



THE PRIMARY IMPORTANCE OF SANCTIFICATION

Galatians, an epistle, a letter written by the great apostle Paul to some churches in a region called Galatia around the Mediterranean.

“My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you – but I could wish to be present with you now and to change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.”
- Galatians 4:19-20

Paul had poured his life, at no small risk, into the establishment of the churches in Galatia, established out of paganism. He had preached the gospel to them. He, like a pregnant woman, had endured the agonies of bringing the gospel and having it finally be believed, and they literally be born into the kingdom of light. He had labored intensely, painfully, to see that happen. They are now his children, and in a very strange set of circumstances he feels like he’s in pain again, as if he’s going through the birth pangs that he already experienced in bringing the gospel to them, the gospel that brought them spiritual life.

He is enduring pain again, the same kind of pain, the pain that longs for them to become what they are not yet. This time it is “labor pain until Christ is formed in you.” At first it was “labor pain until Christ is in you.” And now he longs that Christ be formed in them, or that they become Christlike.

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They have become believers, Christ lives in them, but they have not taken on the form of Christ. He wishes that he could be present as he writes this letter, so that he could personally hands-on aid them in this Christ formation. He would like to come. And it may be that if he were able to come he could change his tone; something of the straightforwardness and the severity might be mitigated a bit, and he might have an opportunity to demonstrate some more compassion and tenderness to them, because he is profoundly perplexed about them.

They are true believers; that is affirmed. They have begun in the Spirit. They are in Christ, but Christ is not yet fully formed in them. And rather than them pursuing that, they are caught up in being foolish and becoming bewitched by some false teachers

who are leading them to a misunderstanding of the gospel, and necessarily then away from them becoming more like Christ. He is perplexed – that’s a very strong word. One translator translates it, “I’m at my wit’s end.” You might say it’s frustration, confusion. You could even add a component of grief to that word. They are not what they should be, and therefore they are not what he as a faithful pastor wants them to be.

And I might add at this point, this is the concern of every faithful pastor for his people. This is the pain of the ministry, the pain of seeing your children become like Christ. And nothing is enough short of that. Nothing is enough short of that.

So the word of the Lord for us today is simple, and yet in these two verses we are embarking on a very profound area of truth. It is timely and yet timeless. It is truth for all the days of our lives on earth, and yet it is truth that ultimately defines our life in heaven. It is this matter of being like Christ. Here we have the very nature of sanctification.

Sanctification is a marvelous word, it’s a familiar theological, biblical word that all Christians understand. But the doctrine of sanctification, the truth of sanctification has become unpopular in our time. There has been much, much talk about the doctrine of election, divine sovereign election, how God has chosen sinners before the foundation of the world to belong to Him and to enter into eternal heaven, and He wrote their name in the Book of Life before the foundation of the world. We celebrate the doctrine of election. There has been much talk about the doctrine of justification, which is where God in time declares a sinner righteous by virtue of imputing to him the righteousness of Christ; and that is the experience of conversion, salvation, regeneration, new birth, new life. We are committed and we celebrate loudly the doctrines of election and justification, and we’re happy as well to celebrate the doctrine of glorification, that great reality that will be the culmination of God’s redemptive purpose when we are in heaven and we are like Christ, and we are in the midst of eternal joy and peace and bliss and worship and service.

Even in the contemporary church there is a lot said about the doctrine of election. There is a lot said about the doctrine of justification. And there is some said about

the doctrine of glorification, although that doesn't seem to be a priority as it should be. But the doctrine that has fallen into the greatest disuse is this doctrine of sanctification. And yet, sanctification is the applicable doctrine to our entire life as believers on earth.

Election is something that happened before creation; that was the work of God solely. Justification happened in a moment of time when God declared us righteous in Christ by faith. Glorification will occur in the future. And in between justification and glorification, we live our lives on this earth, and the doctrine that defines the character of our lives before God is the doctrine of sanctification.

What is sanctification? The word means "to be separated, to be separated." It is the lifelong work of God in every believer to separate us from sin; that is sanctification. It is what the Holy Spirit is doing now in our lives. Nothing is more important for us to understand than this work of sanctification. And yet the truth of sanctification is treated with indifference commonly. It is ignored by many preachers, if not assaulted by many preachers. The same foolish teachers and their followers who are bewitched about the gospel of salvation by faith alone are often bewitched about the doctrine of sanctification. But beyond those who are bewitched there seem to be many who completely ignore this doctrine.

Again, the truth of sanctification is what defines the work of the Spirit in our lives from justification to glorification, which means from the moment of our salvation until we enter heaven. If there's anything that we ought to know, understand, and be committed to it would be sanctification. And that is expressed in Paul's words where he says, "I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you, filled out in you, so that you are like Christ. I settle for nothing less."

You might want to look at Ephesians chapter 2 for just a moment, and this is familiar territory for us; but maybe you'll hear it in a different way. Ephesians 2:8, "For by grace you have been saved through faith." That's the past. You have been saved from the penalty from sin; you passed from death to life. "You have been saved through faith; that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God." We love to celebrate that. We love to articulate that. Preachers love to preach on the grace of salvation by

grace alone through faith alone apart from works. “It is not” – verse 9 says – “a result of works, so that no one may boast.” All the glory goes to God. But please notice verse 10: “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus” – listen to this – “for good works,” – not because of good works, not by good works, but for good works – “which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.”

Now listen, the doctrine of election – sovereign election, predestination – does not only relate to justification. It does not only relate to justification and glorification; it relates also to sanctification. God has not just ordained that we be justified and one day glorified, He has ordained that we be sanctified. And that is what verse 10 is saying: “God prepared beforehand.” God prepared, we can say, before the foundation of the world certain good works that we would walk in.

The doctrine of election, the great truth of sovereign election, divine choice, encompasses our sanctification, not just our justification and our glorification. God has established a pattern of good works in which believers will walk by His sovereign will. And as our justification was accomplished by the Holy Spirit who gave us life, so our sanctification is accomplished by the Holy Spirit who enables us to become more and more righteous, and less and less sinful. Nothing then is more important for us to understand than this great doctrine that is the defining work of God in us until we go to heaven. God has ordained this as much as He has ordained our justification and our glorification.

That is to say, God did not design to justify us and glorify us and be indifferent about what’s in the middle. He ordained that, and for that He ordained sanctification and manifest good works, that before the foundation of the world He determined we would walk in them, so that every true believer is being sanctified, has been justified, will be glorified, is being sanctified. That is a mark of a true believer. That’s why Jesus said, “By their fruits you shall know them.” Manifest evidence of the Holy Spirit’s sanctifying work are those fruits.

Listen to the importance of sanctification just from the texts of Paul’s letters. First Corinthians 1:1 and 2. “Paul, to the church, sanctified in Christ Jesus.” Chapter 1, verse 30, “But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from

God, and righteousness and sanctification.” Second Corinthians 7:1, “Beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness, perfecting holiness.”

First Thessalonians 3:12 and 13, “May the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love, so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father.” First Thessalonians 4:3 and 4, “This is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel” – his own body – “in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the nations who do not know God.” Second Thessalonians 2:13, “God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification.” Your final salvation will be reached through sanctification by the Holy Spirit.

Titus 2:14 says, “The Lord gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good works.” Hebrews 12:14 adds, “Without holiness no man will see the Lord. Without holiness no man will see the Lord.” We reach our final glorification through sanctification, and it starts at justification. There are many more passages.

Now you notice that holiness is the synonym for sanctification. Holiness means “to be separate” also, as sanctification does, “separate from sin.” So, the doctrine of sanctification, we could say, is the doctrine of holiness, or the doctrine of righteousness. It defines our earthly lives in Christ. It is the constant work of the Holy Spirit to separate us from sin.

You will see as you live your Christian life decreasing frequency of sin and the increasing frequency of holiness as you move from your justification to your glorification. As the believer is being sanctified, the seductions of the world, the desires of the flesh, the lusts of the eyes, the pride of life are replaced by love for God, love for Christ, love for the Word of God, love for obedience, longing for holiness, aspirations to give glory and honor only to the Lord with your life. This is, as justification is and glorification is, a mark of true Christians.

Now the question would be asked, “How does it occur? If Paul is desiring that his people whom he loves and once gave birth to in a spiritual sense, if he’s in pain again for them to become like Christ, how does that happen? How does it occur? By what means do we become Christlike? Are we sanctified? Do we become holy? By what means does this happen?”

Well, first of all, it is again the work of the Holy Spirit, but not apart from means, which engage the believer. Salvation is the work of the Holy Spirit, but not apart from faith. Sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit, but not apart from obedience.

You say, “Well then do I need to read the commands more, go over them, maybe memorize all the commands? Do I need to become more familiar with the commands?” That can’t hurt. “Do I need to develop more self-discipline? Maybe I need to have more accountability with people around me who can help me with discipline.” Certainly, that’s good, but that is not what Scripture calls us to do.

If you are to keep His commandments in an increasingly more faithful way, this is not going to come out of sheer duty, but rather our Lord said this: “If you love Me you keep My commandments. Whoever keeps My commandments” – He said – “loves Me.”

This is not about duty, this is not about discipline, although it is a duty and there is a discipline; this is about love. So, if you want to be more obedient, you must love Christ more. And if you want to love Christ more, you must know Christ better.

Why do we spend years and years and years going through Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and all the rest of the books of the Bible that present Christ? Why are we always preaching on Christ? So that you can have a lot of information about Him, so that you can have a lot of data in your mind about Him? Not at all. So that you can know Him in the fullness of His glory, and as a result of that, love Him.

The unconverted don’t love Christ. And anyone who doesn’t love Christ is damned, Paul says. Believers are those who love Christ; and we are continually exhorted to love Him more. That’s not going to happen in a vacuum, that’s going to happen as

you are exposed to who He is in the glorious revelation of Scripture. Sanctification, holiness, purity, righteous attitude, righteous words, righteous actions are the result of looking at the Lord Jesus Christ and loving Him more until you are literally becoming like Him

Second Corinthians 3:18 – we'll say more about this next week – says that “As you gaze at the glory of the Lord, you are changed into His image, from one level of glory to the next, to the next, by the Holy Spirit.” It is your vision of Christ that is the means the Spirit uses to sanctify you. Sanctification is Christlikeness. Christlikeness is loving obedience to God.

What marked the Lord Jesus Christ? What was the demonstration of His perfect virtue, perfect holiness? Listen to His prayer in John 17, verse 17. Praying for us, He says, “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.” Sanctification happens in the Word. “Sanctify them by Your truth; Your word is truth.”

And then He says, “As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves may also be sanctified in truth.” Jesus said, “I am living the example of sanctification.”

And what did He demonstrate? First of all, perfect love for His Father that manifested itself in perfect obedience. He said, “I only do what the Father tells Me to do. I only do what the Father shows Me. I only do what the Father wills. I only do what honors the Father.”

His perfect obedience out of perfect love for the Father is a manifestation of what it is to be fully sanctified. A fully sanctified person is one who loves God perfectly and obeys Him perfectly. Christ is our model.

When you think about sanctification you cannot think about it in a minimalistic way, as many do. “Well, how much sin do I have to get out of my life? How much of the world do I need to get out of my life?”

That's not where you start when you think about sanctification. The question you ask is this: "What is Christ's perfect sanctification like?" because that's the model. And any faithful pastor will never be content. He will always be in pain until his people are manifestly Christlike.

Now, why am I so concerned about this? Well, if nothing else, because it's true, and because it's critical. But beyond that, I am concerned about it because it's just not an issue in contemporary evangelical Christianity. Holiness, godliness, sanctification, obedience, separation from sin, separation from the world – those were very common themes in the history of the church, always there. Preachers preached often on holiness, virtue, fleeing sin, fleeing the world. They preached calls to salvation, and then to the saved they preached calls to holiness. The truth of sanctification through the history of the church has been dominant, and it should be dominant because it is the dominant reality in the Christian experience.

Yes, it's great to celebrate the doctrine of election. It's great to celebrate, as we do today even at the Lord's Table, the truth of justification. It's marvelous to anticipate the glory of heaven. But we live in the realm of the operating doctrine of sanctification, and it once was central to the life of the church. There were expectations about how you lived and how you thought and how you talked and how you conducted yourself to honor the Lord. There were continual calls to love the Lord and to be obedient to His Word out of that love.

That's not true anymore. The truth of sanctification, the truth of holiness, godliness is disappearing from popular Christianity. In some cases, it's gone. Rarely do we hear any call from popular preachers for purity of life, for holy living, for separation from the world, for self-denial, for resisting all fleshly desires. Instead, the church is now offering God up as the one who wants to fulfill everyone's desires. All the longings of the selfish human heart are being legitimized, and people are being told, "Whatever you long for or whatever you desire, whatever you want to be, whatever you can dream, this is what God wants to do for you. Come to Him. Come to Jesus, and you'll have everything that you want."

Things of the world are necessarily accommodating that message, so that things of the world are incorporated into the church as the necessary elements to fill out the church with its full attempt to satisfy the longings of fallen human hearts. The church will look more worldly. It'll be more worldly. It'll be more people centered. It'll turn God into some kind of heavenly amazon that'll deliver to your door whatever it is you want. The new version of evangelical Christianity, even reformed, even those who say they're reformed, that new evangelical kind of Christianity is committed to import the culture, the fashion of the world, and appeal to people's consuming self-interests.

We talked a lot about the economy in America and the economy growing. You do understand, don't you, that the economy in America grows on massive self-interest, not on altruism, not on wanting to help others; it grows on massive self-interest. The church has bought into that as a way to appeal to those people who live for their own fulfillment. Churches then look and sound and feel like the world, and they advertise God as if He was a product that would satisfy your heart's desires. Carefully they avoid anything that condemns people, anything that convicts them, certainly anything that terrifies them, like the judgment of hell. They avoid anything that expects people to deny themselves, take up a cross, pursue with passion what is holy, pure, and good. And, again, even in churches where there's a strong emphasis on justification, and maybe a now and then emphasis on glorification, there is a strict avoidance of sanctification. This plays out all the time.

The church is supposed to look like Christ in the world. And rarely does a day go by that there isn't some blatant, gross sin and immorality attributed to someone in the media across the country, if not across the world, who is anything but Christlike. Faithful churches are always led by godly shepherds who lead their people away from the world, away from themselves to God, away from the fulfillment of their own desires, their own longings, to seek those things which are above, not things on the earth. The church is in a sad state.

Now, how did we get to this point? I don't want to belabor this, but this is a little bit of helpful history. Churches for centuries were theological, theological, and biblical. The Bible was the centerpiece, and the theology that the Bible taught established the convictions, and churches were God-centered.

It was even demonstrated architecturally. You go back a few generations, and when churches were built they were built to manifest a kind of transcendent perspective. They were tall, they were high; they wanted to demonstrate something that was above the earth. Some of you have visited those kinds of places where you look up, perhaps in some cases a hundred feet or more, and you see paintings and stained glass and things like that.

There was a sense in which when you went to church you were encountering God, and transcendence was important. It was God-centered, it was Christ-centered. And they trusted in the Holy Spirit for the growth of the church. I'll say that again. They trusted in the Holy Spirit for the growth of the church.

Churches opposed worldliness. They opposed sin categorically. And I'm not just talking about – I'm certainly not talking about false religion like Catholic cathedrals. But even Protestant churches, even gospel-preaching churches had a sense of transcendence. There was a dignity about them. The music had dignity. The way people conducted themselves had dignity. The leadership carried themselves in a dignified fashion. One commentator I read this week said, "Modern pastors look like they buy their wardrobes at Forever 21." There was a loftiness. There was an ascendancy. You came to hear from heaven. You came for an encounter with God.

New churches are not theological, they're not biblical; they are psychological, sociological. They have given up transcendence – a heavenly experience, for imminence – an earthly experience, to make it as much like what is familiar in the world as possible; to not make you think that you've stepped into any kind of different category, either in the style, the fashion, or anything else; make it as worldly, as flat as possible. It is man centered. And though the names of Jesus and God are used, Jesus and God are like imaginary friends who give you what you want. Churches today trust in their growth techniques, not the Holy Spirit. They trust that by sucking in the world and redefining worship as a mindless musical stimulation while the people think only about their own desires, that somehow this is how you grow a church.

You can collect a crowd that way, but only the Holy Spirit can build a church. Vague spirituality has replaced sound doctrine. True holiness is not an issue, because that would be way too confrontive. You can't talk to people about self-denial, of giving up everything they long for, everything they think satisfies them, giving it all up in total self-denial for the sake of God; can't do that. This culture today has drunk too deeply of the wine of self-fulfillment for too long. They are drunk on it.

Attendance in a church and loyalty to a church is never related, it seems, to the love of the truth or the love of Christ, but always to the love of self: "I like what they do, it's my style; makes me feel good about me." You might say, "How did we get here?" We got here because ideas have consequences.

Sigmund Freud died in 1939. He was the father of psychoanalysis. His system was a system that rejected God. His system was a system that said man is the ultimate. And so he said, there is in every human being, what he called, the id. And the id is the real you, the authentic you. It's basically the complex out of which comes all your desires. And if you want to be who you are you've got to let your desires go. If you want to be an authentic person, you need to be you. Whatever you is, whatever the complex of your heart's desires are, you have to be able to fulfill them to be a healthy, authentic person. In other words, unleash your sinfulness.

Obviously, the most eager people to buy into that were young people, because young people haven't learned lessons in life about how living like that destroys you. So, they're the fertile ground to sow those seeds. The most liberated sinners are the youngest, because they lack the restraints that come from the lessons of life, and so youth become the symbol of authenticity. Youthful, irresponsible desire is elevated to a noble level, and the perpetual adolescent is the most authentic person.

We see it in our culture. The heroes of this culture are so profoundly sinful and so proud about it, that it would be hard to track the record of their iniquitous behavior. But they're real; they're the real people. The church is a restrainer. The church is bondage. The church is full of hypocrites, people who dress up like we do because they're phonies and they are not authentic.

Over the years since Feud, this youthful authenticity movement has taken over the culture. Dramatically it made strides in the 1960s when, for the first time, the selfish, self-indulgent, immoral young person, hedonistic young person became the cultural hero: the hippies – sex, drugs, rock and roll. This is played out in songs like “I’ve Got To Be Me,” “I Did It My Way.” “And so, if a church doesn’t let me be me, I reject it.”

This has reached severe proportions. An illustration: same-sex marriage.

Homosexual people don’t care about marriage – just mark it – they don’t care about marriage; they just care about doing what they want to do. They don’t care about marriage.

Why do they want same-sex marriage? They want it established by law for one reason: so that they can put those who are against that sin out of business. That’s all they want; LGBTQ lobbying constantly for acceptance in the culture. It isn’t that they want some kind of political acceptance, they want to make criminals out of the people who spell that out as sin. They want to criminalize Christianity. That’s the only reason any of this is happening. They’re free to do what they want, and they do it. But what bothers them is those who denounce that behavior as sin; they want to make us criminals. So, we’re in a tough spot.

The culture, mostly young people, is against us. In the ‘60s after the hippie movement, when immorality just broke loose, there were some kids who supposedly came to Christ; they became the Jesus people. They came to Southern California down to Orange County. There was a guy named Lonnie Frisbee who was leading that movement, who was secretly a homosexual and died of AIDS.

But Lonnie Frisbee had decided they needed to take their kids, that were meeting on the beach and baptizing in the Pacific Ocean, to church. So, they went to Calvary Chapel in Orange County where Chuck Smith was pastor. Then it was a four-square church, a traditional church. And they all showed up on a few Sundays barefoot, long hair, irreverent, casual, with their own kind of music; and the leaders of the church said, “We’ve got to hold onto the young people. If we don’t give them what they want they’ll leave.”

That was already being discussed in a lot of places, because the hippie movement caught fire across America – the movement of rebellion against authority, responsibility, duty, expectation; rebellion against right, honor; it caught fire. So, the church feared, “We’re going to lose these people if we don’t acquiesce.” So, for the first time when the Jesus people came to church, first time I can find in church history, the church began to redefine its own identity and worship based upon the wishes of a rebellious subculture. That definition started then and spread; started in California, spread clear across the country.

Prior to the ‘60s, nobody expected a church service to be a rock concert. Nobody expected a church service to be entertainment. Nobody expected worship to be physical stimulation, emotional feelings without engaging your mind. Nobody expected church to be a manipulation of people’s desires to fulfill their own self-styled identity. A church was a church, and it was a place where there was thoughtful, prayerful, biblical, sober-minded hearing from the Word of God, leading to conviction and edification and elevation. It was a heavenly encounter.

But to this modern generation of young people – serious, sober, thoughtful, scriptural preaching about God, and confrontation of sin, and a call to holiness, and a call to separate from the world and from iniquity is far too absolute and far too offensive. People who want to feel good about themselves the way they are don’t want that, so the church caved in. The church caved in and gave them what they wanted. And now pastors continue to accommodate those same people – irresponsible, lazy, undisciplined rebels who want what they want – and the church, instead of confronting it, conforms to it. No preaching on sanctification, no preaching on holiness can be done in those environments; they’d empty the place.

This is the situation today. Strong preaching on holiness against worldliness, confronting the desires of the hearts of the “me” generation as sin from which they need to repent is a far cry from the trend.