

Sanctification Not By The Law

Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified. My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message (John 17:17-20).

I would like to speak to you for a few minutes on John chapter 17, and verse 17; John chapter 17, and verse 17. Jesus, in his great prayer in the garden, says: ‘Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth’. ‘Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth’.

He is praying here for his people. At the moment, he’s praying for his immediate disciples. But as he goes on – in verse 20 – to say: ‘My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message’ – through the apostolic preaching. We may, therefore, justly, regard this prayer of Christ: ‘Sanctify them by your truth; your word is truth’, we may justly take this to be a prayer for us – if we are believers. A prayer for us today!

So, I address you as a believer. If you are a believer in our Lord Jesus Christ, one of whom it says, in the beginning of this chapter, that you have come to know the only true God through Jesus Christ, you have trusted him, you have rested your soul and your eternity upon him, for your everlasting salvation, his blood has washed you from your sins, if his righteousness has clothed you, Jesus is praying for you here – in this great prayer: ‘Sanctify them’! ‘Sanctify these believers, sanctify all believers, by the truth’! And as he says to his Father: ‘Your word is truth’!

Now, I want to speak to you, at this time, on this matter of sanctification; on this matter of avoiding antinomianism, overcoming antinomianism. Antinomianism and sanctification¹ are exact opposites: godliness – ungodliness; living for God –

¹ Because of what follows, I should have put this the other way round: sanctification and antinomianism.

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living for self; living under God's word in obedience to Christ – living lawlessly, living without account, just living for self, for the world.

There's much debate these days about antinomianism. And there is much debate about sanctification. And the usual view, the common view, the overwhelmingly-usual view, is that sanctification is by the law. We must look to the law, the ten commandments in particular, 'the moral law' as it's called – it's not called that in Scripture, I might say, but it's called that by the theologians! – the ten commandments are the rule, the standard, and the motive, the spring, to move us to sanctification. As Calvin said – and he formulated the system – as Calvin said: The law is a whip smiting us! We are lazy and we need to be hit into line!' You can read all this in his works. You can read it in my books² – my book, in particular, *Christ Is All* – I've given extracts, very fully, proving, showing, demonstrating that Calvin made the whip of the law the great way of sanctification.

Now I turn to this text. Here is Jesus praying for us as believers, and he's praying for our sanctification.

The first thing I would notice about that is this: if Jesus prays for it, then it must be an essential! It must be something vitally important for us. This is no option, believer! We must be sanctified! Now, he's not praying that we'll be separated from the world in regeneration. He's not praying that we should be separated from the world in justification. That's already taken place, earlier... he's already said, in John chapter 15 verse 3: 'Now you are clean through the word I have spoken to you', and so on. And all that is complete! What he's praying for here is sanctification in the sense of daily, practical, godly living. And Jesus prays that all his people shall be sanctified.

Believer! It is not an option to live a godly life for Christ and for God! 'Holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord'! And in that passage, if you read it in Hebrews 12, you'll find it's

² See also the first chapter of this present work.

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about sanctification. It's not about the initial, great, secret work of God, when he makes us perfect for ever in Christ! It is our daily living he is talking about there! Holiness, daily, practical, godliness, spirituality of life, obedience to Christ is an essential! Without it, no man shall see the Lord!

I said you're a believer. Well, you're a *professing* believer! But if you're living like the world, you are a worldling! If you are living carnally, you are carnal! You must be sanctified! Jesus prayed for it. It is an essential!

But I say again, Jesus prayed for it! And I make another point from that. It is not only Jesus' desire and earnest prayer – and, therefore, a command to us to be sanctified: 'Be ye holy for I am holy' – if he prays for it, this shows me that this is a fundamental aspect of the *means* of my sanctification! How will I, as a believer, be sanctified? Jesus prays for me to be sanctified! He is ever the same; the same yesterday, today and for ever. He ever lives to make intercession for us. I believe I can overhear him, in his intercession for me now: 'Sanctify them! Sanctify them! Make them holy! You have justified them! O Father, sanctify them!' And this is an essential ingredient in my sanctification: Christ is praying for it for me. And, therefore, seeing he is always heard, I have the help of the Spirit assured to me in this prayer – that I shall be sanctified!

And that takes me on to the Spirit.

'Sanctify them through thy truth' – through your truth – through truth. Now, there is a great deal of debate today about truth versus Spirit; Spirit versus truth; life and Spirit; Spirit and life; word and Spirit; Spirit and word; life and doctrine; life and Scripture. You see, these two are played against each other. *They should never, never, never be played against each other!* It is life *and* Spirit! It is word, truth *and* life! It is Spirit *and* word! It's not either/or! It is both! Sanctify through truth! Truth leads to sanctification. Scripture/obedience linked: life, doctrine, Spirit, word, godliness. All these cluster around each other. They're not either/or's. They make up one whole. We're not sanctified by feelings. We're not sanctified by some mysterious,

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mystic experience. It is truth and Spirit; it is Spirit and truth: 'Sanctify them through thy truth; your word is truth'. Word and Spirit!

But my main point in this short address is this: What exactly is this truth which is the great means of my sanctification? The truth will not sanctify me on its own – I need the Spirit to enable me to be sanctified. But what is the truth that the Spirit will take me to?

Well, I've already told you what Calvin taught. Calvin said, expressly, it is the law, 'the moral law', the ten commandments. And this acts as not only a standard, but it acts as a whip to drive me to that standard! So he makes *fear* the motive! He makes whip – the whip of the law – the great means of sanctification.

Now what does Christ pray for here? 'Sanctify them through thy law! Thy law is truth'? 'Sanctify them through thy truth! The ten commandments are the truth'?

Now he doesn't say that does he? He says: 'Sanctify them by the truth; your word' – the entire word of God is the truth that sanctifies!

Can you see the contrast here?

Here am I, as a believer. I know, from many scriptures, that it is the Spirit who leads me into sanctification. He leads me to Christ. He shows me Christ. The New Testament is full of this. But how must this be calibrated? How can I find instructions and directions? I'm under law to Christ (Gal. 6:2). 1 Corinthians 9, verse 21: 'I am under the law to Christ', 'the law of Christ'. Now where will I find that law written down? OK – the Spirit writes it in my heart! That is the promise of the new covenant. But where will I find it?

Well, I find it in Scripture! But do I find it in the ten commandments? Is that the sum total of it?

Well, the New Testament does use the ten commandments, occasionally – like it uses other things – to give me illustrations,

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and so on. *But it doesn't take me primarily to the ten commandments*, I assure you. Read the New Testament, and see! And the prayer of Christ here is explicit! 'Sanctify them by the truth; your word' – *the entire word* – 'is truth'.

I would go further!

In the context of John, in the context of the New Testament, I would interpret this to be the entire word of God, *but especially the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ!* Because it's the *gospel* which is saving! And it's the *gospel* which is sanctifying! I'm reminded of that passage when Paul wrote to Timothy (2 Timothy chapter 3). He urged him to continue in the things that he learned, knowing that *all Scripture* is able to make him wise to salvation. *All Scripture* is profitable: instruction, teaching, conviction, correction, training in righteousness, and so on. The Scriptures! The entire body of the Scriptures is given to instruct us, and to calibrate the Spirit's working within us that we might be sanctified.

But, as I say, primarily – and in the context of Timothy, too, I think you will find it so – it is the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ which is the prime source of my instruction. I don't mean just the four Gospels. I mean the whole doctrine of the saving work of Christ, as worked out in the New Testament.

Now that's what I see here. I see not that we should be restrained to the ten commandments, and certainly not as a whip! It is the word of God completely. And it's the gospel! It is the good news! Not the whip! It is the love of Christ, the love of God, the mercy of God, the grace of God, the salvation which Christ wrought for us! *This* is the great motive! Indeed, Christ himself! Christ is the gospel! Christ is the gospel, and the gospel is Christ!

It's very interesting to ask Calvin – when he's not talking in his *Institutes* about this system of the law – and to ask him what he thinks this text means. Well, we can ask him! We can ask his view of John 17:17. It's written down. He's published his *Commentary*, and we still have it. Shall I read it to you? Remember he has told us that we are to be sanctified by the ten

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commandments, and we treat the ten commandments as a whip to smite us into obedience. That's what he says. Now, when he comes to comment on John 17:17, this is what he says:

'The word' here denotes the doctrine of the gospel. True, it is God alone who sanctifies, but as the gospel is the power of God to salvation to everyone that believes (Romans 1:16), whoever departs from the gospel as the means must become more and more filthy and polluted.

Can I read that again?

'The word' here denotes the doctrine of the gospel. True, it is God alone who sanctifies, but as the gospel is the power of God to salvation to everyone that believes (Romans 1:16), whoever departs from the gospel as the means must become more and more filthy and polluted.

I could not agree more with Calvin on this! John Calvin got it dead right here! He says if you want to be an antinomian – 'more and more filthy and polluted' – then give up the gospel, give up the word of God!

So, my friend, if you want to be an antinomian – then reject Scripture! Live as you want! Forget what God has said! Especially forget the gospel! Forget Christ! Live as you want! *But you're on the road to damnation!*

But if you want to be sanctified, then as Calvin said: "The word" here denotes "the doctrine of the gospel" – the doctrine, the teaching, of the gospel, the good news of the gospel. And what is the good news of the gospel? The saving work of Christ! The person of Christ! The merit of Christ! True, 'it is God alone who sanctifies', he (Calvin) says, but 'the gospel is the power' – and I need power to be sanctified, sanctify them through the *power* of your word – 'the power of God to salvation'.

I'm interested in that statement by Calvin. He's not just talking about sanctification. He's not just talking about justification. He's talking about *salvation!* Salvation includes the whole lot! So when the Pharisees and the teachers of the law wanted the Christians to go under the law for salvation (Acts 15:1-5), this is what they wanted. They wanted Christians to take Calvin's view

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– as he would later formulate it! Come under the law, they said, and you will be sanctified. As Calvin said: ‘No! “The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone that believes” (and he quotes Romans 1:16). Whoever departs from the gospel as the means’ – not only *the standard*, but as *the means* – ‘must become more and more filthy and polluted’!

I couldn’t agree more with Calvin! *But Calvin didn’t agree with himself!*

But, my friend, I’m talking to you. Are you one who has been reared on Calvin’s system? – the (his) original system, the law system? Are you finding it a grind? This whip hurts doesn’t it? You can’t make it, can you? The standard is too high, you can’t reach it! It’s impossible, isn’t it?

You should be looking to Christ! Abundance of scriptures show it: ‘Consider him! Set your affections on him’!

‘But all this must be calibrated!’

I fully agree! And that’s why I’m speaking to you now! The Scriptures are your calibration – not just the ten commandments! Go to the entire range of Scripture! And look for Christ everywhere. Luke 24, as he spoke to his disciples, Christ said: ‘Christ is in *all* the Scriptures’. And beginning with Moses and the prophets, he revealed himself to his disciples. And that’s what you must look for! Wherever you open your Bible – law, prophets, psalms, the Gospels, the letters, the prophetic bits, the poetical bits, the historical portions, whatever – look for Jesus. Jesus is in all the Scriptures. Set your affections upon him, and you will be sanctified as you grow in the likeness of the Christ you see revealed in Scripture. Look for Jesus! ‘Sir’, said the Greeks, ‘we would see Jesus’!

And *that’s* what Jesus is praying for here: ‘Sanctify them’, he says. ‘Take the whole of Scripture! May they be subservient to Scripture! May they be submissive to Scripture! May they bow to Scripture! And may the Spirit help them, and lead them to me, so that looking upon me, and gazing upon me, and walking

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with me, and talking with me, I will pray for them, and so they will be sanctified’!

‘The gospel’, as Calvin said – and I agree – ‘is the power of God unto salvation’ – in this respect: it is the *means* of sanctification. If you would be more and more filthy and polluted, my friend, then leave Christ, leave the gospel. But if you would be sanctified, if you would be saved, look to Jesus!

Indeed, I go on just to finish with this: if you are an unbeliever, the word of God tells me you are a sinner, and on the road to damnation, you’re under the wrath of God – now! But it also tells me that if you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, if you look to him, if you call upon his name, if you repent of your sins and turn to him, you will be saved!

But my final word will be for all of us who are believers: Jesus prayed for us. He’s praying for us now my brothers and sisters. Let us fall in with this. Let us take our Bibles – *all* our Bibles – looking for Christ in the Scriptures, looking to be like him, and grow like him, and to be sanctified in this present evil age. ‘Sanctify them’, he prays to his Father. ‘Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth’. And Christ, being the word of God, is *the* truth we must concentrate upon, above all. Look to Jesus, Jesus Christ the Lord.