



Becoming a Model Church

Sermons from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians

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A holy Life that Pleases God

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

March 8th 2020

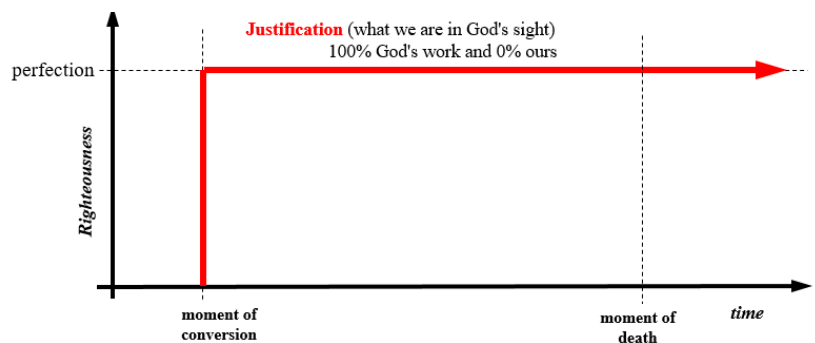
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Sanctification and Justification

Every believer should understand the two Bible words, Justification and Sanctification. "Justification" means "declared righteous" in God's eyes, "Sanctification" means "becoming more and more holy over time."

Justification is something God does to us and for us, the moment we believe the Gospel. God immediately declares us righteous in his sight. A glorious double transaction takes place: all our sins are laid on Christ, and paid for, through his atoning death, so it is as if we had never sinned, though of course we have! But more... all the righteousness of Jesus Christ is placed on us, imputed to us, reckoned to our account, given to us, so that we are viewed by God, as having the righteousness of Jesus Christ himself! Our debt is not only paid, but righteous capital is put into our account!

This is the wonder and glory of the Gospel! That sinners who deserve nothing but God's condemnation are made rich in Christ, and fully acceptable and holy in God's presence! The wretched beggar in filthy rags is made a prince at the King's table!



And the most wonderful thing about Justification is that it comes to us, merely by believing in Jesus Christ! Not by doing anything, not by being a good person, not by doing good works, merely by believing the Gospel! "But now a righteousness from God apart from the law has been made known, to which the law and the prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe." (Romans 3:21-22)

The very moment anyone believes the Gospel, believes that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who came into the world to die for our sins and rise from the dead so that we can have new life, they are

made righteous in God's sight! Their sins are wiped away, all of them, their debt is paid, and all the righteousness of Jesus is poured into their account! "The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives."

Perhaps there is someone listening to me who has misunderstood the Gospel all the way until today. You have thought that you have to be a good person to be accepted by God, or a religious person, or a churchy person or whatever!

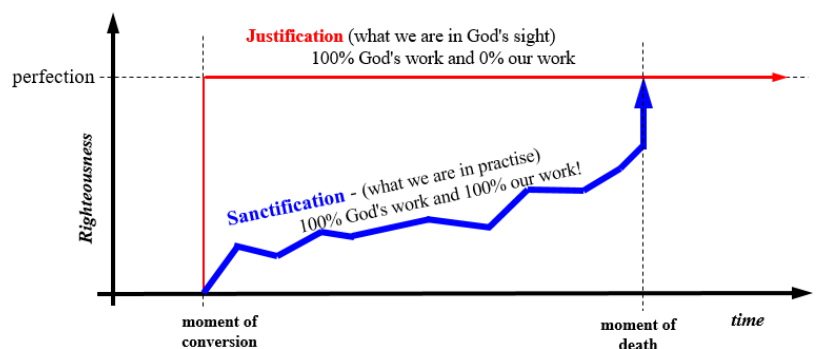
No! All you have to do is to believe the Gospel message, believe that you are a sinner, believe that Jesus died for your sins, believe that he rose to bring you new life in this world and eternal life in the world to come. You only have to BELIEVE! And if you do believe, go and tell someone: "If you confess with your mouth "Jesus is Lord" and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." (Romans 10:9)

Do you believe? Can I ask you that question? If the answer is "yes" have you told someone you believe? "If you confess with your mouth", there is something about saying it out loud that confirms it in your heart. And then after you have said it out loud, get baptised to publically declare your faith to the world.

But in actual practice, does someone become perfect over night? If someone believed the Gospel today and was filled with the joy of salvation, would their life become perfect overnight? No more swearing, no more stealing, no more lying, no more bad thoughts, no more hatred, no more coveting, no more sin?

No, we all know that Christians continue to struggle and battle with wrong thoughts, words and deeds. This is where our second big word comes in, Sanctification. Sanctification is the process of actually becoming more and more holy in practice, as time goes by.

It should be a nice upward line, growing steadily day by day, but we all know it's not like that! Sometimes we grow fast and steady, at other times in our lives we grow slowly, and God-forbid, sometimes we may even backslide for a while.



If you have been a believer for a few years you will be able to look back and see that there were times when you seemed to grow a lot and times when your spiritual growth was slower—almost always the times of rapid growth times of suffering or trial or difficulty. We seem to grow best when we suffer most. Sanctification is the process of actually becoming more and more holy in our thoughts, words and deeds. The process of repenting of that sin—giving it the boot, "pride has to go", "jealousy has to go", and of putting on this grace, "I must learn to be more patient, more joyful", whatever. And sanctification is both God's work and our work: God's Spirit works in our hearts by his

Word, the Bible, convicting us, urging us, encouraging us on and empowering, and we ourselves work hard and diligently and seriously at the great work of living a holy life. “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purposes.” (Philippians 2:12-13)

So we have these two wonderful big words in the Bible. Justification—God declares us perfect in his sight the moment we believe! Sanctification—in practice we’re not perfect, we’re still sinners, but little by little over time, God works in our hearts and minds and lives and we put off that sin, and we put on this grace, and so on and so forth.

What can we say about them?

Wherever you have one you have the other. It is impossible to be justified without then going on to be sanctified. The God who gives the faith to belief, at the same time gives his Spirit to sanctify. If someone says “Jesus has saved me” but they don’t want to live a holy life, you can be sure their faith is fake. Go together.

Secondly we can say that Justification provides the motive for sanctification. Why should I live a holy life to please God? Why should I put off my sins and put on graces? Because God has declared me righteous in his sight, through his Son.

Thirdly, Justification and Sanctification help us to avoid judging young Christians. Suppose someone becomes a true believer this morning. They are as holy in God’s sight, as justified in God’s sight as the most mature Christian, the most holy! That is the wonder of the Gospel! But their lives won’t be sanctified all at once! All sorts of things to sort out.

Have you seen the sign on a learner's car? “Be Patient you were a Learner once.” It’s meant to discourage older drivers from hooting over the silly mistakes and slow manoeuvres of a learner!

If you are an older Christian, if you’ve been on the road for decades, and God has done wonderful things in your life, don’t expect young Christians to have everything sussed out! Don’t be surprised if you can see sin in their lives. It doesn’t mean they are not Christians! Paul had to write to some Christian men in Corinth and say to them, “hey blokes, it’s time you stopped messing around with prostitutes” They were true believers who still had to get sexual lives sorted out. He didn’t say “You can’t be Christians”, he said, “stop fooling about with prostitutes.” So, older believers must not judge young believers! Remember that while their sanctification might be low, they are just as justified as you are!

The fourth thing to say is that Sanctification is about growing, which leads us into 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12. Paul has encouraged these young Christians in chapters 1, 2 and 3, so much, but now it’s time to say to them, “there are things in your life that need working on.” “Yes you have lots of faith and hope and love, but you can go further.” God is never happy with where we are today, he wants us to grow. “Brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living.

Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus *to do this more and more.*" (4:1) Paul has received a good report from Timothy, the Christians are doing well. But he wants them to move on! They are "here" but he longs for them to be "there".

Isn't that the natural desire of every parent? Your child can form the letters of the alphabet, but are you happy with that? No, you want them to form words! And are you happy with that? No, you want them to write sentences! And are you happy with their sentences? No you want their grammar to improve and their spelling to grow in accuracy and their vocabulary to expand.

So with the apostle Paul! "You are living a godly life, do this more and more!" And so with every genuine Christian leader, pastor, elder! False Christian leaders don't encourage you to grow, true ones urge you on! So don't be surprised, but thank God, when your elders and pastors urge you on! "Now about brotherly love, we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other.... Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more..."

Some Christians get upset when their elders spur them on! But that's their job! (5:12) Their calling! Be thankful, be humble, be receptive to their instructions! So, the rest of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is about sanctification, about growing, about advancing.

Three Areas of Holiness

Paul encourages us to become more and more holy, in three areas of life:

1. In our private lives
2. In our church life
3. In our secular life

First of all, in our private lives, in sexual purity. Paul gives more verses to this area of our lives, any other, because then like now, immorality is a big problem in our culture.

#1 Holiness in our private lives (verses 3-8) ***(More and more sexual purity)***

The precious and good gift of sex, in the teaching of Jesus Christ, is designed to strengthen the relationship between a man and woman in marriage. What happens when a river overflows? Sex is like a river which is designed to bring life to a marriage, but if it is allowed to flow over the banks of that river, outside of that river, it is always destructive and harmful.

Sex is for marriage alone. Now, this teaching is so different from the world's that Paul has to pile up lots and lots of words to make the same point. The world says that provided no one is hurt, any kind of sex is OK. The only rule "don't upset anyone." That's always been the view of the world, from the world Paul lived in to our world. Anything goes. But look at what Paul calls any sexual activity outside of marriage, whether it is adultery, homosexuality, fornication, pornography, whatever;

- Sexual immorality, verse 3
- A lack of control, verse 4
- Unholy and dishonourable, verse 4
- Passionate heathen lust, v.5
- Punishable by God, v.6
- Impure, v. 7

He piles up all these words so that no-one will misunderstand him: sex outside marriage is wrong. Therefore, we should all avoid sex outside of marriage. So we should all ask ourselves: Are we growing in sexual purity?

“It is likely that pornography is now the single greatest besetting sin among Christians.” I read this week. If you struggle with pornography, that sin must go. Look what Paul says in verse 8—God has given you his Spirit—his powerful Spirit who will help you to put all sin to death. Remember that the journey of a 1000 miles begins with one small step. Renounce that sin today, repent of it. Start putting it to death. If you need a trusted brother or sister to help you, to pray with you, to hold you to account, then start that conversation this week.

But it may not be pornography. Whatever the sexual sin is, repent of it today, get rid of it. Perhaps someone is thinking, “I don’t sleep around, I don’t look at pornography, I’m Ok.” Are you really declaring that you cannot grow in sexual purity one millimetre further, that you have arrived at perfection? That there are no influences, books or TV programmes, or thoughts which you need to put away? Surely we all can grow in sexual purity.

#2 Holiness in our church lives (4:9-10) *(more love for one another)*

The second way Paul wants us to grow is in our church lives, verses 9-10: *“Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you to do so more and more.”*

God wants our love for one another to grow and grow and grow. And you know, Christian love is always spelt A C T I O N. Because that is how God showed his love towards us. He sent his Son into the world. Our love is growing towards someone if we, pray more for them, serve them more, empathise for them more, encourage them more, show more hospitality, make more and more sacrifices for their sake, and so on! However loving we may presently be, more to go!

#3 Holiness in our secular lives (4:11-12) *(more personal responsibility)*

And the third area God wants us to grow in holiness in our secular lives—our lives in the world, homes, neighbourhoods, places of work. “Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life”—don’t make

trouble in your neighbourhood or work place, don't be known as a big mouth, be known as a peacemaker. Be careful what you put on Facebook. "Mind your own business" - don't be a nosy parker, wanting to hear the latest gossip and then spreading it about. Mind your own business. "Work with your own hands... so that you will not be dependent on anybody." - Some people in the church at Thessalonica were lazy. It is God's will that his people use their time productively, and as far as they can, earn their own keep. In those days there was no social security, so if a Christian did not work, they became a burden to their local Christian community. Paul says that's not right. If we can earn a living we should do so. And look at the reason for holiness: "so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders." If we live quiet lives, minding our own business and are working with our own hands, where we can, people will sit up and notice.

Where do you need to grow? Where do I need to grow? May God help each of us to grow in sexual purity, in love and in personal responsibility.