



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 12.7 – The Doctrine of Sanctification

Sanctification as a Gradual Process

When the Holy Spirit leads a sinner to trust in the redemption won by Christ for all persons everywhere, he receives the gift of 100% justification, 100% forgiveness of sins. There is no such thing as partial justification or partial forgiveness. But when it comes to sanctification (in the narrow sense), progress is gradual, and there can also be backsliding at times. The many times the apostles of our Lord encourage growth in holiness of living show us that this is true. In fact, all the encouragements given by the apostles regarding Christian living are necessary for the very reason that none of us has reached the point of perfection. Our righteousness of life is called incipient because it is still in the beginning stages of development and is always in need of improvement.

For example, the apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonian Christians: **“May the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you”** (1 Thessalonians 3:12). **“We urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how ought to walk and to please God”** (1 Thessalonians 4:1). **“You yourselves are taught by God to love one another, and indeed you do so toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more”** (1 Thessalonians 4:9-10).

In his second letter to these Thessalonian Christians, Paul indicates that there has been growth among them. He writes: **“We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other”** (2 Thessalonians 1:3). At the same time, he warns them against backsliding: **“Do not grow weary in doing good”** (2 Thessalonians 3:13).

The apostle Peter also wrote about growth in his two letters. **“As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby”** (1 Peter 2:2). Just as babies grow by drinking milk, so Christians grow by drinking the pure milk of God’s Word. Just as the Holy Spirit uses the Gospel Word to create faith and produce the fruits of faith, so He uses the Gospel Word to increase faith and produce more fruits of faith. In his second letter Peter wrote: **“His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness. ... But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (2 Peter 1:3, 5-8). Peter concluded this letter by again encouraging growth. He wrote: **“Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”** (2 Peter 3:18).

Peter also presents a strong warning against backsliding: **“If, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse than the beginning. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: ‘A dog returns to his own vomit,’ and, ‘a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire’”** (2 Peter 2:20-22).

During this process of sanctification, the Christian has total forgiveness of all sins as long as he turns to Christ for forgiveness. **“The LORD takes pleasure in those who fear Him, in those who hope in His mercy”** (Psalm 147:11). **“The LORD takes pleasure in His people; He will beautify the humble with salvation”** (Psalm 149:4). The Christians to whom Peter wrote his two letters were encouraged to grow in their faith and love, but at the same time the good things they were already doing as fruits of their faith were pleasing to God. He says to them: **“You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ”** (1 Peter 2:5). Even though the good things we do are imperfect and in need of further growth, God is pleased with them because Christ’s perfect sacrifice covers their imperfection. As long as we are walking in the light as Jesus is in the light, **“the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin”** (1 John 1:7). **“If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins”** (1 John 2:1-2), not only the sins we committed before we were Christians but also the sins we still commit as Christians.

The sinful flesh that remains within Christians cannot be converted or educated, but it must be put to death by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace. This implies the daily killing of the old Adam by the confession of sin and a renewed trust in the Lord Jesus for forgiveness. As this process continues in our lives from day to day, the flesh loses more and more of its power, and the spirit created by the Holy Spirit gains in strength and control over more parts of the body, such as the mouth, the hands, and the inner desires of the mind. But sometimes the flesh gains strength through our neglect of the means of grace and a failure to persevere and be serious in our fight against sin. Jesus’ parable of the sower and the seed warns us against the danger of other interests crowding out and choking the good seed of the Word, and the danger of giving up and turning away from the struggle against sin when the Christian walk becomes extremely difficult (Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23; Luke 8:4-15).

Martin Luther wrote about the Christian’s gradual progress in sanctification in his *Large Catechism*: *“Forgiveness is constantly needed, for although God’s grace has been acquired by Christ and holiness has been wrought by the Holy Spirit through God’s Word in the unity of the Christian church, yet we are never without sin because we carry our flesh around our neck. ... Meanwhile, because holiness has begun and is growing daily, we await the time when our flesh will be put to death, will be buried with all its uncleanness, and will come forth gloriously and arise to complete and perfect holiness in a new, eternal life. Now, however, we remain only halfway pure and holy. The Holy Spirit must always work in us through the Word, granting us daily forgiveness until we attain to that life where there will be no more forgiveness”* (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 438).

Questions

1. How can a Christian be perfectly holy in one way and yet only partly holy in another way?
2. What is the difference between imputed righteousness and incipient righteousness?
3. What does the apostolic encouragement to grow teach us about sanctification?
4. What does the Holy Spirit use to lead Christians to progress in living the Christian life?
5. What is meant by backsliding? How does God warn against it?
6. How can a Christian be forgiven when he continues to sin after he has been forgiven?
7. How can God accept a Christian’s good works even when they are imperfect?
8. In what way is it true that we are only halfway pure and holy, as Luther wrote?