

## **No Matter What! You Can Change!**

### **Various Scriptures**

**No sin is so great that it can hold you captive against the liberating power of the Spirit and the word.**

LTS: Psa. 119:49-72

We have been working our way through Paul's first letter to Timothy and kind of slowed our pace a little when we got to the part where he says (4:7) "Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness." I suggested to you that Paul was commanding something consistent with NT teaching elsewhere on the doctrine of sanctification. I said at one point that I intended to do a whole sermon on the topic and so here we go.

Aside from the promise of eternal life one of the most hope-giving truths in the bible is that as soon as we were born of the Spirit God began working to change us from the sinful, selfish, Christ-belittling, idolaters that we were into people who not only love Christ but progressively becoming like Christ. If you know yourself at all and the word of God even a little then you know you need to change. In fact, you WANT to change! There are temptations you frequently face and sins you habitually commit that weigh you down and keep you from knowing the joy of waking in the Spirit. God is committed to changing those things in you. And because God Himself is working on you, it is no exaggeration when I say, No Matter What! You Can Change!

The power of God's grace is infinitely stronger than the temptation and sin that enslaves you. The Spirit and the word of God have more authority over your life than past failures and painful experiences. The God who has declared you to be a new person in Christ is determined to make you into a new person in Christ.

Now, when we speak of the transformative and restorative power of grace we must think of it in two ways. Like so many other truths in the Bible there is an already and a not yet. In one sense, the image of God has been restored in us already because God has independently declared us righteous because of Christ's sinless life and bloody death on our behalf. Moreover, He has united us with Christ so that when God looks at us He sees the glory of His Son instead of our sin. In that sense, your salvation is eternally and unalterably complete.

On the other hand, it is also true that practically and experientially speaking we have not yet apprehended the fullness of our salvation. We still sin and are not yet completely like Christ. In fact, we still have a long way to go. Isn't that true?

Of the already reality of our salvation theologians typically use terms like Justification and union with Christ. Of the not yet reality of our salvation theologians typically use the word sanctification. Justification speaks of God's once-for-all work of redemption by which we are

saved. Sanctification speaks of the day-by-day transformation of our attitudes, desires and behavior by which we grow into the image of Christ.

I want to talk with you this morning about Sanctification. How does the H.S. grow you toward practical maturity, and what part (if any) do you play in the process? I want to speak about Sanctification under Three (3) headings:

1. Understanding Sanctification
2. Misunderstanding Sanctification
3. Applying Sanctification

Let's see if we can get an accurate understanding of sanctification first.

## I. Understanding Sanctification:

1. When we speak of "sanctification" we are talking about growing in holiness. The Greek word for holy is *hagios*, which when used as a verb is *hagiazō*. The problem for we who speak English is that there is no verb form of the word Holy. We don't talk about getting *holified*, nor progressing in *holification*. These are not real words. So scholars in generations past decided to borrow from the Latin who's word for holy is *sanctus*; Hence, "sanctification."

2. Any time you read in the NT any form of the word "sanctify," you know you are reading about holiness.<sup>1</sup> Sanctification is about God making a sinner holy.

3. There are three kinds of sanctification use in the Bible.

A. Positional Sanctification: (God declares that one is holy based on the righteousness of Christ applied to those who believe. In this sense it is virtually synonymous with justification.

- Heb. 10:10 "we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."

B. Progressive: (The Holy Spirit leads the follower of Christ through the life-long process of growing and changing into the likeness of Jesus).

- Heb. 10:14 "For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified."

C. Perfected: (When we see Jesus face to face we will be transformed completely and perfectly into his likeness. That is, we will be made perfectly holy. This is synonymous with glorification.)

- 1 John 3:2 "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."

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<sup>1</sup> John Piper & David Mathis, editors, *Acting the Miracle*, (Wheaton, Crossway, 2013), 29

4. What we are learning about today is Progressive Sanctification. We are learning about the process by which the H.S. leads followers of Christ through the life-long process of growing and changing into the image of Christ. You see, the practical problem is that “though you and I enjoy the decisive victory over the dominion of sin as a result of his union with Christ, our hearts and lives are not yet what they should be.”<sup>2</sup> Through progressive sanctification, however, the H.S. begins moving us toward what we will one day be when we see Jesus face to face; we shall be Holy even as He is holy.

5. Now, it's important to note that there is a significant difference between sanctification and other facets of this beautiful gem which we call salvation. I suspect that for many of us when we think about salvation we think of it in terms of that moment in time when a sinner exercises faith in the finished work of Christ and is born again. And certainly that is one of the most beautiful facets of the salvation gem. But there are others. For example:

- A. Election (predestination, foreknowledge - God chose before the creation of the world whom he would save).
- B. Effectual Call (Regeneration - the new birth)
- C. Conversion (Repentance and faith)
- D. Justification (declaration of right legal standing)
- E. Adoption (place into God's family and given all the rights and privileges of an adopted son)
- F. Perseverance (remaining in Christ)
- G. Glorification (receiving a resurrection body and made perfectly holy)

6. Now when you look at this list (*ordo salutis*) we can make some observations about which actions God does on His own (monergistically) and which parts sinners have a part in. For example,

- A. Election: God alone
- B. Effectual call: God alone
- C. Conversion: (repentance and faith) Man has some responsibility
- D. Justification: God alone
- E. Adoption: God alone
- F. Perseverance: Man has some responsibility
- G. Glorification: God alone

7. What I want you to see is that we have to be careful NOT to say that every aspect of the salvation matrix is something that God does monergistically, or without human participation. (I one time heard a theologian ask, How many Calvinists does it take to change a light bulb? None! You know only God can change a light bulb!)

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<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *editors, Bible Doctrine*, (Wheaton, Crossway, 2017), 635

8. On the other hand, we have to be careful NOT to say that man is the only one active in the salvation matrix, that would be heresy. So let's think about Sanctification. God alone? Or does man have some responsibility? Yes, man has some responsibility.

9. The most significant thing I want you to see here is that Sanctification is NOT the same as Justification. Justification is the act by which God alone declares the sinner righteous based on the merits of Christ alone.

10. Sanctification, however, is the process by which the Christian is made holy through the agency of (or by the means of) human effort. Let's consider some important facts about sanctification

11. The Nature of Sanctification:

- A. Sanctification is fundamentally about change in the heart.
- B. Phil. 2:12-13 (We looked at this last time, but it bears repeating). Paul says,
  - ...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, <sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.
- C. The H.S. works in the child of God NOT merely to sanctify his behavior but even His desires (his will).
- D. In Rom. 12 Paul says it involves the renewal of one's mind.
- E. Eph. 3:16 Paul prays that that you would be strengthened with power through His spirit in your inner being.
- F. All of this points to the reality that sanctification is focused fundamentally on changing the heart.
- G. Sanctification is NOT about stapling fruit to dead branches on the vine. It about grafting the branch into the Living Vine so fruit will be borne by virtue of the believers vital union with Christ.<sup>3</sup>
- H. Charles Hodge helps us on this point when he writes, "Sanctification... does not consist exclusively of a series of a new kind of [behavior]. It is [about] making the tree good, in order that the fruit may be good. It involves a [fundamental] change of character."<sup>4</sup>  
This is the NATURE of sanctification.

12. The Author of Sanctification:

- A. Phil. 2:12-13 says "It is God who is at work in you.
- B. 1 Thes. 4:23 says "The God of peace sanctifies you..."
- C. It is noteworthy to point out that in Rom. 12 Paul uses the passive voice.

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<sup>3</sup> Mac & Mayhue, (2017), 639

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 639

- Believers are NOT to transform themselves, but to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” God Himself is performing the transformation.
- D. More specifically the NT identifies the H.S. as the member of the Godhead who performs the work.
  - E. 1 Peter 1:2 He calls it “the sanctification of the Spirit.”
  - F. Rom. 1:4 The third Person of the Trinity is called “the Spirit of holiness.”
  - G. Consequently, the character qualities that are produced in sanctification are called (Gal. 5) the “fruit of the Spirit.”
  - H. So the NATURE of sanctification is change in the heart. The AUTHOR of sanctification is the H.S.

### 13. The Means of Sanctification:

- A. While sanctification is a work of the H.S. it does not follow that believers have no responsibility or need not exert effort. The N.T. is full of exhortations and commands for the believer to rigorously pursue holiness.
  - Phil. 2:12-13 “Work out your own salvation... God’s sanctifying work is the REASON and the POWER for our work, not an excuse for passivity
  - This text does NOT say that since God is at work my effort is unnecessary but that God’s work makes my effort possible (and productive). “Sanctification is the outworking of the New Life given to us in [salvation].”<sup>5</sup>
  - Phil. 3:12 Speaking of his desire to know Christ to the fullest extent, Paul says, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.
  - 2 Pet. 1:3-8 (Turn there & Read)
  - 1 Cor. 15:10 “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.” (Who is working, Paul or God’s grace? YES).
  - You can probably think of other text that state or imply the same truths.
- C. The point is that Sanctification is a work of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit accomplishes this work through the agency of human effort.
- D. The NATURE of sanctification is heart change. The AUTHOR of sanctification is the H.S.; and the MEANS of sanctification is spirit-empowered human effort. Hence Paul can tell Timothy, “Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness” (1 Tim. 4:7).
- E. As with the doctrines of conversion, and perseverance, in Sanctification we find a God-ordained tension between God’s work and man’s work; God’s sovereignty

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<sup>5</sup> John Frame, *Systematic Theology*, (Phillipsburg, P&R, 2013), 987

and man's responsibility. On this point John Frame wisely warns:

We should beware of slogans that disparage one side or the other of this tension. [For example] "Sanctification by grace alone" minimizes our responsibility, while "synergistic sanctification" misses the sense in which all our progress in holiness is by God's grace."<sup>6</sup>

E. Needless to say, some do disregard this counsel. And that brings us to the next point. We have talked about Understanding Sanctification. Now let's talk about...

## II. Misunderstanding Sanctification

1. "Let go and let God." (Keswick Victorious Life view)
2. "The art of getting used to our justification" (Lutheran view). This is an older form of the modern approach that suggests that the hard work of sanctification is the difficult duty of daily "pressing the reset button on our justification" (Tullian T. Jesus Plus Nothing...)
3. These are simply reformulations of what theologians have referred to as Quietism, the view that in sees the Christian as entirely passive. (Frame, 993).
3. Some seem to believe that "trying" to obey God, pursuing holiness, and so on are incompatible with trust in the finished work of Christ.
4. Perhaps the problem is that many good believers have adopted the notion that there is only one way that God can be pleased; namely, through the righteousness of Jesus Christ on our behalf. A more biblical understanding, however, is that while we can never satisfy God by our works, we can and should seek to please him by our work. Only Jesus can satisfy the just demands of God's Law on our behalf. By His active obedience we are Justified (declared righteous). But as God's children – Justified in, and unified with Christ – we should make it our ambition in everything to please the Lord (2 Cor. 5:9)
5. That's our role in sanctification. And as we "walk in the Spirit" (Gal.5:16), "pressing toward the mark of His high calling" (Phil. 4) "making every effort" to grow in godliness (2 Pet. 1:5), clothing ourselves in "the armor of God" (Eph. 6:10-19), "running the race so as to win (1 Cor. 9:24-27), "disciplining ourselves for the sake of godliness" (1 Tim. 4), all the while depending entirely upon the empowering grace of H.S. the more we grow and change into Christ's likeness.
6. So lets make this practical. We have sought to understanding Sanctification. We have been warned about Misunderstanding Sanctification. Now let's talk briefly about applying sanctification.

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<sup>6</sup> Frame, 988

### III. Applying Sanctification:

1. let's make this simple in order to go directly to the heart

- Every time we read God's word with a heart to know God.
- Every time we confess sin from the heart to God and one another.
- Every time we risk sharing the gospel
- Every time we consciously put on the armor of God to battle temptation
- Every time we truly pray as an act of worship and lay out our petitions before the Lord in faith.
- Whenever we preach the gospel to ourselves for encouragement and fellowship with Jesus
- When we meditate on a certain scripture to battle temptation, help us worship God, or learn to pray.
- Every time we come to hear the word of God preached NOT to take a much needed nap but to really deepen our knowledge of God.
- Every time we fellowship with brothers and sisters around God's word.
- When we share the Lord's table,
- When we rejoice in the baptism of one who desires to testify to the power of the resurrection in their salvation.
- When we join God's people in singing God's promises
- Whenever we ask a brother or sister to help us battle the flesh or discover God's wisdom for life.
- When we sacrifice our time and money to help someone in need.
- Every time we deny ourselves and take up our cross to follow Christ
- In all of these ways we are obeying Paul's command to "discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness." And by these means (and others) the Holy Spirit works in our lives to bring about real change.

2. Why do the spiritual disciplines work to bring about change? Because they all help us to see Jesus more clearly. One of the most profound texts on sanctification comes from Paul's second letter to the church of Corinth. Paul writes (2 Cor. 3:18)

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

3. You become what you behold. The only question is, what do you want to become? Is your greatest ambition to become like Christ? That was Paul's ambition for himself. That was Paul's ambition for you. And that is God's ambition for you, for "those He foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom. 8:29).

4. Are there things in your heart and life that you know need to change? Have you felt frustrated by your lack of growth in Christ-likeness? God is committed to changing you at the deepest level of your heart.

- Perhaps you would describe your relationship with God right now as dry and lifeless. You can change
- Maybe you feel addicted to lust or ensnared by fear. You can change.
- Maybe you and your spouse are believers but your marriage is a train-wreck. You can change.
- Someone hearing my voice may be wracked with bitterness toward someone who hurt you. You can change.
- And just speaking practically, I have seen many people over the past 10 years who had seemingly insurmountable obstacles to their growth in Christ, and if they could stand up here today they would say, "I never thought it was possible, but God has changed me. Praise Him!

He will do it by the power of the H.S. as you exercise grace empowered effort.

5. And just a little hint to accelerate your growth – from time to time all of us need the help of other believers. There are people in this church who can help you grow in ways that you may not be able to imagine. Find someone who is more mature in Christ than you are and ask them if they would consider making an investment in the church by investing in your sanctification.

6. If you don't know the Lord Jesus Christ, God has a different message for you. (Gospel).

7. But this same gospel also promises the power of the Spirit to change your life. Will you trust Him with your life? Will you invite Him to do anything necessary in your life to make you more like Christ? It won't be easy, but you will never regret it.

**No sin is so great that it can hold you captive against the liberating power of the Spirit and the word.**