

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, June 30, 2024

So, as Courtney taught our children, we will continue this day in our Theology 101: Back to the Basics of Faith series, and our doctrine this morning is that of Sanctification. It's back to back with Justification, because throughout the Reformed tradition these two ideas, these two doctrines, have really been tied together. And, hopefully, you heard the Reverend Dr. Steve Haynes's proclamation of God's word last week on Justification. If not and you are traveling within the next month, we'd love for you to. You can subscribe to the podcast, and you can listen to all the sermons in this series along the way. It's a good way to learn and grow in discipleship even as you travel and Sabbath. And this morning we tackle a significant one, so we're going to learn together from Philippians, the 2nd chapter, verses 1-13. If you'd like to follow along, you can grab the blue Pew Bible and turn there. As you do, let us join our hearts in prayer.

Sanctifying Spirit, fall fresh upon us this day. Fall fresh and bring your peace. Fall fresh and bring your wisdom. Fall fresh and bring your challenge. Bring your mercy. Teach us by your word that we might be your people. For we ask it in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Second chapter of Philippians starting in the first verse—

If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he existed in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped,

but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
assuming human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a human,

he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Therefore God exalted him even more highly
and gave him the name
that is above every other name,

so that at the name given to Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

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and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence but much more now in my absence, work on your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

Sanctification, simply defined, is the process of being made holy...the process of being made holy; and so, what we're tackling this morning as we study together is actually something that we can then take part in. Paul speaks to that. The idea in general terms is that disciples of Christ should become more like Christ. It might seem self-evident, but in practice it's less evident than we might hope. The idea is that this process of sanctification does not happen by accident but by intention and by the work of the Holy Spirit within us. I heard someone say recently if you want to become more like a news anchor, then watch the news. If you want to become like a politician, then watch how the politician navigates the world. We become like those to whom we devote the most time. We become like those to whom we devote the most time. If we want to become a clearer reflection of Jesus Christ, we must spend time learning from Jesus Christ; and it seems so simple to say that, and of course it's as complicated as you can imagine. Paul describes the intricacies in this text that we read this morning. He describes the balance of this work. He describes the human responsibility. Here I'm going to skip down to verses 12 and 13. He instructs the people in the early church to work on their own salvation with 'fear and trembling.' Note there the plurality of that statement. There is a group of people to whom Paul is writing, whom he instructs to work together, through fear and trembling to work out their own salvation. There's a communal aspect, then, to this work of sanctification that we dive into this morning. There's also a personal aspect. It takes, sanctification, takes an engagement of you, of the people of God, to become clear reflections of Jesus in the world. But lest the Philippians think that the responsibility lies fully on their shoulders, right after that Paul says, "For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure." To will and to work, to not only have the mindset and the posture of doing this sanctifying work, but then also to actually do the work. It's one thing to think that you want to do something. It's another thing to actually engage in the work. We're going to dive more into that in just a little bit. But one of the things that I think Paul is clear on to the Philippians is that they must recognize their role in the sanctification process. Most explicitly they must be open to the work of sanctification. And if they are open to this work of sanctification, if they are open to Jesus working in and through them, then that means that they must be open for their lives to be changed. They must be open for their lives to be changed by this spirit of God working within them. Now I hear all the time, "I don't know the Bible like I want to know it. I don't actually know how to pray on my own. I'm not good at it. I want to volunteer and participate in the Ministries. I just don't have the time." All of us, all of us, have different priorities that we can

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place in front of these simple tasks of Biblical literacy or the discipline of prayer or the act of discipleship, but all too often we are unwilling to take up the tasks that necessitate, that are necessary, excuse me, for the sanctification of our hearts and our minds and our souls. Then I also see the joy of others who come with those same questions, those same worries. “I don't know scripture. I don't know how to pray. I don't have time to volunteer,” but who are open to actually having their lives and the ordering of those lives changed. They make a decision to prioritize something differently in their calendar or in the movement of their day, and they...they join up with a FastTrack Disciples Bible study class, and before you know it, they know scripture more. They feel more at home in God's word. They sign up for the summer long prayer time with our Community Prayer Ministry. They make that commitment, and all of a sudden that practice becomes more ingrained in who they are. They say, “I can't give up every night of my week, but I can give up a Thursday night once a month, and I can do Room in the Inn.” And all of a sudden their compassion for those who are vulnerable in our community, who do not have shelter, who are in dangerous living conditions, they become more compassionate, and they realize they can give up that Thursday. They can sleep on an uncomfortable mattress in a room in their church, and I see the joy that comes from that, their openness to their lives being reordered.

Discipleship is what they are doing. Sanctification is what is happening to them. Let me say that again. Discipleship is what they are doing, you are doing, we are doing. Sanctification is the work that the spirit of God is doing in them as they follow in the ways of Christ. But the question becomes “Are we willing to have our lives reordered?”

I was reminded of this section in the Screwtape Letters by C.S. Lewis. Y'all are probably familiar. If not you should pick it up. It's a good summer read. ...It's a good summer read for our sermon series, yeah.

So there are these demons apprenticing in the art of human deception, okay? There's Screwtape and there's Wormwood. Wormwood is discouraged early on when someone converts to Christianity. He doesn't feel like he has done his work, but he is told it's okay. “It's okay. This happens sometimes. All of their practices, though, are still in our favor. It's okay that they have experienced a conversion, because the entire construction of their life is still in our favor. We can get their souls back.” Actually the translation is that it is possible to come to a different cognitive understanding of faith as long as, at least for Wormwood, as long as our way of living is still owned by another Power, It is okay for the people to claim Jesus Christ so long as they change nothing else about their lives. A Reformed understanding of Sanctification acknowledges this—not only the salvific power of God to cognitively claim us, but also the spirit's ability to push us, encourage us, to re-shape our lives that we might be sanctified by the very spirit of God. For hundreds of years the Reformed tradition has held that God accomplishes God's work of sanctification in some really simple ways, one of which, actually a few of which, you are already participating in this morning. For hundreds of years the Reformed faith has claimed that the sanctifying work of God happens through the Word of God studied and proclaimed, that the sanctification of God happens through the sacraments—baptism and communion, that the

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sanctification of God happens to us through prayer. That it is in those simple acts, those simple acts, that God is working. Love what Mahatma Gandhi says, “The more efficient a force is, the more silent and subtle it will be.” We in the Reformed tradition claim that these practices that are right before us—the reading of Scripture, its proclamation, joining around the table, moving through the waters of baptism, and going to God in prayer—it is through these small tasks, seemingly small, that God accomplishes a sanctifying work that is beyond our imagining. A preacher might be tempted in their preparation for a sermon on Sanctification to create a list on their phone about all of the sins that they have that keep them from, distract them from the sanctifying work in their lives. The preacher might be tempted to create another list of the practices that they really need to take on to really put themselves in the right position to be sanctified by this God of all creation. And if a preacher was tempted to make lists like that, he would be off base, at least according to Paul. To paraphrase John Mark Comer, in the work of sanctification God is not asking you to do more but to do less, and to do it more intentionally. Sanctification is about, as Eugene Peterson phrased it, “a long obedience in the same direction.” It is not about adding more and more and more to your plate. It is about choosing those places in which you will center yourselves in the work of the Holy Spirit of God, that you will open yourselves to that Spirit, willing and working through you. Sanctification is a process and a hope. It is a hope of our tradition that God is indeed not done with you. You are not a complete work. In fact, you can, by the power of God's spirit, grow more and more in the likeness of Christ, in the way in which you move through this world with Grace, in the way in which your words help to heal, in the way in which you care for the lonely and the oppressed. Your salvific moment is not the end of your story. It's, in fact, the beginning of a process that you will work out with fear and trembling. But it will not just be you who is working it out, for it will be the very spirit of God at work in you, enabling you to will and to work for God's good pleasure. So, then, the final work for us, as we imagine the doctrine of Sanctification together, is to trust that the power that was at work in Christ Jesus is still at work in each of us and indeed in community, sanctifying us, making us clearer and clearer reflections of Jesus the Christ. Can you trust that that is happening? Will you open your life to being reordered so that Christ might be at work in and through you? What is it? What is it that is stopping you from engaging in these historical, simple tasks of the word being read and proclaimed? What is it that is stopping you from engaging in the simple task of gathering around table? What is it that is stopping you from praying and communing with your God? Maybe the challenge for you this morning is to imagine the reordering that must happen that you might be open to God's sanctifying power at work in your life, renewing you and making you a clear reflection of Christ. There is nothing I think our community and our world needs more than people committed to becoming clearer and more vibrant reflections of the living Christ in the world. So what if you were open to the sanctifying power of Christ to will and work through you?

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.