

## **The Spirit and our spiritual growth**

Message 2 in 4 part series

### **Introduction:**

What do we mean by “spiritual growth”? What signs should we look for to check that we are growing in a spiritually healthy way?

See Eph.4:13-16; Phil.1:9-11; 2 Peter 3:18.

Some dimensions of “spiritual growth”:

- growth towards maturity in our understanding of and stability in our Christian faith – see Eph.4:13ff
- growth and change on the inside – see 2 Cor.3:17-18
- growth in discernment concerning God’s will – see Phil.1:9-11; Col.1:9-12.
- growth in Christian character (ie bearing spiritual fruit, becoming more and more visibly a child of light) – Phil.1:9-11; John 15
- growth in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ – 2 Peter 3:18

How are we doing? Are we growing and becoming more mature spiritually (as the Bible defines maturity)? It is healthy at different times in our Christian lives to do an honest spiritual growth analysis – just between you and the Lord. Why not during this retreat?

Spiritual growth is also described in the Bible with the word “sanctification”.

“Sanctification” = the process of being made holy, of being set apart or made separate from the things of this world in order to be “wholly” or exclusively God’s holy possession. God’s work to conform us to the image of Christ in every part of our lives and beings.

So talking about “spiritual growth” today means we are talking about how we as believers grow to be more and more “sanctified”.

Questions:

- How does this happen or take place?
- Who is responsible to make it happen?

Answers:

- God causes it to happen through the work of His Spirit. He is the Instrument or Agent through whom the Father works to bring about our growth in “sanctification”. See 1 Cor.6:11. In other words, God takes the initiative. See Scriptures “by the Spirit”.
- God calls us to obey the promptings of the Spirit, or to respond to His initiatives. That is our part.

Both go hand in hand, though often we focus upon what WE have to do – easier to define and handle. So much of our thinking in our evangelical circles about the Christian faith and sanctification after we put our faith in Jesus is confined to the one topic: OUR responsibilities – seen in all the challenges we give to people to DO this and that in order to become better Christians. However, this emphasis is not strictly biblical or balanced. Nor is it “good news” to most people because we all know that we can’t keep up with our own high standards.

Where does sanctification begin? With God’s initiative, and that is good news indeed: GOD Himself is presently at work in us in the Person of His Spirit. He continues His saving and renewing work to perfection by the Spirit. See Phil.1:6.

There are three parts to God’s work of saving His people:

- past – “have been saved” (= justification)
- present – “are being saved” (= sanctification)
- future – “will be saved” (= glorification)

Each part of His saving work God the Father accomplishes “through Christ” (ie our salvation from start to finish is rooted in or grounded upon the work of Christ in our place – eg He is our Sanctification – 1 Cor.1:30) and “by or through His Spirit” (ie how God actually effects this work or causes it to take place in each of our lives).

We are today focusing our attention upon the “present” saving work of the Spirit. Saving us from our sinful and evil ways, from our “flesh”, from our “selves” (our innate selfish tendencies), from the evil one, and causing us to grow up into Christ. We receive these blessings both in the “passive” and in the “active” senses of the word.

THE MESSAGE IS CLEAR: We are totally dependent upon the faithful work of the Spirit both for our coming to faith as well as our continuing in faith until we see Christ face to face. This is not just a theological statement but a truth to be believed, ie to be received both “passively” and “actively”.

This means for us in our understanding of the present work of the Spirit in our lives that ...

- we know these truths, ie we gain a deep understanding of and living awareness of what the Spirit is doing in our lives – ie how HE is actively and continually at work behind the scenes “sanctifying” us, ie a passive receiving of His work; and then
- we believe in (= rely actively and continually upon, receive with thanksgiving) the Spirit’s work in each aspect of my spiritual growth.

Let’s be reminded of some fundamental truths about how the Spirit helped you and me to come into God’s family (though probably we weren’t personally aware of His work at that time):

- He used some “witness” and witnessed Christ to our minds and hearts, revealing to us that He is God’s Son (John 15:26)
- He convicted us of our sin, of righteousness, and of judgment to come (John 16:8-11)
- He gave us “new birth” (John 3:5-8) (= regeneration – brought us to life)
- He renewed us on the inside (Titus 3:5)
- He sealed us with the Spirit (Eph.1:13; 2 Cor.5:5)

We are members in God’s family today because through the Spirit God worked to bring us to life, to give us new birth etc. We need to honour the Person of the Spirit

of God by acknowledging His faithfulness in His work in and for us – rejoicing in His faithful work, thanking Him and thanking the Father.

And it is by the Spirit that we are also kept in His family. If it was left up to keep growing in maturity, to keep obeying God's commands, we wouldn't make it, perhaps some not even through one day let alone a life-time.

So the Word tells us that by the Spirit, God is continuing growing us up (= maturing) in Christ.

How does the Spirit who authored the Scriptures describe His sanctifying work to us? What blessings do we daily receive by the Spirit whether or not we ask for them?

- We become more stable and strong in our faith as He faithfully teaches us more and more about Christ – John 16:12-15 (N.B. The roots of our spiritual growth grow down deep into the soil of our knowledge of Christ and of God)
- We grow in discernment and wisdom as the Spirit of wisdom and revelation shows us more of God – Eph.1:15ff; Col.1:10
- We weather the storms of life, the discouragements, the sufferings, even the persecutions, because the Spirit of God encourages us in our hard times and helps us to stand firm – Acts 9:31; Mark 13:11
- We grow in our likeness to Christ as the Spirit causes fruit to be born – Gal.5:22,23; Rom.5:5; cf. Phil.1:10
- We become transformed into the image of Christ through the Spirit's faithful work in us all the time – 2 Cor.3:17,18
- We are enabled to have a deeper knowledge of the truth and grow in our doing the will of God through the work of the Spirit – John 14:26; cf. Phil.2:12 (N.B. The Spirit of God always works inseparably with the Word of God which is also called "the Sword of the Spirit" – Eph.6:17 – the LOGOS & the RHEMA working together)
- We are helped to know how to approach God and grow in our effectiveness in prayer through the Spirit's work – Rom.8:26,27

Again let us take time to acknowledge and believe in each aspect of the Spirit's work in our growth in grace. Let this lead to praising God the Spirit, worshipping Him as God, not considering or regarding Him as some hidden "force".

But what about the "active" receiving of the work of the Spirit for our sanctification? What part do we have to play in our growing up into Christ?

We are called to collaborate or cooperate with the Spirit – to respond to the initiatives of the Spirit.

The Bible also gives us some clear directions about what we need to do in response to the presence of the Spirit in our lives. This is stated in the Scriptures in both the positive and the negative: "Do" and "do NOT", eg "Live/walk according to the Spirit", and "do not grieve the Spirit".

We are to be active, eg active in praying (Eph.1:17). We are also to recognise the part that the body of Christ plays in our sanctification (ie that God works through "means", ie fellow-believers to cause growth to take place – Eph.4:15-16).

But we are also to see and take seriously our personal responsibility, eg to put to death the misdeeds of the body – Rom.8:13; Gal.2:20; 5:24.

See Gal.5:16-25 & Eph.5:18.

1999 OM Romania team retreat