**Foundations (44 of 60) Sanctification - RC Sproul**

Is it possible to overcome the desires of the flesh? The process by which we move in that direction is called sanctification, and it's our topic on Renewing Your Mind. Welcome to the weekend edition of Renewing Your Mind, featuring the founder and chairman of Ligonier Ministries, Dr. R.C. Sproul. I'm Lee Webb, and we're in the midst of an extended study on the core doctrines of the historic Christian faith.

Today we're taking an in-depth look at the path of spiritual growth traveled by the Christian. We'll learn when sanctification begins and the impact it has on our maturity. This series is titled Foundations, an overview of systematic theology.

And right after the message, I'll tell you how to get a copy of the entire 60-part series on DVD. But right now, here's Dr. Sproul. When I first became a Christian back in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, I used to commute from college every weekend.

My mother was a widow, and she didn't drive, and so I would drive home from college to take her shopping and so on. And so on the way back to college on Sunday night, I would listen to the radio broadcast of the preaching of Dr. Robert J. Lamont from the historic First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh. And when I was in seminary, I had the opportunity to meet Dr. Lamont, and I had made an appointment for an interview with him, and made that appointment with his secretary.

And I remember going to First Church and being very nervous and intimidated that I was going to meet the great Dr. Lamont in person. And so finally the moment came, and the secretary ushered me into his office, and Dr. Lamont came in and shook my hand and sat down and looked me in the eye, and he said, Now then, young man, what is on your partially sanctified mind? I just started stuttering in response. But obviously I remembered that comment even to this day, that he didn't know me, but he knew I was a believer, and he knew that as a believer I was not yet a fully sanctified person.

And so he reminded me of that in the initial salvo here of the conversation. What's on your partially sanctified mind? Well, the good news of the Christian faith is not only that we are justified by the righteousness of someone else, and we don't have to wait until we're fully sanctified before God will accept us into fellowship with Him and into His family, as we have seen, but He declares us just and righteous by virtue of the imputation or the transfer of Christ's righteousness to our account. So the good news is, on the other hand, that even though we are not fully sanctified people and God is totally holy, that nevertheless we can enter fellowship with Him.

So we may say that it's bad news that my sanctification is only partial. However, the good news is that sanctification, as partial as it may be in this life, is real. And what we're talking about in this process of sanctification is the actual making righteous or making holy of the people of God.

We've seen that our status before God is based on somebody else's righteousness, not on our own righteousness. However, the second we are justified, a real and true change is enacted upon us by God, the Holy Spirit, so that this process of sanctification by which we are being made holy and brought into conformity with Christ – again, we are His craftsmanship – that the change of our nature toward holiness and toward righteousness begins, and it begins immediately. Now, I mentioned before that Luther, in declaring his doctrine of justification, said that justification is by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone.

That if true faith is present, the instant that true faith is present in your soul, the there begins a change in your actual nature, that the fruit of sanctification is not only necessary as a consequence of justification, but it's not only inevitable as a consequence of your justification, but it is immediate. That is, it begins instantly. Now, I say this to give warning to those who hold this view that it is possible for people to actually be converted to Christ and, A, either never bring forth any good fruits because they remain carnal to the day they die, or, B, may go for a season without manifesting any change in their behavior, though inevitably they will begin to at some point or another so that they may be for a season in a state of pure carnality.

Now, I have no quibble with the language at that point if we understand that all Christians are carnal throughout our lives in a certain sense. That is, we don't ever in this world completely vanquish the impact of the flesh. In that regard, Paul speaks of Christians as being carnal.

They still have to struggle with the flesh, and the old man is not put to death totally and completely until we enter into glory. But sometimes people use this expression, carnal Christian, to mean somebody who is completely carnal. And it's at that point that I demur, and I would say if somebody is completely in the flesh with no evidence of any change in their nature, then what we're talking about here is not a Christian but a carnal unchristian.

And so, I think we have to understand that sometimes people are so zealous to keep the numbers of our evangelistic converts high that we are loath to say that there are people who make a false profession of faith. And if a person makes a false profession and doesn't show any fruit of it whatsoever, that indicates that it was a profession of faith but not a real conversion. Again, we are not justified by the profession of faith.

We are justified by the possession of faith. We have to have true faith, and if we do, then the fruit of that faith will begin to work itself immediately. It's impossible for a regenerated person, for a converted person, to remain unchanged.

The very presence of the new nature, the very presence and power of the indwelling Holy Spirit indicates to the contrary that we are indeed changed and changing people. Now that doesn't mean that the progress of sanctification moves in a steady line from the starting point of conversion until we get home in glory. There are few, if any, Christians who have ever lived who have ever shown a graph of personal growth that would match that line.

But sooner or later, it gets there. Now, I show the graph like this, that there is a steady growth for the most part in the normal Christian life with peaks and valleys. However, there can be an occasion where a Christian who is truly a Christian can have a serious and radical fall into protracted sin.

In fact, this person may be involved in such egregious sin that they enter into discipline in the church and may even be excommunicated from the church. And it may take that last step of discipline before that person turns around and is restored to faith. So, again, we would say that people can go through these peaks and valleys, although there is an indication that the more mature a person becomes in Christ when we move from spiritual infancy to spiritual adulthood, to follow the biblical metaphor, the peaks and valleys tend to smooth out more.

We're not quite as high in the spiritual highs that we enjoy, nor do we plummet to the extraordinary depths that we once did, but that we become more stable, as it were, in our Christian growth and fellowship. But the point I want you to see is that sanctification is that process by which we are really changing, really being conformed to the image of Christ, and that it is a process. Now, there are those views that abound in the church that teach, on the one hand, that a person can be moving along in their sanctification and in this world have a sudden infusion of grace, a second work, a second blessing that gets a person instantly to the state of perfection in this world.

And there are, as I said, there have been many churches that teach a brand or form of perfectionism. And closely related to perfectionism are those movements which are even more widespread and more popular that promise some kind of instantaneous leap of sanctification through a deeper life experience or a deeper fellowship with the Holy Spirit where you become Spirit-filled or so on. And even though many of these folks would fall short of teaching full or perfectionism, nevertheless they do talk about virtually two different kinds of Christians, those that are on a normal growth pattern and those who can have this sudden electrifying leap of sanctification through a deeper experience with the Holy Spirit.

Well, I want to be the last person in the world to dissuade people from seeking a deeper walk with God the Holy Spirit. And I don't want to persuade you not to seek to be filled with the Holy Ghost, but this is something we should be seeking at all times. But I think you're going to be in for some real surprises if you're expecting some instant cure for sin and some instant dosage of the Holy Spirit that will give you the, quote, victorious Christian life.

That is not what I find in the teaching of Scripture or in the testimony of the greatest saints who have ever lived. St. Thomas Akempis, for example, who wrote The Imitation of Christ, which remains a Christian classic in sanctification, said it is a rare thing for a Christian ever to be able to break a single bad habit in their life. I mean, and every Christian who's been at it for a long time, you look in the mirror and you say to yourself, how can I have been a Christian for so long and still struggle so much with my own flesh? The only comfort we get is that if we look back over that period of time and realize where we were thirty years ago or forty years ago, then it becomes plain that God has been molding us and shaping us and giving us a real progress in the Christian faith.

But it is a day-to-day, long-term experience of being shaped and fashioned by God the Holy Spirit to be brought into maturity in Christ. I mean, we all in this country are looking for instant gratification. We want to know how we can know the whole Bible in three easy lessons and how we can be sanctified in three easy steps.

There aren't any three easy steps of sanctification. Sanctification is a lifelong process that involves an enormous amount of labor, and it is labor-intensive. If we go to the New Testament again, where, for example, in Philippians, Paul says in chapter 2, verse 12, Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

For it is God who works in you, both to will and to do, His good pleasure. Here's good news and bad news again. Paul tells us to work out our salvation, which is really a call to diligence in the pursuit of righteousness and in the pursuit of our sanctification.

It's work. It's work. That means that a Christian in seeking sanctification and spiritual maturity must be active.

And how active? Work out your salvation how? In fear and trembling. Now, those terms there that describe the atmosphere in which we are to work out our salvation are not terms that would ordinarily describe a cavalier attitude. One cannot just be at ease in Zion in the pursuit of sanctification, where we just relax, take it easy, and go along for the ride that the Holy Spirit carries us on.

We are to work, and we are to work with fear and trembling. This indicates real diligence with real concern, not with the kind of fear that has a person paralyzed with anxiety, and not the kind of trembling that one has who is in a panic attack. But the point is, the fear and trembling means that we take this as serious business, and that we're trying now to please the living God before whom we stand in reverence and awe, and despite our reconciliation is still one before whom the godly people tremble.

And this is work. Now, the good news is, work it out with fear and trembling, for God is at work within you both to will and to do. Here we see something where we have a genuine synergism or a cooperation, that sanctification is a cooperative process where God is working and I am working.

I am called to work, work, work, fear and trembling. Why? Because I'm not working alone, because God is working at the same time. God is working in me.

The Holy Spirit has been given to us, and remember He's called the Holy Spirit because one of His chief tasks is the application of our redemption and bringing to bear on our souls the fruit of our justification. He's working in us to change our very nature, to convict us of sin and of righteousness and so on. So, it is a cooperative venture between us and God, between ourselves and the Holy Spirit.

So, in one sense, insofar as we are working, we are active. In another sense, insofar as the Spirit is working, at that point we are passive or we are quiet. Now, that raises the specter of two nagging heresies that have threatened the church throughout church history with respect to the doctrine of sanctification, and those two heresies are called activism and quietism.

Now, notice that a few moments ago I wrote on this board that the Christian is called to be active, to be earnestly active in the pursuit of sanctification, and yet here I'm talking about a heresy called activism. Well, what's the difference? Well, the difference is found in these last three letters. Anytime you see that "-ism attached to a word, the word itself may be a perfectly legitimate word until the "-ism is attached.

For example, I exist, but that doesn't make me an advocate of existentialism. I am human, but I don't embrace humanism," and so on. So, we are to be active without embracing activism.

Well, what is activism? Activism is the heresy of self-righteousness, of works righteousness, where a person sees the quest of sanctification something that they achieve in themselves, by themselves, that they are the pull-themselves-up-from-the-bootstrap spiritual mentality, I don't need the grace of God, I don't need the assistance of the Holy Spirit, I'm going to make righteousness an achievement that I can do on my own through my own energy and through my own activity. So there is a pure self-reliance type of sanctification, which is to be rejected. On the other hand, there is the error of quietism, which was introduced by French mystics in the seventeenth century who said that the work of sanctification is exclusively the work of the Holy Spirit.

You don't need to be exercised about it. You don't need to be trying to be sanctified. All you need to do is be quiet.

Get out of the way. It's God's work to make you sanctified. It's kind of a monergism carried over from regeneration throughout the whole Christian life.

And their motto, you may be surprised to hear this, was, let go and let God. Now, how many times have you heard that in your Christian experience? Now, there may be times when it's important to let go. If we are holding on strictly in our own strength and are ignoring the grace of God and not depending and relying upon the help of the Holy Spirit and are pure activists, then it's time to be quiet.

But when we're quiet, we ought not to embrace quietism that tells us that we can be at ease and join, kick back on the porch, put our feet up on the ottoman, and let God do the work of sanctification. You see, heresy traditionally and historically always comes in pairs, and it always comes in a distortion in one or the other direction. So, activism is on this side, as a heresy quietism on that side.

The other twin heresies that follow the doctrine of sanctification are the doctrines of antinomianism or legalism, and those two heresies spoil the broth. And there are very, very, very few churches that haven't been severely afflicted by one or the other, and sometimes even both of these distortions. The legalist is the one who sees the law as so important to his sanctification that he adds to the law of God.

He's not satisfied with the laws that God gives, but in order to assist in his sanctification will begin to legislate where God has left men free. And to say, well, we have to do this to keep people from being spotted from the world. We have to create rules and regulations.

A Christian cannot go to movies. A Christian cannot dance. A Christian cannot do this, this, this, and this, where God has never legislated, and these people put others in chains and inevitably substitute their man-made laws for the real law of God.

The other extreme is antinomianism that says, as a Christian, the law of God has no bearing on my life. I'm free from the law altogether. I'm not under the law.

I'm under grace, and so I have every right to ignore the law of God in Scripture. Well, that is rampant in our day. In fact, we're living in a pervasive period of antinomianism in the church, where the godly person, though he understands he's no longer under bondage to the law, he's not under the weight of the law, he's not under the penalty of the law, he still loves the law of God and meditates in it day and night, because in the law he discovers what is pleasing to God and what is that which reflects his character.

And so, rather than fleeing from the law, a person who is diligent in the pursuit of righteousness and sanctification becomes a serious student of the law of God. The law of God reminds us as Christians of just how closely we're bound to Christ, and we're moved to obey out of thankfulness for what Christ has already done. You're listening to a message from Dr. R. C. Sproul on Renewing Your Mind.

Today's message is part of a hallmark series from Dr. Sproul that covers the broad expanse of theology. The complete study is titled, Foundations, an Overview of Systematic Theology. All 60 full-length messages are now collected into a complete DVD set.

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Is it possible for Christians to lose their salvation? That's our topic next weekend on Renewing Your Mind with R.C. Sproul.