

# **Way Truth Life: A Journey of Grace**

*Sanctifying Grace*

- **Being what we are.**

*Romans 7:15-20; Galatians 5:17; Romans 8:6; 1 Corinthians 3:1-3a*

- **Becoming like Jesus.**

*Romans 8:28-29; Ephesians 4:22a-24; 2 Corinthians 3:18*

- **Believing means participating.**

*Galatians 2:20; Hebrews 5:12-6:1a; Ephesians 4:16; Hebrews 10:14, 12:14; 1 Thessalonians 4:3a, 5:23-24*

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## Way Truth Life: A Journey of Grace<sup>1</sup> Sanctifying Grace

It's great to be back with you again; I missed you last Sunday. Last weekend I flew to Oregon to speak at a student leadership retreat. I spoke five times between Friday night and Sunday afternoon, and then flew home. I was there to challenge and teach students to step into the leadership that God has for each one of us to make a difference in this world for Christ. In addition to times of prayer and seeking the Lord throughout the weekend, at the end of the event, every student came forward to pledge their lives to Christ, to be leaders for him that make a difference in this world for the Kingdom of God.

While I was away, Pastor Dan preached here, and didn't he do a great job! I'm so thankful for such a committed team of pastors who love Christ and you, West Valley Church, and they love the unchurched in our community. I can tell you your pastors are dedicated to doing all they can to help our church grow in our mission, giving their very best.

For these Sundays of Lent until Easter, we are taking a journey of grace. We're using the book by David Busic called, "Way, Truth, Life: Discipleship as a Journey of Grace" as our resource and guide.

Jesus invites us to a journey when he says, "Come, follow me." The Christian life is more than just having the right belief or making some kind of intellectual decision to adhere to some philosophy. The Christian life is an invitation to a lifetime journey with Jesus. That journey is what we call *discipleship*. For every person on the discipleship journey, it is a *lifetime of becoming more and more like Jesus Christ* in all things. Don't be mistaken, though – this is not a journey you can make on your own. It is impossible for you to follow Jesus by your own determination and strength, but thankfully when Jesus calls us to follow him, he also gives us what we need to do so. We can't do it without Jesus' help, so *it is a journey of grace*. Jesus tells us:

"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." (John 14:6, niv)

He's saying that this discipleship journey of becoming transformed into Christlikeness can only take place by and through him – and it is all by his grace.

So we began by talking about how amazing this grace is, then we talked about God's seeking grace, seeking us first, because if he didn't, we aren't even capable of responding to him.

Last week, Pastor Dan talked to us about saving grace – that because of God's grace for us by the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross in our place, the debt has been paid, we can be forgiven for our lifetime of sin against God, and we can be saved. Jesus described it as being

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<sup>1</sup> This series borrows heavily from, and is indebted to:

- David A. Busic, *Way, Truth, Life: Discipleship as a Journey of Grace* (The Foundry Publishing, KC, MO 2021)

“born again” – not our physical birth, but a spiritual birth, coming to life in an entirely new way that is filled with transformative potential. That’s the key: once we have put our faith in Jesus and accepted that he is alive and resurrected from the dead and is real, and we accept what he’s done for us in our place, the potential for our lives is off the charts. When I became a Christian at the age of 17, it was such a profound difference in my life. Before that moment, I was headed this way, and now my life was headed in an entirely different direction. The trajectory of my life was entirely new.

But once that trajectory starts for us, we begin to see a problem in our lives. See, even though we are saved by grace, the problem is...

### - **Being what we are.**

While we are given a new start when we become Christians, there is still a lot of work to do. All the sin we’ve committed up until that moment is forgiven, but the *habit* of sinning is still there. God, in his providential grace (if you remember we talked about that two weeks ago), God in his providential grace delivers us from *some* sins, but not our sin nature. So for example, in my life before I became a Christian, there was a group of us guys that all ran around together. And for several of us, we thought it was cool to swear. A lot. And, for whatever reason, whenever we saw each other, instead of waving hello, we thought it was funny to flip each other off. Well, several months after I became a Christian, it occurred to me that I hadn’t used foul language or flipped anyone off that entire time – or since then! When Jesus saved me, that part of my life was completely removed, and I had no desire to do it again. But there were other things that still plagued me, sins that I still struggled with, and would for some time.

The problem for us is that we are born with what the Bible calls a “sin nature” (Romans 7:18, 35; Ephesians 2:1-3; Colossians 3:5). That is the problem of what we are; we are sinful – even from birth, the Bible says (Psalm 51:5).

Some people think that we are born with a clean slate, and we only learn to sin from the people around us. It’s a nice philosophical idea (*tabula rasa*), but that’s not what the Bible says. The Bible is very clear: we are born with a natural propensity and inclination to sin.

If you believe the idea that all people are born good, you’ve never met a two-year-old. Right, parents? Our author says, “A child is not a sinner because of their upbringing. They haven’t lived long enough for their examples to affect them to that degree. A child is a sinner because sin comes from the heart – it is inbred. They don’t have to be taught to be selfish; they come by it naturally.” We are born with a sin nature.

Here’s what I’m getting at: when we become Christians, we are forgiven of all the acts of sin that we’ve committed *up to* that point. But our *nature* still needs work – it still needs cleansing and healing and transforming because we are still continually inclined toward sin. That’s exactly what the Apostle Paul was referring to when he wrote these words in the book of Romans:

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does

not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. (Romans 7:15-20, niv)

Can you hear the Apostle Paul's testimony? He's saying, "I know what I should be doing and what I should not be doing. But I seem to keep doing what I shouldn't, and I don't do what I should." Paul was describing the same experience that we have as Christians; we've been forgiven of everything we've done in the past – we are saved, we know now what's right and wrong, but there's still this nature or inclination to sin. We can be forgiven each time, but we keep doing it. It's a frustrating position to be in.

The Bible describes it as the struggle between the Holy Spirit, who is now working in the life of the Christian, and our sin nature, or what the Bible calls "the flesh." I should point out that there are two different Greek words that the Bible uses for the word "flesh" – one is "soma," which means our physical body, and the other is "sarx," which describes our sin nature or the desires of the flesh. It's not that your physical body (soma) is bad or sinful, it's what you *do* with your body (sarx) that can be bad and sinful. Got it? So what we're talking about today is "sarx." The contrast between "sarx" and the Spirit is found a lot in the Bible. For example, in the letter to the Galatians, Paul writes:

For the flesh (sarx) desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. (Galatians 5:17, niv)

I think every Christian can relate to this struggle between what God's Spirit wants for us and what we want for ourselves. Again in Romans, Paul writes:

The mind governed by the flesh (sarx) is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. (Romans 8:6, niv)

There are many Christians that never get past this internal struggle, even though God has provided for us a way out by his Spirit. In the first letter to the Corinthian church in the Bible, the Apostle Paul wrote his frustration with Christians who never grow up but instead keep struggling with this sin nature:

Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. (1 Corinthians 3:1-3a, niv)

Take a good look at that passage... Could that be describing your Christian life right now? Maybe you are thinking that's all there is to the Christian life. But my friends, that is not what God has for you. You *can* grow up – you *need to grow up* – that's why God has given you his Holy Spirit. What you've experienced so far is not all there is; God created you to be in his image and likeness, and having the image of God is about far more than being on the top of the intellectual food chain of creation. Having the image of God is not the capacity to reason; it is the capacity to no longer be a slave to sin, but instead to love, forgive, and seek the best for others. Now, maybe you wonder what that looks like; what does it look like to be what you were originally created to be? Well, that's why God sent his One and Only Son,

Jesus Christ, to show you what your life can be like. When Jesus said he came to give you life abundant and free, a life that can do amazing things in this sin-broken world, he not only described it to you, he *showed* it to you – with his own life. You have the same Holy Spirit available to you that Jesus had. You can be like Jesus. You can never *be* God – that was the lie of the devil that Adam and Eve believed in the Garden. You can never be God, but you can be *like* God. You don't have to live in this wrestling match between your sin nature and the Holy Spirit. But you've got to be willing to make the deeper commitment of...

### - ***Becoming like Jesus.***

Let's talk about what this means, because this is the whole point of why Jesus died on the cross and the resurrection. God has made this Christ-like life available for us and wants to work in our lives to shape us to be like Christ. The Bible says this a lot, for instance in Romans:

And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them *to become like his Son*, so that his Son would be the first born among many brothers and sisters. (Romans 8:28-29, nlt *italics added*)

The word that the Bible uses to describes Christlikeness is "sanctification." Now that's a five-dollar word that simply means to be holy, or to be completely set apart for God and his purposes. Just like Jesus. This abundant life that we are promised does not mean we are going to be rich and never be sick and never struggle. Jesus wasn't rich. Jesus experienced all the difficulty that life gives us, and he struggled, and he died. But – he never *sinned*. You see, God didn't just save you so that you could go to heaven. God sent his Son to save you so that you wouldn't have to keep struggling with sin, and instead could live fully for him, like Jesus in this world. So the struggle Paul talked about in Romans seven was about wanting to live for Jesus, but sin kept pulling on him. But that's not the end of the story; if you read on into chapter eight, Paul says:

"Who will save me from this wretched man that I am and from this wretched experience? Thanks be to God who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!"  
(Romans 7:24-25)

...and then right away in chapter 8 Paul says:

"The law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death."  
(Romans 8:2)

Not just forgiven for the acts of sin, but actually set free from the nature of sin by the Spirit of God.

Let me describe it this way. I have this huge book, and I want to hold it up with one hand, outstretched. Now, can I hold it up? Yes. But for how long can I hold it up? Forever? No. Why? Because it's heavy! What makes it heavy? Gravity! Right now, gravity is exerting a steady downward pull on this book. Gravity is constant and unyielding; gravity will remain the same and it's never going to change. It's relentless. For right now, I am stronger than

gravity. But I won't be able to hold it up forever, will I? I'll get tired and I'll drop it or have to put it down and gravity will win. Right? Sin is like gravity. We live in a corrupt world of sin, and we have a sin nature that is constantly pulling on us. And for the moment, you might be able to say "no" to a particular sin. Some sins are "lighter" than others; they don't pull on you as much. But the "heavy" sins – the ones you really struggle with – you might be able to resist the pull of that sin for a while. But eventually you are going to get tired, and that sin is going to win. Right? That's exactly what Paul said in Romans seven.

But then watch what happens: I take this heavy book, and I put it here on this table. Has the book changed weight? No. But will it stay there? Yes. For how long? Indefinitely. Why? Because the table is stronger than the pull of gravity on this book. If this book represents sin in our lives, then this table represents the power of the Holy Spirit in your life and mine. That's the life that God intends for us! That's why the Bible tells us to:

...put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:22a-24, niv)

This is God's desire for you – to no longer have to keep living in the struggle of sin, but to live fully in his love for others, bringing God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. (Who told us to pray for that? Jesus!)

So when you become a Christian, the process of sanctification has begun in your life – you are "being sanctified" from that moment on. That is called the moment of "initial sanctification." But then immediately God starts working inside you, changing your thinking, and strengthening you against sin, using circumstances to teach you and strengthen you. God begins the process of sanctification. God's Word begins to come alive like never before as you read it, and the Spirit uses it to bring change in you. This is what the Bible means when it says:

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18, niv)

Is this making connections in your heart and mind? That's the Holy Spirit! It's because the Holy Spirit is using God's Word to sanctify you. This is what God wants for you – to be sanctified.

So in this process of sanctification, you begin to mature, but you *still* struggle. And that struggle continues until you get more and more frustrated; God brings you to a place of holy dissatisfaction. That's where Paul was at in Romans seven. And when you get to that point, the Spirit is asking you if you are willing to surrender your life to Jesus; to fully submit yourself to his Spirit. To let him step in and start leading your life. He will, if you are willing to believe it and trust him. But it's not just saying, "OK, I believe that the Holy Spirit can take over in my life and fill me." You have to participate in the process. You see...

### **- Believing means participating.**

This place of surrendered sanctification is cooperative. In other words, we don't just sit

back, and God goes “presto change-o” and does it *to* you. You have to participate, and it starts with surrender. This is exactly what the Apostle Paul’s testimony was when he got to that point of surrender. Listen to how he describes it in Galatians 2:20:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20, niv)

Paul describes it as putting his old self – his flesh – death on the cross, to the point that his life is no longer governed by himself but by Jesus. He no longer calls the shots, Jesus does. But the Bible is clear that we won’t get to this point if we don’t surrender to the Holy Spirit.

And when we surrender to the Holy Spirit, that doesn’t mean that we are suddenly perfect; it means we are now able to *really* grow. But we must continue to participate with the Holy Spirit. That’s why Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:31, “I die *daily*.” This sanctified life is a daily dying to self; a daily surrender. But we’d rather not do that; our sin nature doesn’t want to go without a fight. So instead, we buy into this theory that we’ll just sort of keep drifting along in our Christian life and hopefully somehow, by osmosis or something, we will gradually become like Jesus. So that’s how a lot of people approach their Christian life. Our book says that, if you were to write this notion down in a formula, it would look like this:

Salvation + time + individual application = life change

In other words, sanctification happens when you add up these things: we get saved, and then I’ll just work on my own spiritual growth, and slowly over time my life will change, little by little, bit by bit, and I’ll just keep at it until I get to heaven.

About the only things right about that formula are that we need to be saved, and our lives need changing. Yes, spiritual growth begins at salvation, but our growth in grace does not happen at a snail’s pace. It is the primary driver in our lives.

Sanctification is a process, but God intends for it to happen significantly, and it will when we surrender and let the Spirit fill us completely. So it involves way more than just time! Churches are full of people who have been Christians for decades, who still have rotten attitudes and are cranky, unloving people who don’t act like Jesus. Right? Turn to the person next to you and say, “rrright...” True spiritual growth – sanctifying grace – takes more than time; it takes cooperation with God and intentional training. That’s why the writer to the Hebrews in the Bible said:

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been *trained by practice* to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us go on toward perfection, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ. (Hebrews 5:12-6:1a, nrsv)

Did you see that phrase: *trained by practice...we go on toward perfection*. We must intentionally cooperate with the Spirit, surrendering to him daily and participating in the ways he gives us to grow. What are those ways that he’s given us to grow? Reading the Bible and daily prayer, for sure. But also doing acts of kindness and love toward others.

Being generous with the resources God gives us.

Don't get me wrong: we are not saved or sanctified by our own works; God makes us holy. But we *can* cooperate with the sanctifying work of grace that God wants to do in our lives.

And here's a very big one: by participating in growth together with your church. That means weekly being a part of worship, for sure: whether you are attending in person or joining us online. But it also means being baptized, sharing together in communion, being a part of a small group and working hard with your small group to help each other grow in grace. Participating in the opportunities for growth and ministry in your church. If you are worshipping with us online, we can have online small groups, too. Just contact us and tell us you want to be in one.

Only in western cultures, particular here in the United States, we've got this idea that to grow spiritually we have to do it on our own. We have this inbred idea of "rugged individualism," that we need to "pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps," and that "God helps those who help themselves." That might be part of the American dream, but it is NOT part of the biblical vision. The Bible is very, very clear that we grow in grace *together*. For instance, the church is called a "body." God has designed you so that every cell in your body works together to create organs and muscles and bones and sinews, and all of that works together to form a healthy body. There's a reason God calls the church a body – we are all designed to work together for the sake of the greater health of the entire church:

He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love. (Ephesians 4:16, nlt)

Do you know what cancer is? Cancer is when cells in your body decide they no longer what to exist for the health of the rest of the body, and instead get this insatiable appetite for themselves. So they try to form their own organs. We call them cancer tumors. And they continue to consume the body until the body can't sustain itself and the cancer at the same time, so unless something drastic happens, like surgery or chemo or radiation, unless something drastic happens, the body dies. And then, the greedy cancer dies too because it's consumed the body that fed it.

Are you getting the picture here...there are a lot of cancerous Christians in churches, who exist for themselves, greedy for their own desires or only looking out for their own spiritual growth. And unless something drastic happens, those cancer Christians kill their church. Oh God – may we all grow in grace, being and doing our part as the sanctified body of Christ!

God gives us grace; we cooperate with him by surrendering to the Spirit and participating in our growth in the church. That's sanctification!

We need a different formula for growth in the grace of sanctification:

Grace + cooperation with God + Christian community = Christlikeness

God gives us grace, we cooperate with Him by surrendering to His Spirit, participating in the opportunities God has given us to grow in him, and we do so as a part of the life of the Church; that is how we grow in Christlikeness!



This is the reason Jesus came, lived among us, died for us, and rose from the dead. This is the reason that the Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples in Acts chapter two, beginning the pattern of what God wants to do in our lives. It's what God has had in mind for us since the beginning – that in Christ we might be perfected – made holy – in Him:

For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.  
(Hebrews 10:14, niv)

We are made perfect (that starting point of holy dissatisfaction and surrender) and *being* made holy (the process), and we do so together – there is the vital component that we grow in this grace together. Again in Hebrews we are told to:

Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. (Hebrews 12:14, niv)

This has always been God's will for you:

It is God's will that you should be sanctified. (1 Thessalonians 4:3a, niv)

It is God's desire, God's plan, God's will, that you should be sanctified. *Made* holy. That the Holy Spirit could live out the life of Christ in you – not you having to continue wrestling with sin, but free to live for him, making a difference in this world in the lives of others, just like Jesus did. This is the prayer for you found in Scripture:

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, niv)

God in his grace seeks you, enabling you to respond to him, and when you do, God in his grace saves you. God, in his grace, begins the process of sanctification in you, delivering you from your sin nature and bringing you to that place of holy discontent. The question is, will you surrender to the Holy Spirit? Or will you spend your entire Christian life wrestling with the Spirit? Or worse yet, will you become a Christian cancer?

We are going to close this service with a time of prayer. It wouldn't be appropriate to close without giving you a chance to bow before God, opening yourself fully to his sanctifying grace, surrendering your life to the Holy Spirit. You can do that where you are, but this altar is a place dedicated to meeting God especially in prayer. Yes, you can pray about this where you are. But I'd encourage you to tell God and your church that you are serious about this by coming to this altar for a time of prayer before we close.

*Prayer*

*Benediction: Pastor Jason*

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, niv)