

The Blessing of Sanctification (1 Thessalonians 2:23-24)

Today we're finishing a series on "Labor of Love", about our relationships with and care for one another in the body of Christ. It's part of a larger topic, that of "sanctification," or Christian growth in holiness.

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 *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.*

Two verses, the **first a benediction** (a wish, or a blessing), and the **other a promise**.

Outline. Sanctification, or holiness, to sanctify, to be holy, or the holiness of God is almost on every page of the Scriptures. I'm just looking at these two verses and giving three observations. *The blessing of sanctification* (that is, it's a good thing), *the totality of sanctification* (that is, it involves every area of our being), and *the author of sanctification* (that is, God promises to accomplish this work in us).

1) The blessing of sanctification (it's a good thing!)

a) what does this mean? Chap 1 & 2 describes their coming to faith; chap 4 & 5 the completion of their salvation (Christ's return). In chap 3 & 4 we are introduced to this word *sanctification* or *holiness*: **(3:13)** *that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.* And **(4:2-3)** *you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification.*

God is holy. That means as God he is infinitely exalted above creation. He is transcendent, glorious, perfect, beautiful, and completely pure. And to his people, both in the OT and NT he says, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." (Lev 11:45; 1 Peter 1:16)

People become holy as they are set apart to belong to God and to serve him. A person who receives Christ becomes holy by virtue of now belonging to God and being indwelt by the Holy Spirit. That's what it means to be "a saint" (a holy one). That's a position, but there's also a process of change in the direction of God's holy character, of growing purity and separation from the defilement of evil and sin.


The Apostle Peter describes it... *As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."* (1 Peter 1:14-16)

John says it this way: *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. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.* (1 John 3:2-3)

It is one phase of salvation. [chart] past, present, future. It is part of the bigger picture of salvation. Actually from eternity past in election and foreknowledge, but in our experience at a point in time, when we were given new life (regeneration) and when by faith we believed in Christ for our salvation (justification), and delivered from the guilt (penalty) of sin. There is a future aspect when we will be delivered from the presence of all evil and conformed completely to the image of Christ (glorification). Sanctification is the ongoing work of grace, whereby the Holy Spirit works in us to overcome sin and gives us a heart to remove the defilement of sin and seek God's will in all purity.

One definition [J I Packer].

"Regeneration is birth; sanctification is growth. In regeneration, God implants desires that were not there before: desire for God, for holiness, and for the hallowing and glorifying of God's name in this world; desire to pray, worship, love, serve, honor, and please God; desire to show love and bring benefit to others. In sanctification, the Holy Spirit 'works in you to will and to act' according to God's purpose; what he does is prompt you to 'work out your salvation' (i.e., express it in action) by fulfilling these new desires (Phil. 2:12-13)." J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, p. 170.

| Salvation  | | | |
|--|-------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|
| <u>Time:</u> | Past | Present | Future |
| <u>Process:</u> | Beginning | Continuing | Completed |
| <u>From sin:</u> | Penalty | Power Pollution | Presence |
| <u>Terms:</u> | Regeneration Justification | Sanctification | Glorification |

Also, "Sanctification may be defined as that gracious and continuous operation of the Holy Spirit by which He purifies the sinner from the pollution of sin, renews his whole nature in the image of God, and enables him to perform good works." (Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine*, p 267) *Note that sanctification is not merely a moral improvement plan, it is a gracious and supernatural work of God, a phase of salvation as real as regeneration, justification, and glorification.*

It is a necessary part / aspect of your salvation: Hebrews 12:14 *Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.*

b) why is it good (a blessing)? This is a blessing, or a benediction. It's a good word, a word of well-wishing. It comes from the "God of peace himself." Peace here not meaning inner peace but of reconciliation (see 5:13). **Restoration of good relationships.** God is giving us a complete salvation that restores the image of God in man. The goal of salvation is that we will be conformed the image of Jesus Christ his son.

Sanctification is the beginning of spiritual healing... *God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness.* (Acts 3:26) It is the beginning of true beauty... *Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth!* (Psalm 96:9)

Ultimately it is a sharing in his holiness... *God disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.* (Hebrews 12:10) It's a transformation into a being that looks as much like God as a creature can look. *Note: pursuit of holiness, or obeying God, is not "legalism". It is not legalistic to want to know God, please him, and be transformed by him.*

This is a good thing, a blessing, a healing, a cleansing... this is God's will for us, and it's good. We need to reject the lies of our culture (the world), the devil, the sin still indwelling us (flesh). **Objection:** "God loves me just the way I am." *God loves you just as you are?* I think better, God loves you *in spite of* who you are and he loves you too much to leave you in your sin and ugliness and selfishness. He disciplines us for our good that we might share in his holiness and beauty. We need to realize & embrace this!

2) The totality of sanctification

a) Comprehensive & detailed ... sanctify you completely... (5:23) **Context... all areas of life.** "All" or "every" ... Be patient *with them all*, v14; rejoice *always*, v 16; give thanks *in all circumstances*, v 18; Test *everything*, v 21; abstain from *every form of evil*, v 22. (Reminder that there are do's and don'ts to the Christian life! Also, both positive and negatives. Things to do, and things to abstain from. *...himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.* = **All of a person.**

The Bible has always taught that we are both material & immaterial. We know innately that we are more than a sum or our parts, that we are more than a biological machine. We have things in common with the animal kingdom, but also are made in the "image of God." Our body relates to the world, our soul... and our spirit... "The soul is a spirit designed for a physical life." (Bavinck) **Genesis 2:7** *then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature* (lit., a living soul). Can't go into a lot of detail here on the difference between these. **Main point here: complete, as in...** *You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.* (Deuteronomy 6:5) This includes positive and negative, big picture and details... Paul lists the fruit of Spirit, but he also lists the works of the flesh. (Gal 5) *We are so liable to self-denial, blindness... things need to be spelled out.*

b) why is this reasonable and good? God has brought to us **a salvation which is complete in whole and in all its parts.**

Every area of our life is tainted and polluted with the defilement of sin. (Total depravity) Every area will one day be completely glorified, in conformity to Christ. (Rom 8:29-30). God is himself entirely involved in our salvation: Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Christ came and took upon himself a body, a soul, and a spirit. Totally engaged. Jesus was holy from birth, but also sanctified himself in order to sanctify us (John 17:19). His complete humanity died upon the cross, and rose from the dead.

Our holiness is a kind of beauty and wholeness in which the totality and all the details are in a kind of symmetry. **We are in process of being remade wholly.** We should think of ourselves like a ruined home is being restored. **[Fixer-upper.] Chip and Joanna Gaines. Restoration.** The results are unbelievable. Demo day. Invariably the “phone call”, something serious found... rotting sub-floor, black mold, bad foundation, rats... We think our walk with God means putting some religious knick-knacks on the mantelpiece, but God is about restoring our foundation and removing entire walls. We tend to have a light view of sin, a high view of our own goodness, and a low view of what salvation is all about.

Another example is **the bride on her wedding day** (a biblical image, see Revelation 19). A bride prepares for her wedding weeks ahead. Everything must be right. No one ever said to a bride, “Your dress looks pretty good, only one or two stains. Go with it.” ... ever! This is how we should be

c) So our goal is perfection. **Matt 5:48...** *You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* But what about reality? Note “**blameless**”, not sinless. The Bible never promises perfection, or perfect maturity and Christlikeness in this life. But “blameless” does not imply sinless perfection, but it does mean that we are walking with Christ and when we sin or fail, we seek cleansing and restored fellowship: **1 John 1:7-9** *But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. 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.*

So even though we will not attain perfection, we are to press on to the goal of perfection. **Philippians 3:12-14** *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.*

Two temptations we face: a) compartmentalize the Christian life, b) not complete the Christian life (living on a plateau). The Christian life is “a long obedience in the same direction.” (Eugene Peterson)

3) The author of sanctification (the promise)

a) Who does this? “**The God of peace himself**” ... himself is emphasized in the original text. This is personal, this is relational. He has not delegated this to the angels, to the departed spirits in heaven, to some mechanical process or impersonal dynamic like karma. This is God’s work of salvation.

Does this mean I’m to be passive and do nothing? By no means! See...

Luke 9:23 And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

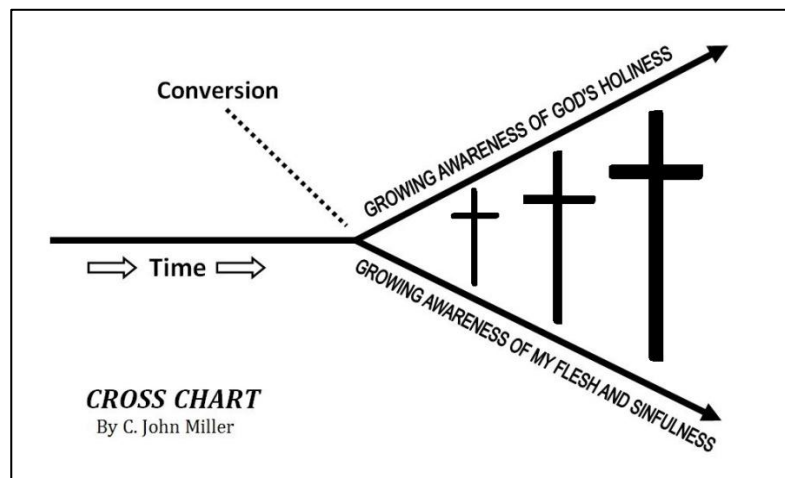
Philippians 2:12-13 ...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

1 Corinthians 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.

= **Not passivity or inactivity.** Not self-reliant activity. God-reliant effort, exercised in trust and obedience to God's will revealed in his word.

b) The encouragement and comfort of God completing the work! God not standing in heaven **with a clipboard shaking his head** with disappointment, wondering if we'll ever make it. He began it, he will complete it: **Philippians 1:6** *And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*

Temptation, discouragement, despair, giving up, denial... etc. How do we keep from being discouraged (despair) or self-righteousness (pride). **John Miller diagram.** As we grow in the Christian life our understanding of the holiness of God grows, as does our awareness of our own fleshly sinfulness! We must ever "preach the gospel to ourselves" by remembering the infinite merit of Christ's death covers that great gap between God's holiness and our progress. The cross doesn't "grow", but our view of it, and understanding of it, must expand in our understanding.



c) how does this work – an example from my life

My sin, a blemish, a fault... interruption, speaking before fully hearing, finishing other's words, etc. I will continue to read his word which reminds me of the power of words, the importance of understanding and compassion, the conviction of the deep well of human pride in me. I need the church – reproved in elder meeting the other day. Will I face this tendency or temptation the rest of my life? Most likely. Will I just live in chronic guilt? No, I confess and remember Christ's work upon the cross for me. Do I give up dealing with this? No, I press ahead...

Prayer

Responsive reading for Sunday, May 8, after the sermon...

Leader: *Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.
Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*

Congregation: *I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.*

Leader: *Let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found.
Many are the sorrows of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD.*

Congregation: *Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.
Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.*

Leader: *The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

Congregation: *If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?
But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.*

Leader: *In Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses,
according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us.*

Congregation: *He has delivered us from the domain of darkness
and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son,
in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*

Leader: *When Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins,
he sat down at the right hand of God,*

Congregation: *For by a single offering he has perfected for all time
those who are being sanctified.*

Leader: *If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another,
and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.*

Congregation: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins
and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

~Readings taken from Psalm 32, 38; 51; 130; Ephesians 1; Colossians 1; Hebrews 10; 1 John 1.