

MESSAGE 5 – RESPONDING WELL TO GOD

Introduction

- In this final message, I wish to consider with you the importance of responding well to God, His provisions and working in our lives, and maintaining a proper perspective on life and a positive approach to life
- Question: How can we make good progress in moral and spiritual stature? – It can be a complex issue and there may be many different ways of answering this question
- A helpful way of summing up the whole subject is: *Responding well to God, His provisions and working in our lives*
- This is the primary issue; all else is secondary – if we respond well to the Lord, we will make good progress and nothing can stop us from growing
- But we cannot make progress on our own no matter how hard we try; we make progress as we respond well to God and all that He has done and continues to do for us
- Just as the branch must abide in the vine for it to bear good fruit, the believer must abide in Christ and Christ in him so that:
 - o he will be continually nourished by the Lord
 - o the Lord will have the freedom to work in and through his life
 - o he will bear much fruit - the fruit of the Spirit in his own life and bearing fruit in every good work

Why responding well to God is essential

- Moral and spiritual stature involves the moral and spiritual dimensions
 - o Our conforming to the moral, spiritual beauty and character of God
 - o Our being conformed to the image of Christ
- It cannot come about by fleshly efforts
- The Holy Spirit must work in our hearts to bring about moral and spiritual transformation - on the basis of what has been accomplished at the Cross
- But moral and spiritual development also requires our positive moral response and input

The difficult process of moral and spiritual development

- Moral and spiritual development is a difficult process and we do stumble along the way
- There are many distractions, difficulties and temptations in this world - and the evil one is continually and actively at work to bring about our downfall
- The evil one knows our weaknesses and he exploits them – it is easy to falter and fail
- When we falter and fail, we may try to excuse ourselves and rationalise away our failures, or we may become discouraged and self-condemned
- Both are being promoted by the evil one and both are detrimental – they are different forms of spiritual attack

- On the one hand, the evil one would encourage us to excuse ourselves and rationalise away our failures
 - o This would hinder us from facing the truth and recognising the deficiencies in our lives that need to be dealt with
 - o This would grieve the Spirit of God and hinder His working in our lives
- On the other hand, when we fail, the enemy would accuse us and make us feel condemned
 - o We may feel helpless, hopeless and miserable because we keep failing and do not seem to be making good progress
 - o We may even wonder whether we are retrogressing
- What is the answer to this dilemma? What would be a wholesome, appropriate approach to life?
- How does God want us to view life and live each day meaningfully – without burying our heads in the sand, but facing the realities of life?
- Can we ensure we will make good progress? Yes! The good news in the Scriptures is that this is feasible

Difficulties and encouragement

- There are two sides to the scriptural presentation:
 1. Walking in truth and making progress in moral and spiritual stature is a difficult and painful process
 2. There is much encouragement and many assurances for all those who have resolved in their hearts, by the grace of God, to persevere in this path

Difficulties

- God does not shield His children from all hardship and pain
- In fact, we will face many difficulties and experience much pain because we want to be faithful to God
- Paul and Barnabas encouraged the disciples to continue in the faith, saying:

Acts 14:21-22

21 After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch,
 22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."

- o The apostle Paul himself experienced much hardship and afflictions in his faithful walk with God
- The Lord Jesus tells us if we want to be His disciples we must be prepared to deny ourselves, take our own cross daily and follow Him:

Luke 9:23

And He was saying to them all, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me.

- However, we need not be deterred nor discouraged by the difficulties and pressures we face

Encouragement and assurances

- The scriptural presentation of the life of true discipleship is not a miserable, pitiful life
- It is a life of love, joy, peace and rest in the Lord – a life of spiritual abundance and fruitfulness
- It is a blessed life – one of continuing growth in moral and spiritual stature
- As we have seen, God sovereignly watches over those who love Him and walk with Him, so that all they go through would contribute to their growth in moral and spiritual stature, as they respond positively to God's provisions and the Holy Spirit working in their lives
- This is true at all times, though we live in a fallen world and the powers of darkness are continually at work to tempt, pressurise and afflict us
- The powers of darkness can afflict us directly and also through situations and people, including those near and dear to us
- The evil one wants to destroy us, but God is sovereignly undertaking - His grace is sufficient and His provisions more than adequate
- Though not easy, it is feasible for us to respond well to the Lord and what He seeks to bring about in our lives and make good progress
- Compared to the eternal weight of glory they are producing in us, the trials and afflictions we endure in our walk with God are but momentary light afflictions (2 Cor 4:16-18) – no matter how severe they are
- Do we believe this? Can we affirm it while going through very difficult times? It is important and helpful that we do so
- Can we affirm: The more severe the trials, the greater the opportunities for learning deeply and making good progress in moral and spiritual stature? If we do, and we live out such a life faithfully and with deep conviction, it would be a powerful testimony to the grace and wisdom of God and would manifest God's glory
- Let us remind ourselves during trials that if we remain faithful to the Lord and abide in Him and He in us, we will produce much fruit (John 15:4-5) – we will not be suffering in vain
- Paul actually counts it a privilege and expresses the longing to experience the fellowship of Christ's sufferings in ever-increasing measure:

Philippians 3:10

that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death;

- We can have rest and peace in Christ – not after – but in the midst of the trials and tribulations
- As we go through pain and pressures, let us remember that the Lord Jesus invites us to come to Him and find rest for our souls:

Matthew 11:28-30

28 "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.

29 "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

30 "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

- In the midst of afflictions and tribulations in this fallen world, we can experience true peace and live an overcoming life in the Lord Jesus Christ:

John 16:33

“These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage (or cheer up); I have overcome the world.”

- We can overcome in Christ:

2 Corinthians 2:14

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place.

- As we walk with the Lord, it will not be a miserable and pitiful life because Christ has come that we may have life and have it abundantly:

John 10:10

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy;
I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Positive approach and perspective of life in relation to ourselves and our own well-being

- Do not be over-conscious of or view life primarily from the angles of:
 - o the activities of the forces of darkness – what they are doing and their objectives
 - o the conduct of other people – what they are doing and their motives and objectives
 - o the complexities of situations and calamities that confront us – how perplexing, difficult and painful
- Rather, be more conscious of God and His sovereignty, His intentions, provisions and working in our lives – what He seeks to bring about and what He desires to teach us
- Concentrate on how to respond well to the Lord and His working by maintaining a positive attitude, perspective and a prayerful spirit
- Draw near to the Lord and seek to deepen in our knowledge of Him and His ways, and learn as much as we can as we go through life in fellowship with Him
- If we maintain this attitude and perspective, we will make good progress in moral and spiritual stature and in the quality of our relationship with God (Rom 8:28-29)
- The two legs will be healthy and will grow increasingly strong, making it feasible for us to stand firm and fare well in every aspect of our faith and walk with God
- Our conviction on all these points can be enhanced by a proper appreciation of what the story of Job can teach us
 - o A deep appreciation of the sovereignty of God, His majesty, greatness and power, and the knowledge and wisdom of God
 - o The wisdom of God – seen in the way He responded to Job’s failures and the questions that perplexed Job – helping Job to recognise his failures and resolve his deficiencies without answering the questions that perplexed him
 - o Throughout the story of Job, what was required of Job in order to fare well was for him to maintain an unwavering faith in God and submission to Him, and concentrate on responding well – even though the trials were severe and there were issues that perplexed him
- Our understanding of this area of truth will also help us identify with the meaning of Paul's exhortation to believers to rejoice always:

Philippians 4:4

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!

- o Paul exhorts us to rejoice in the Lord – always – in all circumstances – however trying, difficult, pressurising, disturbing
- o How is this feasible?
- We do not rejoice in evil deeds and manifestations of unrighteousness, but we rejoice in the Lord
- We rejoice in who God is, what He means to us, what He seeks to teach us, and what He seeks to bring about in and through our lives – even in the midst of trials – or especially in the midst of trials
- Trials provide the opportunity for deep learning and accelerated growth – and the opportunity for us to glorify God by our positive response
- When trials are severe and we still respond well, the quality of testimony in the spiritual realm will be greater
- Note the context of Paul's exhortation to 'rejoice in the Lord always':

Philippians 4:1–9

1 Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord, my beloved.

2 I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord.

3 Indeed, true companion, I ask you also to help these women who have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel, together with Clement also and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!

5 Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near.

6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.

9 The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

- o Note Paul's concern that believers stand firm in the Lord (v 1)
- o Note the difficulties in relationship (vs 2, 3)
- o Note his encouragement to Christians not to be anxious about anything (v 6)
- o I.e. Paul exhorts us to rejoice in the Lord in all circumstances, especially those that are difficult, that may tend to cause anxiety and shake our faith – and to experience the peace of God which surpasses all understanding (v 7)
- o How can this be real in our lives?
- o Our understanding and conviction about the area of truth we are considering can help significantly – when bound up with prayer (v 6) – dependence on God and fellowship with God, and letting our minds dwell on the positive and helpful (v 8), learning, absorbing and living out the truth (v 9)
- The positive perspective and approach to life go together with and enable us to maintain a spirit of thanksgiving in all situations (v 6)
- Note the similarity of Phil 4:4-6 to Paul's injunction in 1Thess 5:16-18

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

16 Rejoice always;

17 pray without ceasing;

18 in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

- o V 18 is a meaningful verse but often misinterpreted
- o 'In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus' – it does not mean it is God's will for us to give thanks for everything that takes place, including wrongdoing and negative things – or that everything that takes place is according to the will of God
- o This kind of understanding can lead to questions like: God, why are you doing this to me?
- o Rather, it means it is God's will that we maintain a spirit of thanksgiving in all situations, whatever may be taking place
- o Why? Because God is sovereignly watching over us and undertaking for us as we can go through every situation prayerfully and in fellowship with the Lord, knowing that we can learn, grow and glorify God in every situation
- o We do all this while maintaining a spirit of love – genuine concern for the well-being of others, and not retaliating (or harbouring a retaliatory spirit) against those who have negative intentions toward us (v 15)

1 Thessalonians 5:15

15 See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all men

- o We also take care not to quench the Holy Spirit (v 19) and to abstain from every form of evil – whatever is negative and displeasing to God (v 22)

1 Thessalonians 5:19, 22

19 Do not quench the Spirit;

22 Abstain from every form of evil.

Concluding remarks

- When we adopt the perspective and approach to life of seeking to respond well to God, His provisions and working in our lives, then every situation can be a context for learning and growth – every situation can be an opportunity for the manifestation of God's glory
- Our positive response manifests God's working in and through our lives – with our active participation and cooperation – thereby manifesting and vindicating God's wisdom in creating man
- Trials need no longer be viewed as negative experiences or something to be fearful about
- Yet we are not presumptuous – we take care we do not venture into or remain in situations God does not desire of us
- Even when trials are very difficult or seemingly unbearable and overwhelming, we can trust in God's sovereign undertaking and in the sufficiency of His grace, viewing every situation as opportunities to learn and grow and manifest God's glory
- In a nutshell, we can say this is what life is all about
- Maintaining the posture of rejoicing in the Lord and giving thanks in all situations and at all times is an integral part of the positive approach and perspective of life

- o It is an important aspect of responding well to God and His intentions for us and His provisions for us
- o It is also an important factor for making good progress in moral and spiritual stature
- o Does a spirit of rejoicing and thanksgiving characterise your life? If it does not, you can do something about it
- You can have proper confidence that it is feasible to maintain the right posture in all situations
 - o But your confidence is not in yourself – it is in God
 - o God desires to bring this about – as you say ‘yes’ to Him, the Holy Spirit will work in your heart and make it a reality
- God has been working in your life that you may be conformed to the image of Christ, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing
- He will continue to do so until the day of Christ Jesus

Philippians 1:6

For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.

- This positive approach and perspective of life will ensure good progress in moral and spiritual stature – having the right approach and growing well morally and spiritually form the basis for the most effective way to:
 - o honour and glorify God, serve Him and contribute to His kingdom
 - o relate meaningfully with others and have positive influence on the lives of others

Close relationship between the two key aspects of God’s intentions for man

- Finally, take note of the close relationship between the two key aspects of God's intentions for man:
 1. Development of moral and spiritual stature
 2. Deep fellowship with God and among the brethren
- These two key aspects of God's intentions for man mutually reinforce each other - like the relationship between exercise and health
- Good exercise helps you attain good health – good health enables you to exercise well – which then enables you to attain even better health – which then enables you to exercise even better
- If we want to attain to a deep relationship with God, moral and spiritual stature is vital – if we neglect and fail to nurture our relationship with God, our progress in moral and spiritual stature will suffer
- We must pay much attention to both as both are of primary importance
- We must consecrate our lives to God and nurture our relationship with Him – this will help us make good progress in our growth in moral and spiritual stature – which will in turn facilitate the deepening of our relationship with God – which will then enable us to make further progress in moral and spiritual stature
- The quality of our lives and fruitfulness will continue to spiral upwards – this is the will of God for each one of us
- This area of truth is a big subject
 - o Moral and spiritual stature and our relationship with God

- o Responding well to the triune God
 - o Appreciating and responding well to the role of Christ, the Holy Spirit, and God's provision of the Scriptures
- There is much more I would like to consider with you, but they cannot be covered during this conference
- You will find much relevant materials on my website www.godandtruth.com
 - o 10 messages on our relationship with God (P22-31) and 41 messages on moral and spiritual stature (P32-72) – in message series *Fulfilment of God's Purposes*
 - o Many messages on the role of Christ and the ministry of the Holy Spirit
 - o The audio and detailed notes of the messages I preached at the 19th Pastoral Care Conference
 - o My three books: *Understanding Job, The Two Kingdoms* and *Man of Faith*
 - o My latest book: *Truly Strong*