

“Words You Should Know: Sanctification”

Psalm 1 • Ephesians 4:17-5:2

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX
Rev. Dr. Charles S. Blackshear • August 14, 2022

I know some of you are excited that football season is right around the corner. In fact, the NFL has already begun playing preseason games. Which means if you are a Cowboys fan (or a Saints fan) you may already be disappointed. If you follow the Cowboys much you know that sometimes they could use a little extra help. So I want you to imagine for a moment that this afternoon when you get home from church you get a phone call from the Cowboys office and they tell you, “we’ve had research scientists studying the genetics of great football players over the last 20 years and their computer has determined that YOU are genetically the perfect wide receiver. We will have someone pick you up in about an hour so you can practice with the team before next week’s game. We’re really counting on you.”

Now, I think it’s probably safe to say that no matter how hard you *tried*, none of you here would last very long in an NFL football game. You see, **trying just isn’t enough**. Professional sports take a lot of skill and those skills come from serious training. Well guess what. Your spiritual life is no different. You will never grow much in godliness by merely trying harder. Like sports or your career you will only make progress by training. In theology we call that training “sanctification.”

The word *sanctification* means to make holy. The goal here is perfection. As God commands in Leviticus 19, “be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” Last week we talked about *justification*, which means that God makes us righteous in a legal sense. Justification makes us right with God. But you also know in your heart that there is much work left to be done in the area of sin in your life. Once God has justified you, he immediately begins the process of sanctifying you, making you into the image of Christ. As one author put it, “Justification freed us from the *guilt* of sin and its *condemnation*. The

process of sanctification begins to free us from the *power* of sin and its *rule* in our life.”

The Bible actually describes sanctification in two ways. One is what theologians call *definitive* sanctification, which simply means that God has set you apart as holy. It’s one of the outcomes of union with Christ and the Bible presents it as accomplished. This is part of what the Bible means by predestination. As Romans 8:29 tells us, if you are in Christ you have been “predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.” The other way sanctification is presented in Scripture—and what we want to talk about today— is what’s known as *progressive* sanctification, the lifelong process of being transformed by the Holy Spirit.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, would begin his small group Bible studies by asking each person, “How is it with your soul?” What a deep, probing question. Built into the question is the assumption that your soul should be growing closer to God. So let me ask you now: how is it with *your* soul?

Progressive sanctification—becoming more like Jesus—is entirely the work of God in your life *and* it takes an all-out effort on your part. That seems like a contradiction doesn’t it. But it’s true. The fact is that you will never be able to make progress in holiness by your own efforts. You need the Holy Spirit to change your mind and your will. But you must also put forth the effort in order to be transformed. As we see in today’s passage from Ephesians 4, the process of sanctification begins in your mind. Verse 17 says, “you must no longer walk (or behave) as the Gentiles do, *in the futility of their minds*.” Verse 18 goes on, “They are darkened in their understanding.”

Understanding takes place in your mind. And if your mind is in the wrong place it leads to being “alienated from the life of God” and “hardness of heart,” which are then followed by all kinds of bad behavior. The opposite, as

verse 23 shows us, is “to be renewed in the spirit of your minds,” which leads to “true righteousness and holiness.”

The reason is that thinking leads to doing. Our thoughts determine our actions. What you think, the way you see the world, will determine the actions you take. For example, it’s unlikely you will ever attempt something that you think is possible. But if you begin to think something’s possible you may be willing to try. That’s how change happens. God’s Word is clear that right thinking can lead us to right actions, and wrong thinking can lead us to wrong actions.

Some of you have heard this before but I think it’s a helpful way of understanding sanctification. The picture we get is sort of like travelling along a highway. You can choose to go in one direction or the other, you can’t do both at the same time. You are either travelling toward God or away from Him. That’s really the only two options. Paul says you can move toward God’s ways or toward the world’s ways, you can either become more like Christ or less like him.

The part that we play in sanctification, the effort that you and I must put forth to grow in holiness, has a negative component and a positive one. The metaphor Paul uses is changing clothes. He says we are to “put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” We’re to take off the bad things, like we take off dirty clothes, and put on the good things. In theology we call the “putting off” of our old self *mortification*. Literally we are to put to death the ungodly things in our lives. In their place, the things we are to “put on” are referred to as *vivification*, which means to give life to them. Paul gives us several examples. He says we are to “put away falsehoods,” and instead we are to “speak the truth.” We are to get rid of any “corrupting talk” and replace it with words that build up others. We are told to stop stealing

from others and instead work hard so we can give to others generously.

This putting off of the bad and putting on of the good is not a one-time event. We much choose every day, every moment really, to become more like Jesus. We must choose to be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Here’s the thing, though. Nobody said it would be easy. You won’t be able to do it by trying harder. This is where the training comes in. God has given us the tools necessary to be transformed. These tools are traditionally called the “ordinary means of grace.” These are the things God uses to transform our minds and therefore our actions.

The primary means of grace include the Word of God, the sacraments, and prayer. God uses these to communicate Christ and His saving benefits to us through faith. This is why it’s so important to gather as the church to worship. This is where we hear the Word of God read and preached. In worship we pray together. And worship is where we participate in the sacraments. As we discussed last week, the sacrament of baptism is the sign and seal of justification and the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, which we will celebrate in a few minutes, is the sign and seal of sanctification. That’s why we are only baptized once, since it represents what only God can do, but we take the Lord’s Supper often. But the sacraments are also a means of grace. God uses them as a “visible word” in our sanctification to help us see and believe the promises of God.

If you are in Christ you should be making progress on that road toward God. Sometimes you will make more progress than others. But the only way you will make progress is through God’s means of grace. As you hear the Word of God, speak to God in prayer, and encounter Him in his sacraments, you will be in a position for the Holy Spirit to work in your mind and in your actions. As Ephesians 5:1 says, we are to “be imitators of God.” Because here’s the paradox: just as right thinking leads to right

actions, right actions can lead to right thinking. Choosing to do the right thing, even when you don't want to, gives God the space to work in your life and renew your mind, leading to true righteousness and holiness. May it be so.

Amen.