

To accomplish this divine mission, to complete this Christ-inspired charge, we must love even people who don't love us. This means we must love even people who are different than we are, people who threaten us, and people who are our enemies. It means that we must love and forgive and share grace with even "that person." To experience and respond to grace means we must love others "even more."

To love God and love others as we love ourselves is why we were created. Life is more than waiting to get to heaven. Full life is found in loving God, letting God love us, and loving others. This is how we are to respond to God's character-shaping love and God's sanctifying grace. It is a process that continues until the day we meet Jesus face-to-face. Love God even more! Let God love us even more. Love others even more! Let us not stop! Let us continue to grow in God's character-shaping love and God's sanctifying love.

Questions for Reflection

1. What is your understanding of salvation? Is it a holy evacuation moment or a restoring process to wholeness?
2. How can we love God "even more" and how can we let God love us "even more"?
3. How can we love others "even more"?
4. What specific way(s) do you experience God's character-shaping and God's sanctifying grace?

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A Grace-Full Life (3)

God's Character-Shaping Love

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Have you ever seen one of those commercials where they share a product, give you the price, and then say, "Wait, There's more"? You may remember an old commercial of the Ginsu knife. It could cut through everything, including tin cans and wood. It even came with a fifty-year warranty. And just as you thought the advertisement was ending, the announcer said, "But wait ... there's more!" and introduced a potato peeler that doubled as a chainsaw. On and on the commercial went, with "even more" offered.

This "even more" is God's sanctifying grace and God's character-shaping love. Just as soon as we encounter grace, God says, "But wait, there's even more!" But God's not trying to get us to buy a Ginsu knife set or some other product. God wants to save us by grace, but God also wants to transform us by grace.

As believers in the Wesleyan tradition, we believe salvation is much more than a holy evacuation plan to escape earth. Salvation is when our souls are restored to wholeness and health so that we are free to love God, receive God's abundant love into our lives, and then freely love others. Loving God, self, and others is what it means to be sanctified.

Experiencing God's justifying grace is just the beginning of the Christian life. It is like your "spiritual birthday." After that, there is a whole new life to grow into and live. To be a Christian is to be born again into a new life as a new person. Just as little kids dream of the day they will be teenagers, and teenagers dream of the day they will be adults, we have an invitation from God to "grow up" in grace. God's sanctifying grace is God's character-shaping love.

Full or entire sanctification is an important theological concept in the early Methodist movement. Wesley believed that a Christian

can be made perfect in love. He believed that with this gift of God's sanctifying grace, the intention of the Christian's heart can be made complete or "perfect." This is the privilege of every follower of Jesus.

This is the type of change Paul longed for in his life. He was not satisfied with a fond memory of an experience of grace in the past. He was captivated by the mystery of God's grace more alive in him than ever each day. In Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, he devoted the first chapters to bragging on God's grace expressed through Jesus dying on a cross for our sin and being raised to new life so that we can be in a relationship with God. Paul was in awe of grace. Having experienced grace, he felt compelled to respond.

There are two ways we can experience and respond to God's sanctifying grace.

1. We can love God and let God love us "even more." In today's text Paul expresses this: *"My response is to get down on my knees before the Father, this magnificent Father who parcels out all heaven and earth. I ask him to strengthen you by his Spirit—not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength—that Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite him in. And I ask him that with both feet planted firmly on love, you'll be able to take in with all followers of Jesus the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God. God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us."* (Ephesians 3:14-21, MSG)

Paul encouraged his friends to daily take in and to experience the excessive dimensions of Christ's love. To grow into the "fullness of God" means to seek every day to see, love, and follow God more and more. Loving God "even more" is our response to grace.

God's prevenient grace is the dating season. God's justifying grace is the wedding day. That's a great day – something to celebrate and take pictures of and remember. But, there is more. Every day we are invited to know God more and grow in God's grace. The goal of grace is not to have a one-time experience when we accept Christ. God's sanctifying grace is the lifelong marriage of our relationship with God. The goal of grace is that we would love God more. As Paul says in another letter, *"I want to know Christ ..."* (Phil. 3:10) more and more every day.

Knowing and loving God more takes time. Just as our relationships with people we love require meaningful time, so it is with our relationship with God. "When was the last time you spent time with God?" Usually it has been a long time since we spent time with God in prayer, Bible study, worship, or Christian community. Loving God takes time.

Jesus wants to save us from separation from God eternally and also here and now. It's God's sanctifying grace that makes this second part a reality. Many have described Jesus' ministry as threefold: preaching (declaring the Kingdom), teaching (explaining the Kingdom), and healing (demonstrating the Kingdom). Jesus' healing ministry was his ministry that healed broken bodies, calmed emotional distress, cast out demons, and even raised the dead. It's not good enough to simply preach or teach that God can heal us. We must have people, places, and processes for Jesus' healing ministry to be demonstrated. Sanctification includes the healing ministry of Jesus to help us find victory over our compulsive behaviors.

2. We can love others "even more." Jesus reveals himself as our Savior and forgives all our sins by his own blood. He overcomes death so we never have to die, and he positions and presents us to God the Father as perfect. Then, what are we to do? Our "work" in response to this amazing grace is to love others even more.