

Sanctification . . . Absent!

“For this is the will of God: Your sanctification” (1 Thessalonians 4:3)

Something very important, something major, is wrong with Christianity as we know it in today's Protestant churches. Sanctification is absent from the life of evangelicals. Absent! Evangelicals don't even know what it is, or grasp the importance of it. Sanctification simply doesn't exist in today's churches. In this lesson, I'll explore this problem. I see it as the most important issue in Christianity.

First, we need to take a deep dive into biblical theology. God created us to be blessed by sharing in His life. Not merely biological life (in Greek, *bios*), but His kind of transcendent life (in Greek, *zoē*). In the Garden, Adam was tested regarding good (obedience) and evil (disobedience). And he made a bad choice. Because of that disobedience, God declared the penalty of death upon Adam and his offspring (all humanity). Sin entered and corrupted human nature, and Adam forfeited life (both kinds). But in grace, God still placed on offer life, to be had by faith in His Word, by faith in Him. In Deuteronomy 30, the offer is starkly presented: Choose good, which is life, or choose evil, which is death (30:15-20). Obeying God out of love is the choice of good, that is, the way of life, and it's a life that comes from God, *His* life (see v. 20b, **“for the Lord is your life”**).

The Apostle Paul derived the doctrine of justification (explicit in Romans and Galatians) upon that passage in Deuteronomy along with Habakkuk 2:4 (**“by faith, the righteous shall live”**). Justification means God imparts life, His kind of life, to the individual who has faith in the Son. We misunderstand justification; It does not mean forgiveness of sins (although that's included in the gift). We don't go from guilt (due to sin) to forgiveness of sins, but from death to life! Justification is the opposite of condemnation (which is death). Justification is by faith in Christ Jesus, and it occurs at the moment of conversion. It's God's gift of life, by grace. It's the resurrection of the soul, though we must wait for the resurrection of the body. Justification is something only God can do. So we participate or share in God's own life. Justification doesn't change our nature. We are humans, that is, we have a human nature, and that doesn't and can't change. We don't become gods. But we can enter into a new mode of being. That's why sanctification.

Sanctification isn't an add-on to justification. Sanctification is living the new life that God gives thru justification. It's the call to live out God's own life. It's Christ living out His life in us: **“I no longer live, but Christ lives in me”** (Galatians 2:20). We participate in the very life of Christ in the Spirit. And it's synergistic, that is, it's by human works (willful obedience to the Word) empowered by the indwelling Spirit. Sanctification is an obligation of justification; it's not an option.

So sanctification as the maturing of a believer in faith. It's growth in Christ-likeness and in fruit-bearing. It's growing in spirituality and in holiness. It's serving Christ, being loyal to Him, and doing works of righteousness. It's everything that Jesus and the Apostles said, in the Scriptures, that we're to be like and that we're to be doing. It's a life-long process that occurs as the indwelling Spirit of Jesus by grace empowers us to obediently (and lovingly, trustingly) live out His Word. Sanctification is the explicit, revealed will of God for us. Yet, it's embarrassingly, scandalously, heretically, almost universally absent.

The problem began with the Protestant Reformers. They viewed Roman Catholic soteriology to be one of works; that justification according to the RCC was a *process* of making Christians perfect. And they reacted vehemently to it. Luther and the Reformers who followed maintained that salvation is complete and perfect at the moment of conversion. They held, from Romans 3:22 (and other verses), that righteousness is imputed on the basis of believing in Jesus, that justification is a forensic, declaratory act of God. And so from that moment on in a person's life, salvation is full and complete, finished and perfect. Forgiveness of sins, reconciliation, adoption, union with Christ—all are complete at the time of conversion. Salvation is a done deal.

Furthermore, the Reformers defined grace as God's operation in a person's life to bring that person to faith, to salvation, in contrast to the RCC view that grace is infused and continues to operate in a Christian's life to make that person justified, to transform that person. And since the Reformation to the present, all Protestants hold that salvation is simply conversion, which occurs at the moment of "deciding" for Christ— of believing in Him. Period. Nothing more, because anything more would be re-introducing "works" righteousness. In Protestant soteriology, from conversion on a believer has right standing with God—however imperfect that believer's life may be. Good works and transformation of the believer may (or may not) follow conversion. So sanctification disappears. It can be safely neglected, ignored, repudiated.

The Reformers also failed to reform the church's eschatology and ecclesiology. They all accepted the post- or amillennial eschatology of the Roman church. From Augustine on, the church assiduously ignored the Bible's teaching of a future, restored national Israel on earth with Jesus ruling a literal Kingdom. So Reformation theology (indeed, most evangelical theology) is amillennial. That's disastrous because the Synoptic Gospels teach that we must be sanctified to be fit for the Kingdom. And this: The Reformers accepted the ecclesiology of the Roman church. Believers simply had to attend a service at a church building, sit passively and listen, then leave. That's not biblical, and it teaches a false understanding of Christianity. So the ecclesiology that we now have in Protestantism means that Christianity is merely passive belief; the professional leaders of the church, the clergy, do whatever work needs to be done. No need for sanctification.

It's been argued that sanctification should be our response to what God has done for us. If we love God, if we recognize and appreciate all that He's done, we'll pursue sanctification. OK. But even that seems to ignore the biblical truth that believers are in a progressive, interactive relationship with the living Christ. So justification is only the *preparation* for us to be sanctified, for us to grow spiritually. Conversion is the entry point into a life-long, loving and trusting relationship with Christ Jesus, a relationship that necessarily entails obedience to Him and being conformed to Him.

Let's get this: The Son came to earth not merely to make forgiveness of sins available, although indeed His atoning work did that, but to enable us to be with God. Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven purposely to send His Spirit into the lives of His followers so that they can be sanctified. It's the gift of the Holy Spirit that chiefly distinguishes N.T. Christianity from O.T. Judaism. The gift of the Spirit of Christ empowers those who follow Jesus to live out Jesus' life, that is, to be like Him, to obey God's will as He did . . . in short, to be sanctified.

The lusts of the flesh, the wiles of Satan and his minions, the deceitful attractions of the world, the artificial traditions of the church, and the blatant immaturity of other believers we know—

all these conspire with our ignorance of the need for sanctification to defeat us. We crave an easy Christian life, but the reality of it is, it's anything but easy. It's demanding! Jesus said it would be (Matthew 7:14). So. Is it OK to be a defeated believer? Does it matter if a Christian is defeated, as long as he is "saved"? In Revelation Chapters 2 and 3, Jesus warns His churches: Only "overcomers" (a military term meaning victorious people) will experience the blessings of salvation. The warning is stark and severe.

Why is sanctification so important to God? My answer is speculative, but it's plausible: Because God has called us to Himself, and He is ineffably, transcendently perfect; and only such beings may be in His presence. Yes, we'll be transformed into the image of Christ one future day (called our glorification) but, for now, in this present life, our desire must be to want to be like Christ, the Holy One of Israel, the suffering, obedient Servant of God. And if we're in a loving, trusting relationship with Him, we'll want that more than anything. We'll understand that Jesus' commands and teachings are infinitely good and wise, and (again, if we're in relationship with Him) we'll want to obey them more than anything. Faith, our response to what God has done for us, must be demonstrated to be real (see James 2).

Our pursuit of sanctification demonstrates that we're in the relationship with God that involves participating in His very Being. Sanctification is *intrinsic* to salvation; it's an essential aspect of salvation. It's how we prepare ourselves to dwell in the Kingdom of God.

We live in a world saturated with evil. The evil is all the violence and hatred and lies, for sure. But most of what I see as evil is indifference toward God. The unconcern for His existence, for His norms and His will (particularly in the West) is massive, even among church-goers. The deliberate, active pursuit of sanctification, in contrast, is the biblical way of repudiating evil and taking a stand for good. It shows God that we treasure His goodness. Sanctification also fulfills God's justice because it vindicates the grace that God extended to us.

Something more. Sanctification is how we express love for God, love for Jesus. We must respond appropriately, biblically, to what God has done in Christ. The Greek word used for the expected response is *pistis*, which is commonly translated into English as faith. But *pistis* is not *merely* faith. It's a trusting relationship. It's a relationship with a living Person that's based on trust. And such a relationship involves mutual love. So, in love with Jesus, we desire Him, we desire to be with Him, we desire to be like Him, and we desire to please Him. Love is as love does. And in love He desires us to be perfect, fit to be with the Father. So we live *now* in loving, trusting anticipation of how we'll be in the future, when we're supernaturally changed to be like Jesus. Thus, sanctification.

I must conclude. Let's not be smug in the belief that Protestant soteriology is true and correct. We must—*must!*—be biblical believers, and not entrust our eternal salvation to the ideas and doctrines of other humans, however biblically-minded those other humans may seem.

So here's a suggestion: A good beginning of a pursuit of spiritual growth would be giving out evangelistic tracts, out of love for Jesus and a desire to share His love with others. After all, the Son came to call people to the Father, to give them life. So we should be doing the same. Tell the Holy Spirit that you want to obey Jesus, to be like Jesus, and listen to Him as He continues to work in your life thru the living Word of God. Sanctification is life-changing.