



Living Faithfully in a Fallen World

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One of the great challenges for all Christians is to hold the balance between mind and heart, between doctrine and experience. If the doctrine is wrong, then the whole practice of our Christian faith will become distorted, and our Christian lives will be the poorer. Yet in our generation many Christians often say that they are looking for what they think is “practical” help in their living of the Christian life. When they hear of a “doctrine,” they become convinced that it belongs to the realm of the mind and dismiss it as having little or no practical value and consequently neglect or even avoid it. One of those doctrines frequently thought of in this way is sanctification. Yet sanctification is the biblical way of describing Christian discipleship, and unless we understand it in its full expression as the Scripture unfolds it, we risk reducing discipleship to a series of “do’s and don’ts” that all too often results in a rigid and arid legalism.

As is the case with many of the doctrines taught in Scripture, there exists a wide theological diversity in the Christian community on the understanding of what sanctification means. However, there is a general agreement about the absolute importance for every Christian to live out his or her faith in the midst of a world where Christ is not received or welcomed. This involves being faithful to him to see him as the only way to heaven and to live in witness to his uniqueness as Savior and the absolute Lord. This is how the Scripture understands sanctification in the life of the believer.

The Greek verb for sanctification, *hagiazō*, means to be “set apart,” and it always indicates the sovereign action of God who “sets apart” a person, place, or a thing in order to accomplish his purposes. When we become Christians by the call of God, ev-

ery believer is thus set apart by God. The great privilege we have is that as distinct from our justification—where we are declared righteous by God on the basis of the finished work of Christ, and to which we contribute nothing—in our sanctification we bring our redeemed minds, hearts, and wills to cooperate with the Holy Spirit who indwells us, in living out our lives as Christians. This is what is meant by discipleship, which is a work of God in us. This is distinct from our justification in which God sovereignly declares us righteous, as the apostle Paul makes clear when writing to the Romans: “Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies” (8:33).

While justification is declarative, sanctification is concerned to eliminate sin from our lives and conform us to the likeness of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is a lifelong process in which the Holy Spirit, who indwells us and causes us to persevere in the struggle with sin until Christ returns or calls us, “will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body,” (Phil.3:21) so that we are delivered from that which is corruptible, and we put on bodies no longer subject to decay, death, or sin.

The Scripture makes clear that in one sense our sanctification is something already accomplished for us by the completed work of Christ on the cross as was made clear by the author of Hebrews, who wrote, “For by one offering he has perfected forever those who are being sanctified” (10:14). As our substitute, the death of Christ has satisfied the justice of God, which demanded that “the soul that sins shall die.” By his



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resurrection Jesus has demonstrated that death, which is the judgment of God on sin, is conquered and, as a consequence, the bondage of the believer to sin is broken. As a result of the salvation accomplished for us, we are set free to live the life God desires for us.

John Webster, professor of systematic theology at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, in his little book titled *Holiness*, summarizes sanctification in a carefully constructed and succinct way:

The sanctification of the Christian is the work of the Holy Trinity in which the reconciled sinner is renewed for the active life of holy fellowship with God. Grounded in the electing, reconciling and perfecting work of Father, Son and Spirit the active life of holy fellowship is the work of faith, which is at every moment characterized by mortification and vivification, and which is actual as freedom, obedience, and love.

He clearly articulates the biblical teaching that sanctification has its origin in the decree of God that was made before all events relating to creating beings, so that God knew certain people as his own, having predestined them to be sanctified and thus conformed to the image of his Son. Christ himself, by his sinless life of obedience to the law of God and his perfect death as a sacrifice to make atonement for the sins of his people, has made that purposed conformity possible for fallen sinners. His work is then applied when by the ministry of the Holy Spirit that work of the Son is applied when the sinner is justified and the new life is breathed into the dead soul, which then displays itself and grows until there is a final glorification at the resurrection of the dead.

Sanctification is seen thereby to be a continuous and lifelong process that is a work of the Triune God. The Father has decreed the sanctification of his people, and the Spirit accomplishes that work as Paul makes clear: "But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth" (2 Thess. 2:13).

The Spirit applies the work of the Son "who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works" (Titus 2:14).

While the work of Christ in the past guarantees our standing as children of God by God's grace, the work of the Holy Spirit, who applies the work of Christ and indwells the believer, continues to aid us in the present. Sanctification is both present and progressive. All through our life as children of God, we will still battle the reality of living in a sinful world fac-

ing the temptations that the world offers to bodies that are still subject to earthly desires, so that even though we have been "set apart" as God's children, we continue to behave in ways that are contrary to our new status of being children of God. At the same time, precisely because we are now children of God there is an inner conflict that is experienced by Christians when we sin. The war that rages inside of Christians is the battle between our old self and our new self and is described by the apostle Paul when he wrote to the Galatians, "For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish" (Gal.5.17). He captures the reality and pain of that struggle for the Christian when writing to the Romans:

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Rom.7.24)

The believer, now a child of God by grace, desires out of gratitude to God to reflect the likeness of Christ; however, the Christian still battles with the sin that is all around and all too often seduces us to forget the love of Christ that is the ground of our life of gratitude. However, even when we sin, we are not left alone, but God the Holy Spirit, who indwells the believer, produces a remembrance of what Christ has done to redeem us and makes us sorrowful for the sin; that sorrow produces repentance.

Historically the development of the doctrine of sanctification has concerned the clarification of several issues, the foremost in importance being the relationship of grace and sanctification. Because the early church was involved with other questions, little was written on this subject; this lack enabled practices to develop without solid biblical and theological reflection. There arose a confusion about the place of faith and good works, which led to the mistaken idea that sin committed before baptism was washed away, while sin committed after baptism demands some form of human penance to find forgiveness. Later medieval thinkers further confused the church by suggesting that in justification God infused a grace into the soul that enabled it to achieve its destiny. Thus Christ together with good works enabled individuals to be saved. The rediscovery by the Reformers of the grace of God saw the separation of the justification

and sanctification, so justification was immediate, the work of God alone, while sanctification, while still being gracious because of the work of the Spirit, was also an ongoing work that required faith and obedience and the mortifying of the flesh.

It is important to understand that sanctification is a gracious work of God, which stands as a sharp rebuke to the “activism” that shapes much of the understanding of the Christian life in many circles today. Sanctification flows from justification and is the fruit of that justification. While man is privileged to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in the work of sanctification, he can do so only because the presence of the Spirit within imparts strength to do so, making clear that the spiritual development of the individual is a work of divine grace.

The Holy Spirit clearly uses “means” for our growth, and the gospel is the key to our growth. As Martin Luther said, “The truth of the gospel is the principle article of all Christian doctrine.” The gospel is, said Paul, “the power of God for salvation.” It is also the instrument of all continual growth and spiritual progress after we have been converted to Christ, bearing fruit and growing in the believer. The Holy Spirit uses this gospel to build us up as citizens of the new kingdom. Fundamental to the New Testament is the understanding that Christians live in an overlap of the ages where the new kingdom of Christ has been ushered in by his coming, yet it awaits its consummation on his return. Until that day we live in a world where darkness continues, and where we live in the reality of the kingdom’s presence and being aware that it is not yet fully come. Because of the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ, we live with the confidence that the power of the kingdom has come and exists in the midst of gathered Christians:

Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you” (Luke 1:20–21).

While Jesus made clear that the kingdom would not arrive in its fullness until the end of time, all believers have already been transferred into that kingdom, and amidst the darkness of the present evil age, we dwell as those who are already reigning in heaven. This knowledge inculcates into every Christian the balance between confidence and humility. For while we are still sinners, we are justified sinners; and while living in this world we are also citizens of heaven, so that the Reformers could affirm that we are simul justus et peccator, both sinful and righteous.

A person who is justified by the application of the work of Jesus Christ is declared holy judicially, but not rendered fully holy in thought, word, and deed at the same moment. Instead that person is strengthened and motivated to struggle against the remains of sin in his or her soul. This struggle produces a progression in holiness as the believer grows more and more into conformity with the image of Christ. This enables us to maintain the scriptural balance of being the adopted sons and daughters of God and thus free from the condemnation of the law, and yet still striving to be what we are in Christ and lovers of the law, which is the reflection of the character of God our Father. It enables us also to avoid the twin errors of legalism and licentiousness, which Tertullian, a North African church father, so famously called “thieves of the gospel.” Legalists stress law over gospel, and the licentious celebrate grace and freedom without the response of gratitude. Legalists turn the Christian experience and life into a moralism, which asserts in practice, if not in words, that one becomes acceptable to God by moral attainment, living often by rules and regulations. The licentious, however, reduce the Christian life to one of pragmatism, dwelling only on the love of God and thinking of love as an emotion rather than a costly act of sacrifice. Both succeed in reducing the significance and efficacy of the cross of Christ and produce a distorted Christian walk.

An issue that arose within the life of the church has also helped shape the biblical understanding of the doctrine of sanctification: the question as to the degree of sanctification that is to be attained in this life, with some following in the thought of John Wesley advocating perfectionism. They suggest that because God has commanded that we should be holy as he is holy, then it must be his will that we shall be so, and he has enabled us to accomplish this. Yet the Scripture leaves us in no doubt that perfection is not attainable now. The apostle John stated this plainly when he wrote:

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us (1 John 1:8–10).

With these words the apostle makes clear that all believers continue to sin; indeed that is the reason that we rely upon the grace of God that brings to us both repentance and pardon. Well into his own life, the apostle Paul affirms the same truth, ruling out moral perfection for himself:

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. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:12–14).

The root of perfectionism lies in the false premise that God will never demand from us what we cannot ourselves do, and reflects the influence of the Pelagian teaching that sees man's nature uninjured by the Fall of Adam. Instead such teaching sees mankind as being guilty of only those sins that are committed personally and voluntarily. It further argues that men and women both before and after Adam's Fall were and are fully able to obey God's law, therefore being able to live sinlessly. Such a teaching of course understands grace as simply making human obedience easier.

On the opposite end of the spectrum concerning the conflict with sin that remains in the human heart are those who have devised the doctrine of the "carnal Christian," who base their thought upon 1 Corinthians where Paul writes: "But I, brothers, I could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ" (3:1). They argue that there are two classes of Christians, the spiritual and the carnal, because when a man or woman becomes a Christian, while the guilt of their sin is removed and the assurance of eternal life is given to them, there is no change in their nature. Thus it is possible to live as an unbeliever and yet no longer be subject to the penalty of sin. Only when there is a subsequent decision to accept Jesus as Lord does the carnal Christian become the spiritual Christian. However, such teaching misses the clear point of Paul's teaching. For the apostle is not speaking to a whole class of believers but rather to those he names as "messengers of the gospel," whose work at planting and tending the gospel will be judged. In Corinth Paul and Apollos had faithfully proclaimed the gospel of Christ and seen the fruit of their labor as there were new converts added to the church. He knew that while these were real believers, their manner of life was not consistent with the gospel that they had embraced. So he was warning them not to abandon the gospel by mixing it with carnal and fleshly behavior, but rather to live in the world as true disciples of Christ who had made them alive.

The reality of the conflict with sin is the context of the sanctification of every believer. While it is not a struggle for unbelievers, it is a struggle for all Christians, and there is no simple or quick solution to that struggle. Instead we are given the Spirit, who encourages us in that struggle and who uses the outward

means of the Scripture and the sacraments to minister the gospel to us in our pilgrimage. Christ has added us to his family the church, and our growth is encouraged and sustained by the godly discipline within the body of Christ to the end that we grow in the grace and the knowledge of the Lord.

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