

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24
(Psalm 24:3-6; John 17:17-19)
“A Neglected Message: Sanctification”

Introduction

Let me begin by asking two questions before we turn to our text: First, what is sanctification? Sanctification has two distinct, but related sides in the Bible: first, there is definitive sanctification, that is, God's setting his people apart for himself, delivering us from the kingdom of sin and death and making us citizens of his Kingdom. In this sense, we are called a holy people, God's own people, even when we are not living very holy lives. This happens once and for all, the moment that we become his children by grace.

But there is another meaning to sanctification, and it relates to what God intends to be the consequence of our salvation, the consequence of our having been born again and given his Holy Spirit to live within us. This is the call to become the people he has declared us to be by consecrating ourselves to him. You are declared holy, so be holy, you are members of the body of Christ, so yield yourself to Christ that he may live through you. You are a new creation in Christ, now grow to maturity in Christ. It is in this progressive sense that we usually use the term sanctification: the call to grow and mature into the people God has declared us to be. It is the very goal of our salvation: conformity to Christ, which means becoming fully human, as God intended humanity to be when he first made us in his image.

But that raises a second question: If sanctification is so essential to our salvation, why is it taught so little in our day? There are many reasons, I'm sure. The flesh resists the call to holiness and we don't want to turn people off. Many of us were taught a version of sanctification that describes our initial salvation as God's work, but sanctification as our work, a view that leads either to legalism or depression – sometimes to both. But there are two main reasons, I think, that evangelical pastors are neglecting the message of holiness today: First, there is a focus on justification to the neglect of the other aspects of our union with Christ, an obsession with providing people with the comforts of the atonement stripped of its obligations.

The second reason is, I think, a deep fear of anything that might even sound like performance or legalism. The “grace police” are especially busy in the blogosphere, trumpeting their freedom from bondage to older teaching on holiness and sanctification. They delight in being cool, and don't realize that they are being disobedient and misleading God's people.

I don't know how to say it more clearly than this: Read the Bible. From beginning to end, in law and prophet and psalm, in gospel, epistle and apocalypse, the call to live holy lives is clear and consistent. Paul, the great apostle of the heart set free, followed the same pattern in every letter: In the first half he declared the glory of

salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Then in the second half he said, "Therefore, this is how you must now live if your salvation is real."

So, this morning, we begin what I plan to make a three-part study of these two verses. Today, we reflect on verse twenty-three, and on a neglected message – sanctification, next Sunday on a neglected perspective – the second advent of Christ, and two weeks from today, Lord willing, we will look at a neglected promise – God's power to sanctify. Our sanctification is as surely a work of God's grace as is our justification.

Listen again to the words of our text:

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

Body

1. Note first that sanctification's foundation is Christ's work finished *for* us: "Now may the God of peace."

Everything rests upon the finished work of Christ in his atoning death and victory. Adoption, regeneration, justification, sanctification, glorification, all these flow from our union with Christ, who is our peace. Until you have trusted him fully by entrusting yourself to him completely, until you have known the relief of sin forgiven and the joy of reconciliation with God, until his Spirit testifies to your spirit that God is now your Father, you cannot grow in Christ. You must first be in him in order to know that he is also in you by his Spirit. Christ is your peace, and in him you are at peace with God and he with you.

2. Note secondly that sanctification's goal is Christ's work finished *in* us: "sanctify you completely."

Just as there would be no salvation for us if Christ's atoning work were not completed upon the cross, so too there would be for us no new life if his work could not be completed in us. Imagine a beautiful infant lying at her mother's breast, so perfectly formed, so completely dependent for survival upon those around her. Now imagine visiting the family one-year later, and the baby is still lying at her mother's breast, completely dependent upon her mother. Imagine returning after two or three years and finding the baby in the same place, no growth, no maturing, no ability to begin to reach out and grasp, no movement, no crawling and then walking, still an utterly dependent baby. That's exactly the state of so many Christians today: satisfied to have everything done for them spiritually, having others to feed them spiritual

milk, never standing up and taking their place with the adults in the family of God, caring and providing for others, (see 1 Corinthians 3:1f). God wants us to grow up, no longer to remain babies who can only take spiritual milk.

Well, how do we grow up in Christ? Through the means of grace that God provides us: daily study of his Word and prayer, accountable relationships with a few other Christians, worship and sacrament, serving others in Jesus' name. Through the loving, intentional, consistent pursuit of God and others, we grow in grace.

3. Note thirdly that sanctification's effects are holistic and transforming: "and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless."

The order of these words is important. God made us spirit, soul and body in order that we might enjoy intimate communion between his Spirit and ours, and that our spirit might then direct our soul (that is, our affections and intelligence and will) to think his thoughts and desire his will, and our soul might thus in turn direct our body to do the will of God. Our first parents turned this inside out by listening to the desires of the body, commanding the soul to do as the body wished, and in the process killing the human spirit and the spirits of all of their descendents. In Christ, our spirits are called to life again and God again makes his home within us. We are to live as first intended, from the inside out: our spirit in communion with his, our soul guided by the spirit in its thoughts and desires, and our body a servant of God.

Salvation must not be compartmentalized. It is not just about the soul or spirit, but includes the body. God intends to make all things new in Christ, whose body was raised up glorious, as a picture of the consummation of our salvation, when God raises up our bodies and makes all things new.

Conclusion

Why would we want to continue to live as spiritual infants when God has destined us for glory and wants to begin the work of renewal even now? Some of you are faithful and diligent in keeping your bodies fit. Some of you are perpetual students always learning new things, always expanding the horizons of your mind. Others are always developing new skills, new sports or hobbies or entertainments. These are good things and can be marks of maturity. But I ask you today whether or not you are on an intentional path toward maturity in Christ. Are you seeking to grow in that holiness without which we will not see the Lord?

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

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