

Grace to You :: *esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Steps of Biblical Sanctification

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:13–14; 1 Peter 2:2

Code: B120913

You probably hear a lot about God's sanctifying work in your life through His Word. But what does that process look like? How do you know if the living truth of Scripture is actually at work in your life? How do you know that God's Word has actually taken root in your life?

To help you understand your own spiritual growth and how God's Word works in your life, I want to highlight the key steps in the process of sanctification with three simple words.

The first is *cognition*. God's pattern for spiritual growth starts with understanding what the Bible says and what it means. The meaning of the Scripture is the Scripture—if you don't know what it means, you don't have the truth. So the process of spiritual growth starts with understanding what the Bible says.

Many years ago as a child, the importance of knowing and understanding God's Word was impressed upon me. I began to read my Bible repetitiously—day after day, over and over. The further I went, the more connections I was able to draw from book to book. After a few years, I was overwhelmed with the understanding that the Bible is its own interpreter. And you can see that conviction borne out in my teaching to this day.

True sanctification begins with renewing your mind. You must know the truth, plain and simple. There's no premium on ignorance in sanctification. You're not going to get there through some emotional or mystical experience. Spiritual growth won't happen by osmosis—it requires the discipline of constantly putting God's truth in your mind.

Don't confuse childlike faith with childish thinking. There are no shortcuts in sanctification—a lack of biblical knowledge will always retard your spiritual growth. Apart from the truth of Scripture, there simply is no mechanism to restrain your sinful flesh. Legalism can't do it. Pragmatism can't either. The same goes for mysticism and sacramentalism. The only certain method for true spiritual growth starts with absorbing God's eternal truth.

Cognition leads to a second step: *conviction*. As you grow in your understanding of the Bible, you begin to develop convictions out of that understanding. Those convictions or beliefs determine how you live, or at least how you endeavor to live. As God's truth takes over your mind, it produces principles that you do not desire to violate. That's sanctification—it's the transformation of your heart and your will that compels you to obey God's Word.

In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul talks about the persecution and threats he faced on a daily basis. Every day presented a new danger to him, a new plot to silence his preaching, and a new threat to his life. In verse 11 he says he and his companions were “constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake.” There was never a time when he wasn't in danger for preaching God's truth.

Why would he live a life that invited that kind of persecution? He tells us in 2 Corinthians 4:13-14.

But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, “I believed, therefore I spoke,” we also believe, therefore we also speak, knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you.

“I believed, therefore I spoke.” As far as Paul was concerned, he didn’t have any other options. His belief in the Lord compelled him to preach the truth, in spite of the dangers he faced. That’s conviction.

John Bunyan spent twelve years in jail, but it wasn’t the stone and the steel that held him there. He could have gone free if he simply agreed to stop preaching. Instead, he wrote,

"If nothing will do, unless I make of my conscience a continual butchery and slaughter-shop, unless putting out my own eyes I commit me to the blind to lead me, I have determined, the Almighty God being my help and shield, yet to suffer, if frail life might continue so long, even till the moss shall grow on mine eye-brows rather than thus to violate my faith and principles."1John Bunyan, *The Whole Works of John Bunyan*, 3 vols. (London, Blackie and Son, 1862), 2:594.

His convictions wouldn’t allow him to compromise, no matter the cost.

When you read the Bible, you’re not just trying to know it academically. You’re studying the Word of God to develop a set of convictions that rule your life, inform your conscience, and guide you toward greater Christlikeness.

Biblical truth is established in your mind through cognition—that same truth guides your life through conviction.

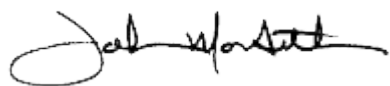
The third step in the biblical process of sanctification is *affection*. Throughout Scripture we see over and over that God’s people truly love His truth. As David says in Psalm 19, the Word of God is “more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.” Take some time in the next few days and read through Psalm 119, keeping track of all the times David says he loves and delights in the Law of the Lord. Loving God’s Word is an inescapable theme throughout the psalms, and it’s an attitude that will be reflected in the process of our sanctification.

If you’re truly growing spiritually, you don’t read the Bible as mere education. You don’t read it as a curiosity meant simply for intellectual stimulation. You don’t study it just to win an argument. You don’t approach it casually or carelessly, and you don’t flippantly disregard its truth.

If you’re truly growing, you come to Scripture eager for the spiritual nourishment it alone provides. Just as Peter wrote, “Like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow” (1 Peter 2:2). Your affection and hunger for God’s truth will be insatiable, and nothing will keep you from it.

But you won’t truly love God’s Word if it’s not already shaping the way you live. And it can’t shape the

way you live if you don't know it. That's why any methods or patterns for spiritual growth that don't start with the study of God's truth cannot lead you to true sanctification.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John MacArthur". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2024 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<https://www.gty.org/about#copyright>).