

Faith Fights to Believe Sanctification

A sermon in the series
What Faith Must Fight For

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by S. Michael Durham
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I Thessalonians 5:23-24

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

In our church's doctrinal statement we say that sanctification is,

The dominion of the old man of sin is destroyed and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified. The child of God is more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces so that it may be said of him that he practices holiness without which no man shall see the Lord.

In short, all that meant is this—sanctification is the work of God conforming us to the image of Jesus. But how does He do that? How does He make us more like His Son? For sure I can tell you it isn't by focusing our gaze on ourselves looking at our fallen sinfulness. Neither is it by getting us to constantly examine our performance.

God conforms us to the image of Jesus by freeing us from a self-focus, making it possible to be Christ-focused and by changing a self-centered stare into a Christ-exalting gaze. That's the work of sanctification and it is God's work in us doing it.

So you could say that sanctification is God's work of making you think less of yourself and more of Jesus. Sanctification's deliverance-working power increasingly frees us of the constant temptation to look at ourselves and at our performance and instead lifts our head out of self and to heaven to see Jesus and all He's done for us.

Sanctification is the work of God to unbury your head out of self and lift it up to look heavenward to see Jesus.

You would think that the more you concentrate on yourself and your spiritual needs you would grow but actually the opposite happens—you decline. The reason for that is because we become self-absorbed which leads to this obsessive anxiousness about our spiritual state. That obses-

sion about our performance instead of God's performance makes us increasingly self-centered leading to more a neurosis, which produces more self-centeredness, and the downward spiral accelerates and more introspection takes over and we become less like Jesus. Why? Because we have our eyes on ourselves and not on Him.

Thinking more about your spiritual needs does not work to make you more like Christ. So what's the answer? How can I be more like Jesus? It is to do the mental legwork of remembering and believing what God has given you in justification.

The fight of faith is to believe God for sanctification and that begins by fighting to believe justification. That's the reason for the last two sermons. You fight by going back to the immutable, unchangeable, gift of His righteousness given to us through the finished work of Christ. You go forwards by going backwards. You hit the replay button a thousand times a day if necessary, recalling the atoning work of Christ, repeating to yourself that it's Jesus' performance and not yours that causes growth and grace.

As Martin Luther said,

"To progress is to always begin again."

That is true. You and I fail and with each failure we must begin again. Today I want to unpack all that and develop that thought to fight to believe God for our sanctification.

I. GOD'S WORK IN SANCTIFICATION

A. God Has Promised to Sanctify Us.

He promised to do it. Our text tells us that He has promised to sanctify us and this promise is not singular but rather accompanied by a host of other verses we could quote today. For example,

"that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word." (Ephesians 5:26)

"for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure." (Philippians 2:13)

"Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified." (Romans 8:30)

Wait a minute, why isn't sanctification listed in that chain of grace? It goes from justification directly to glorification. The answer is there. Glorification is sanctification completed. And that's the exact promise of our text, is it not? *"He who promised you will also do it and may He sanctify you completely, body, soul and spirit."* Completely. Therefore complete sanctification is glorification.

I have searched in vain to find one verse that commands me to sanctify myself. There is no such verse. Oh, you can find verses about sanctifying God in you, setting God apart, but the work of sanctification is the work of God just like justification.

B. How God Sanctifies Us.

1. God sanctifies us by sacrificing His Son in our place.

It goes back to the cross. He sanctifies you by sacrificing His Son in your place. Go back to the text and notice how God is mentioned in our text.

“Now may the God of peace”

Why does Paul use that word *peace* in the name or title of God? He could have used a myriad of descriptive nouns and yet he uses this one, why? I think the answer is because your sanctification is intrinsically tied to your justification. There is now no enmity between God and His people. The peace is real friends, because it's been accomplished through Christ and God's act of justification.

When God declares you justified, righteous, it is a real thing.

“Therefore having been justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

That's why He's referred to here as the God of peace. It flashes back in our memories the reminder that our peace with God is through justification by faith through the sacrificial work of Jesus. You see, the cross is not just an act of satisfying God's justice for sinners, it's also an act of sanctifying, cleansing and setting us apart for His holy use until finally we are completely like His Son.

Jesus' death is not just for the purpose of justification; it's for sanctification as well. In fact, this same grace that justifies is the same grace that sanctifies. Justification proves itself in sanctification. How do I know a man or woman has truly been justified, declared righteous by God? I know it by seeing the process of sanctification occur in their lives. A man who is not pursuing and growing in holiness is a man who has not yet been justified. Meaning he is not yet saved. I'm not saying that a good man is the man God saves. No. A thousand times no. I'm not saying that. I'm saying when God saves He makes bad people good. He makes bad people good. That's how you know a man or a woman has been justified because you see God's work of making them more like His Son.

C.S. Lewis observed that it was this difference between the Gospel and legalism.

“Legalism says God will love me if I'm good. But the Gospel tells us that God will make us good because He loves us.”

Just the opposite. If you're here today and you believe that the goal to get God to accept you and to be close to God is becoming good, you have bypassed the cross of Jesus Christ and you are on your way to hell. Jesus said "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father but by Me." What does the cross say? We're all condemned. Sin is condemned and cannot enter the presence of God. Why do you think as Jesus hung on the cross He said, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani" My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" It's because God did forsake Him. God turned His back on His Son because your sins and mine were placed upon Him and in our place condemned He stood.

So no, God doesn't save good people. He makes bad people good. That's the promise of the Gospel. That's the promise of sanctification. *Pastor, I'm not good. I've professed faith in Christ, I thought I was saved, but I don't feel very good.* Believe God will keep His promise. The answer is not trying to do better. The answer is believing. More about that in a second. If Christ did not remove my guilt then there could be no way He could work in me to make me good. He couldn't even abide in me. The sin has to be dealt with. The curse removed allows God the freedom to move about, live and dwell in me. The good news is that God has promised to change us completely into His Son's image because He already loves us. He already loves you, friend. It's not your performance that has caught His attention and turned His heart to you with great affection. He loves you and therefore is working in you to change you. We know He loves us because Jesus died for us. The demonstrative proof of all proofs that God loves us is that He killed His Son for us.

2. **God sanctifies us by loving us.**

This is it. The only way in which God will sanctify you is by loving you. There is no other way. The only way He does it, I've discovered this through my own experience, but I want you to see it in Scripture first. I want you to focus on this for a few moments because it is so helpful to understand that God sanctifies you, transforms you, makes you into the image of Jesus. The progress which all believers are on that will be completed in heaven. He does that by loving us.

"Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us."

Paul begins by stating that we're not going to be disappointed, we're not going to be ashamed, even though right now it doesn't look like you're much like Jesus, hope will not disappoint because of the love of God. God's love for you has been poured into you by a Person, the Holy Spirit.

"For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly."

I love that phrase because I'm not godly at all in and of myself. I need that verse. That's my hope. He doesn't save righteous people. He saves unrighteous people and makes them righteous because He loves us. That's what He's going to prove to us here.

“For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us,”

He acts out His love toward us.

“in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood,”

There’s justification.

“we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.” (Romans 5:5-10)

Here is Paul’s argument—if Jesus died for us, proving His love for us, how much more will He save us, prove His love for us, now that He’s alive? This is an argument of logic and it’s called the afeorte argument. Meaning you argue from the greater to the lesser. Paul’s logic is again seen in the same argument in one of my favorite verses, Romans 8:32,

“He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?”

There is the argument from the greater to the lesser. If He didn’t spare His Son, if He killed His Son to prove to you He loved you, how much will He prove He loves you or “save you” through His life? The argument is this, if God would justify you through the death of His Son, won’t He sanctify you through the resurrected life of the Savior? It’s a rhetorical question with only one correct answer—absolutely. Amen. He will.

But how does He do it? By loving us. God’s love compelled Jesus to die on your behalf and it compels Him to not leave you with even the stain of sin or its presence in you. The ultimate goal of your sanctification is that even the presence of sin is removed from you, spirit, soul and body. No more fallenness, no more corruption. No more fissures in our person, no more cracks. We’re completely whole in the image of the only Begotten of God.

I’m convinced that everything God does is love toward us. I’m moved by His unwavering commitment to us. His love for you and me is unshakeable, immovable, and steadfast. Therefore I am persuaded that everything He does on our behalf, including chastening, including trials and suffering, is because He loves us. And it is His love poured out in our hearts that transforms. It is the love of God that’s transforming you from glory to glory. I want to show you how this works and how it happened in my life as a testimony as an example.

I will never forget how this comprehension and understanding of the love of God as the means of sanctification became a living truth in my soul instead of a dead fact lodged in my brain. My

perfectionism had put a wedge in my heart between my wife, Karen, and I years ago. I would put on her expectations that demanded from her what no human being, including myself, can give—perfection. Up to one day, every time she didn't perform to my expectations I would get angry and try to manipulate her with that anger. But on this particular day I remember being so angry with her that I went to the bedroom, fell beside the bed and began to weep and pray.

I knew I was wrong, I was in sin and I knew I could do nothing to change my heart. I knew it and I was broken. It wasn't just her. I was the same way with my sons and others but that day I cried out to God, "I can't change myself." Instead of getting the back of God's hand like I expected, do you know what happened? I received the smile of God and at that moment He filled my heart with the reality of His love for me. Instead of dressing me down and telling me what for, He picked me up and caressed me with His nail-scarred hands and loved on me in a very real way. He communicated to me in His affable way that His love for me made Him to forebear with me much more than I would ever have to forebear with anyone else. He could put up with my imperfections, and, by the way, He's not like me, He *is* perfect. As one person told me about a recent experience they had with the Lord, "I realized how much more He forebears to live with me and in me than I have to forebear with others." It's true. That's the love of God.

I used to think that when I sinned I had to suffer God's wrath and disfavor and when I did I could be readmitted back into the Father's presence. Like a spring storm, once it blew over the sun would come out. I just had to endure the storm and then I could experience His love again. Some of you think that way about God. Listen to me, please. On that day beside that bed in our bedroom He showed me that He was so unlike me and that the way I loved was not the way He loved His own people. I was the one who loved with conditions, not Him. My anger and perfectionism issues changed as a result of God loving me on that day.

I've thought about my times of sin and rebellion since becoming a believer and I cannot remember my heavenly Father bringing pain into my life because He was beside Himself with anger over what I had done. All I can remember is the love of God being poured out. I have to confess to you that my testimony is that in the midst of my sin I experience God's love more than any other time. Please listen, it's not to say He does not introduce pain into our lives or that sin never has terrible, painful consequences, it does. But all I can remember is in my grief over my sin I've never gotten the back of His hands, I've always got the kiss of His lips. His love for me is changing and transforming me. That's the way He saved me. I was saved in the darkest days of my sin and nature's night as Charles Wesley called it. I had left the ministry knowing I had never been a true Christian. I was one of those whom Jesus lamented, "You call Me Lord and do not do the things which I say." I had made a mockery out of the name of Jesus. I had brought disgrace to the ministry. I had hurt the ones who had loved me the most and on a cold December morning, kneeling on an oak floor expecting the just sentence of God to come down on my head I received instead the liquid oil of His love being poured out upon my head and it flowed down my body to my feet and I've never been the same again. Changed. Changed I tell you. Changed by the love of God.

Believer, it is God's promise to sanctify us and thus it belongs to God to keep His word and do

the work necessary to bring us to completion. It is not your work to sanctify you. Never. But that does not mean we're passive in our sanctification.

II. THE CHRISTIAN'S WORK IN SANCTIFICATION

There is a proper place for us in God's work of sanctification. Just because it's God's promise to do this doesn't mean He leaves us with no responsibility. In the verse preceding our text we read,

“Abstain from every form of evil.” (1 Thessalonians 5:22)

That's the command to me and you. Abstain. Why? Because that's what holiness does. That's sanctification—abstinence from every form of evil. We have a responsibility to walk holy before the Lord but that doesn't somehow translate or mean that our sanctification depends upon us, as so many people believe. What I want you to see is that God fuels and motivates our responsibility in the process of our sanctification so that in the end it is God's work. He supplies all that is necessary for our sanctification. How does it occur?

A. The Joy of God's Love Fuels Our Service.

When I experience the love of God like I have in these two experiences I've told you, the joy from that love fuels my heart to want to obey Him. God's love is the beginning point. It's the fuel that justification and sanctification run on. The joy of the Lord over His love for you is the only reasonable basis of your service for God. Any other is works coming from you and will fail. Instead of growing in grace you will spiritually decline. Let me show you this in Matthew 13:44. Jesus is saying what I believe is the fuel of my service—the joy of God's love.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”

What motivates that man? Joy. We all know this is a parable about the Kingdom of God. Ultimately it's about the King, because you don't have a kingdom without a King and wherever the king is there is the kingdom. So Jesus is the treasure. What is it about Jesus that would make us so happy that we would leave everything to follow Him? I believe, as I'm going to show you, it's the love of God in Christ Jesus. The love of God in Christ Jesus produces such overflowing joy that I'm willing to say goodbye to everything and count it not a sacrifice in the least, but gain. Great gain. We've got to see that your part, my part in sanctification is joyful service, joyful over the love of God for you and me.

B. Faith in the Truth of God's Love For Us Produces Joy.

It's faith in the truth of the Gospel. How you can experience the joy? By believing God's Word about His love for you. How do you experience joy that will fuel your abstinence from every form of evil? What will fuel you to say no to pornography, to say no to cheating on your income

taxes, what will fuel you to love someone who is unlovable? What will fuel you to forgive your sister when they say a harsh word? It is the belief that God loves you infinitely in the person of Jesus Christ. I want you to turn your Bibles to Galatians 3 to see this. Faith in the truth of God's love for us produces joy.

Let me set this up for us. Galatia is not a city; it's a province, a region of Asia Minor at that time. It would be modern day Turkey now. Paul left there after having an evangelistic missions campaign establishing churches because people had come to Christ through his preaching and after he left Jewish teachers came in that believed that these Gentiles had to become Jewish in order to really be a part of the Christian faith. So they were telling them they had to be circumcised, they had to eat Kosher, they had to honor and celebrate the same Sabbaths and feasts the Jews did. In all practical purposes, they had to become Jews otherwise they were not complete Christians. Here is Paul's argument to that.

“O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?”

The whole issue of the book of Galatians is not justification it's sanctification. But the way Paul deals with sanctification is by running back to justification because sanctification feeds off of justification. Growth in grace feeds on only one diet—the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. There is no sanctification without justification.

“Have you suffered so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?” (Galatians 3:1-5)

Galatians, God saved you by His grace and you received that grace through the agency, the instrument, the conduit, of faith. If that's true for your justification, why do you now think it's any different for your sanctification? Only God can make you like His Son. Only God can cleanse you. Only God can change you. You can't do it. What God has said about His love for you is the source of Christian joy. What did Jesus say?

“These things I have said to you that your joy may be full.”

John imitating His teacher says exactly the same thing in the first epistle of John,

“I write these things that your joy may be full.”

Complete. Faith in the Word produces joy.

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in

hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 15:13)

There it is. All joy and peace in **believing**. Not in doing, not in sacrificing, not in performing, not in having Christian virtues. No. The only way God will produce joy in you is that you by faith believe what God has said. That way you don't get the credit, He does. It's faith in what God has said.

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 15:13)

Believing what God has said will release the joy that is the power of your service. Joy in the truth believed is the fuel for your service. There is nothing else for you to do. Our work in sanctification is to do this—fight the fight of faith and believe God's promise of love in every situation. Period. For example, when a Christian brother is tempted to satisfy his lust in pornography, if he will believe that all he needs to satisfy his heart is found in Jesus Christ, he can resist pornography's enticement. If a Christian woman is tempted to satisfy their lust in romance novels, if she will only fight to believe God's promise of love in Jesus Christ is sufficient to meet her needs then she will resist the urge to lose herself in the fantasy of novels.

C. It is Unbelief That Hinders Sanctification.

What obstructs our spiritual growth is not poor behavior it's poor believing. Poor behavior is not the problem, it's poor believing. It's unbelief that hinders sanctification. It's not your temptations. It's not your flesh. It's unbelief. At the root of it all it's unbelief. The sin of unbelief starts the neurosis of self-centeredness. That's where it starts. When you get your eyes off of Jesus and His promises you are no longer experiencing the joy that is fueling your service, because when you feel the joy of God that He loves you, you could do as David said, “Leap over a wall and run through a troop” there is nothing that can hinder you. But when you're not feeding on the promise and begin to look within, unbelief comes in quickly. It is unbelief that takes our eyes off of Jesus and puts them back on ourselves, the sins of immorality aren't the problem.

The root of sin is unbelief. And where does it begin? It begins in the belief that I am the better judge of what is best for me, not God. In the case of my sanctification it is the belief that my spiritual progress is up to me. Again let me quote Martin Luther.

“The sin underneath all our sins is the lie of the serpent that says we cannot trust the love and grace of Christ and we must take matters into our own hands.”

There is the root of all unbelief. When you come to understand that Christian growth doesn't happen by working hard to get something you don't have, but rather by fighting the good fight of faith by believing what God has already given you, you will grow in grace. Brother, do you believe what God has said about what He has already given to you in Christ? Do you really believe Ephesians 1:4, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ”? That's the fuel that will produce the joy that

will produce the obedience and therefore God does the sanctifying. You will not progress in sanctification until you are ready to put all of your weight of your progress in grace on Him. Many of us are struggling in our walk with God because we are not willing to put all our rest in Him because we are not sure He will hold us up, so we feel we have to add something to it. Hence your problems. Sanctification is sustained by the joy that's believed or the joy that comes from believing the truth. Guilt-induced behavior doesn't produce holiness, only grace does.

I want to conclude. Some of you right now are weighing this out and you're thinking, *Yeah, but what about these verses, Cut off your right hand, gouge out your eye that causes you to sin, that's work. We've got to do something. Just believing is not enough according to these verses.* Please pay attention. Some of you by design are more partial to verses that say, "If your right hand causes you to sin cut it off, if your right eye causes you to sin pluck it out..." or "I discipline myself and bring it into subjection lest I myself shall become a castaway." You're partial by the way you're made to like these kinds of verses because you're geared to performance based upon law. It's the way you're designed. Therefore you tend to be more introspective and that's why you like those verses because it gives you some kind of gauge by which you can judge how well you're doing. Well, that would be fine if God gave you the responsibility to sanctify you but that's His job. Why gauge your performance? It has no bearing.

On the other hand, there are those of us partial to verses that tell us "By grace are you saved... it's a gift, not of works..." and "blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute sin..." You like those kinds of verses because you are not geared to performance and you tend to be less introspective. Which should you be?

Here's the problem. Most of us in this room are either/or rather than and/both type of Christians. What I mean by that is this—the Bible doesn't tell us to choose between those two sets of verses, it equally presents them both. The balanced Christian is the one who loves both. That Christian wants to walk holy before the Lord but knows he can't do it without God's power supplying grace. What then shall he do? He is to walk onto the battlefield and use the shield of faith and the sword of the spirit, which is the Word of God, and fight man.

The child of God takes the shield of faith, faith in what God has said, which is the sword of the Spirit. See how that works? The shield of faith is belief in what the Book says. The child of God takes his faith and looks back on what the Bible says Jesus has already done for us knowing it is the manifestation of God's love for him or her and because of what He has done, rejoices. With that joy he fights. But not just that. His faith is also in the promises that look forward to blessings that come from God and that produces joy in God because those promises are the manifestations of God's love for him or her. When he or she believes them, joy is full and they go to the battlefield and fight to believe what God has already promised.

Knowing what Christ has done, the Christian looks forward to the love of God yet to be manifested and he or she rejoices. The joy of truth believed is the fuel of all Christian service. It isn't going into the prayer closet and trying to muster up determination and willpower. It is to get with

God and say, “Oh Lord, this is what you’ve said, I believe you, help my unbelief.”

Here is how joy becomes an experience—when you begin to believe the promise that God does love you or that He will in the future manifest His love for you through keeping those promises, my brother, that becomes an experience with God that fuels joy and that makes you want to fight. When you believe the truth that God loves you then the joy you experience will be the fuel of holy living. If your faith does not lead to holy living but is an excuse for unholy living then your faith is not of a saving nature and you’re still lost in your sin. Because whom God justifies He also sanctifies and that’s how He does it—through His truth and you believing that truth, joy is manufactured and granted and you have the power of the Spirit. *Sanctify them by Your Word, Your Truth. Your Word is truth.* Faith fights to believe sanctification as a promise of God. Amen.