

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,  
on Sunday, June 19, 1994, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

### **TITUS 2:13-14**

“Our great God and Savior Jesus Christ... gave Himself for us, that He might set us free from all our evil ways and purify for Himself a people who are His very own, with our hearts set upon living a life that is good.”

### **WHAT ABOUT “SANCTIFICATION”?**

I wish to speak today about the Christian doctrine of SANCTIFICATION. Immediately I can hear someone saying, “Oh, he’s into heavy theology again!” Indeed, I am! Christianity is certainly life and health and joy, but it is also dogma, creed, and doctrine. The word “dogma” comes from a Greek word which means to “think.” The word “creed” comes from a Latin word that means to “believe.” And the word “doctrine” comes from a Latin word that means to “teach.” So, if you are going to think anything or believe anything or teach anything, then you need dogma, creed, and doctrine, especially in these days when so many people don’t seem to know what they believe.

Let me affirm most emphatically that “sanctification” is no impractical, dry-as-dust theological doctrine. It is a subject that must of necessity be of vital personal importance to every child of God, for it has to do with our Christian life as we are living it now.

The words “sanctify” and “sanctuary” come from the same Latin word “sanctus” which means “holy.” Now, we all know that a “sanctuary” is a “holy place,” and that it is different from other rooms the same size because it has been set apart; it has been dedicated to the worship of God. You can see, then, that the word “sanctify” means “to make holy.” The most important thing in the life of a Christian is that he should glorify God by becoming holy even as God Himself is holy.

The word “holy” means “different”; it means “set apart.” “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.” The Sabbath day is “holy” because God commands us to make it “different” from the other days of the week, since this day is “set apart” as the weekly occasion for the worship of God and the special nurture and refreshment of our souls and bodies. A Christian is called to be “holy” — to be different from other people because he is “set apart”; he has committed himself to love and serve and obey the God Who created and redeemed him.

Interestingly enough, the words “holy” and “healthy” also come from the same root word; and a “holy” person is “healthy” in the truest sense of the term because he is united to God Who alone is the source of wholeness, healthiness, moral robustness, and spiritual power. So, as believers, we are to “take time to be holy,” as the hymn which we have just sung says.

Now let me say that “sanctification” is closely related to that other doctrine which we call “justification.” It is important to remember that the whole process of salvation is one. The Bible always deals with salvation as a whole. The end is as certain as the beginning because the

whole is a unity, and not a mere collection of parts. But often, in order to understand a process, we are greatly helped by dividing it up into stages to which we can give names. We are not actually dividing up the process itself, but simply making it easier for ourselves to understand it as a whole.

For example, Faith Presbyterian Church is meeting here on Franconia Road in Springfield. Further west, Franconia Road becomes Old Keene Mill Road; and then further west still, it becomes Lee Chapel Highway, but it doesn't cease to be one and the same thoroughfare. The distinction is not actual; the road is one road all the way through. The different names are simply a matter of practical convenience.

So it is with justification and sanctification. For the sake of convenience, we give different names to these two aspects of salvation; but do remember that it is one process that is going on — the creation of a Christ-like character. You can't separate Justification from Sanctification; for when a person is justified by faith, there has already commenced in him the work of sanctification — his feet are already on the highway to holiness.

Now let us define and contrast these two doctrines — “Justification” and “Sanctification.” The classic definitions of them, of course, are found in Questions 33 and 35 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

Question 33 asks — What is “Justification”? And the answer — “Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein He pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.”

Question 35 asks — “What is Sanctification”? And the answer — “Sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.”

So, you see, justification is an act of God's free grace; whereas sanctification is the work of that same divine grace. Justification depends upon what Christ accomplished for us once and for all in the act of His dying on the Cross. It is complete and perfect. Sanctification, on the other hand, is what Christ accomplishes within us continually by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a long process which lasts from the moment of our new birth until the moment we die.

In justification the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us (that is to say, it is put down to our account, even though we haven't earned it); whereas in sanctification the righteousness of Christ is actually imparted to us.

Justification is concerned with our standing before God, and our position in Christ. Sanctification, in contrast, is concerned with our actual moral and spiritual state, and our condition as believers living in an ungodly world.

Some years ago, an English Lord was found in New York City — he was a tramp on Skid Row. Now his standing, his position, was that of a peer of the realm. But his state, his condition, was that of a down-at-heel tramp.

And sanctification is the work of God's grace whereby the tramp is transformed slowly, but surely into what he really is — a peer of God's realm.

Justification and sanctification are thus seen to be two gracious works of God in His one glorious process of salvation. Both of them have to do with two very different aspects of sin; for sin, according to the Scriptures, has two sinister aspects:

1. The first aspect of sin is what is known as GUILT. Guilt means that we are liable to be punished. A person commits an offence. He is guilty; and when he is apprehended, tried, and convicted, he is punished. We who sin against God's holy Law are liable to punishment.

2. But the second aspect of sin is something within us which the Bible calls CORRUPTION. Each of us is born with a nature that is corrupt.

So, the two aspects of sin are guilt and corruption. Now God deals with both of these aspects of sin.

a. He deals with our GUILT through JUSTIFICATION. It is a judge who deals with guilt. In the act of justification, what does God do? He "imputes" to us (He puts down to our account) the righteousness of Christ. He declares us to be in a right relationship with Himself because of what Christ did for us when He died on the Cross. Justification is simply a declaration. It is God's declaration that a particular person is not guilty in His sight, and therefore, under no condemnation. We are treated by God as if we had never sinned, even though He knows, and we know, that we have sinned! God puts our sins behind His back, buries them in the depths of the sea, and remembers them against us no more forever. I am justified not because of my good words; I am justified when, by faith, I put my trust solely and completely in Christ Who, by His death, has fully atoned for my sin. Nothing more needs to be done nor can be done. God, the righteous Judge, paid the debt Himself, and then pronounced the verdict — "Not Guilty." Now that pronouncement, that declaration "Not Guilty," is what justification is all about.

In our reading from the Gospel this morning (Matthew 22:11-14), we attended an Eastern wedding. At such a wedding the bride's parents give to each invited guest a white robe to wear; it is called "the wedding garment." It is, in fact, one's badge of admission to the wedding festivities. In our Lord's parable, a man had gatecrashed the party; he came uninvited wearing his own best clothing. But the host approached him and said, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?" The man was speechless. Jesus says that he was cast out into "the outer darkness."

Now, when by faith we receive Christ as Savior, God clothes us with the spotless white garment of Christ's righteousness, so that when He looks at us, He does not see us as we are in ourselves; He sees us as we are in Christ, clothed with the righteousness of our Savior; and it is this robe of the righteousness of Christ that guarantees your acceptance as a child of God. We are declared by the Judge of the universe to be righteous in His sight; to be in a right relationship with Him because of Christ's atoning sacrifice. This act of justification is done once

for all. We are no more justified twenty years after we have accepted Christ than we were the moment we accepted Him. At the very instant of your rebirth you were clothed with the garment of salvation and covered with the robe of righteousness. God treats you as if you had never sinned at all. You were “justified by faith.” So, God deals with our guilt through justification. But,

b. He proceeds to deal with our CORRUPTION through SANCTIFICATION.

While justification is a legal act of divine grace which affects our judicial position before God, sanctification, on the other hand, is the moral and re-creative process, again the work of God’s grace, whereby the corrupt nature with which we were born, is changed and made Christ-like. Sanctification is that gracious and continuous operation of the Holy Spirit by which He delivers the justified sinner from the pollution of sin.

Having been justified, we are no longer liable to punishment; we are declared innocent and not guilty. Having been clothed with the garments of Christ, we now need to become holy within. The Bible says (Habakkuk 1:13) that “God’s eyes are too pure to look on evil”; that all sin, whether it is in an unbeliever or a believer, is contrary to the holiness of God and is an abomination in His sight. His commandment to us is — “Consecrate yourselves and be holy because I am holy.” (Lev. 11:44) Notice that we are not to be holy and sanctified in order that we might have joy and peace and experience “fullness of life” and “victorious living” and “constant victory.” No! We are to be holy because God is holy, and we honor Him by becoming like Him. To become like Him involves a lengthy process and means that we will never reach perfection in this life.

Sanctification is the work of the triune God, but it is ascribed in Scripture particularly to the Holy Spirit. Peter writes his first letter to those who have been “chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 1:2) We cooperate with the Holy Spirit, but we do this only because the Spirit imparts moral and spiritual strength to us moment by moment. As an old hymn in honor of the Holy Spirit says,

“And every virtue we possess,  
And every victory won;  
And every thought of holiness  
Are His alone.”

God not only declares us to be righteous in Christ: He also proposes to make us righteous. It is this process of “dying unto sin and living unto righteousness” to which the name of sanctification is given. The author of the letter to the Hebrews reminds us that “without holiness no one will see the Lord.” (Heb. 12:14)

Let me reiterate the biblical teaching — We are to be holy because God is holy. The Bible never confines the benefit of Christ’s death on the Cross merely to forgiveness. Our text affirms that our great God and Savior Jesus Christ... gave Himself for us that He might set us free from all our evil ways.” “We are not our own” says Paul in 1 Cor. 6:19-20. “We have been bought with a price. Therefore, we must glorify God in our body” and be holy as He is

holy.

Let me say something extremely important in relation to our text. You cannot receive Christ as your Savior only, and later decide to accept or refuse Him as your Lord; for the Savior is the Lord Who by His death has bought us and therefore owns us. Sanctification is nowhere taught or offered in the New Testament as some additional ecstatic experience available to the believer. It is represented rather as something which is already within the believer, something which he must realize and cultivate more and more, and in which he must grow increasingly.

The object of every New Testament letter is to persuade believers to be worthy of their high calling in Christ. We must understand Christian doctrine and then apply it to our lives, cooperating with the Holy Spirit as He rids us of those things which grieve and dishonor our Lord.

You see, the New Testament teaches very clearly that the person who is born of God is given the power to act morally, and that in this respect he is entirely different from the unregenerate person, and therefore, should never be compared with him.

The unregenerate person is “dead in sins” (Eph. 2:1) and entirely “without strength” (Rom. 5:6) He can do nothing. But the Christian, on the other hand, is “a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17), a live being. He is born again; he has become a responsible creature. God expects things from him; indeed, God demands things from him. God addresses to him, therefore, in the pages of the New Testament, words and commands which never can be addressed to unbelievers.

You see, a Christian is not left to himself and to his own resources. He has received the Holy Spirit in all His fullness, and the special function of the Holy Spirit is to illumine the mind and motivate and strengthen the will of the child of God and to lead him into all truth, and enable him to “live a self-controlled, upright and godly life in this present age.” (Titus 2:12) We are enabled through the Holy Spirit to act; therefore, we are expected to act; and therefore, we must act.

That is the paradox that is expressed so well in the hymn:

“Fight the good fight with all thy might  
Christ is thy strength, and Christ thy right...”

and still better in Philippians 2:12, “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 pleasure.” You see, God enables us to work out what He has already worked in!

The paradox can also be stated like this — God can do everything, yet I must do something! God could cure Naaxnan of his leprosy, but Naaman must first go and dip himself seven times in the River Jordan. Our Lord could raise Lazarus from the dead, but before the miracle could take place, the disciples had to roll away the stone from the mouth of the tomb.

According to 1 Cor. 1:30, “Christ is... our sanctification,” and He becomes that through the Holy Spirit Who, acting upon us, enables us to fight the fight against sin and to work out our salvation with fear and trembling; and the way to holiness, the method by which we become sanctified, is to respond to all the promptings and leadings of the Spirit as He reveals things in our lives that are displeasing to God. In sanctification, God and the believer cooperate in the creation of a transformed personality. He commands us and enables us to use the means which He has placed at our disposal. We must exercise faith in every detail of our daily life; we must study God’s Word, and pray, and associate with other believers, obey all of God’s commandments, worship with God’s people, and receive the blessings of the sacraments.

The Christian life will always be a struggle, just because the flesh will always lust against the Spirit (Gal. 5:17); but the more we understand and appreciate and dwell upon the price Christ paid in order to make our forgiveness possible, the more hateful and abhorrent will sin become to us, because we know it hurts our Lord so much: And the more will we seek to defeat every attack of the evil one.

The closer your communion with God the more you pray for strength to resist and to overcome, the feebler will the enemy appear to be. But if you neglect the cultivation of your spiritual life, your power to resist will become weaker and weaker and the enemy will reassert his old tyranny, and you will end up in a backslidden state as a very carnal person.

Our victories are not won for us while we recline in ease and comfort. On the contrary, you are everywhere in Scripture exhorted to “Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be people of courage; be strong!” (1 Cor. 16:13) I love those four words in 1 Samuel 4:9, “Be men and fight!” And as we do so, we can defy the enemy who attacks us, and verify in our own experience the words of James 4:7, “Resist the devil, and he will run away from you.”

Sanctification expresses itself by an increasing hatred of sin in any shape or form; an ever-growing love for Christ; a burning desire to please Him, and to serve Him and to bring honor to His name. Your sanctification is progressing and increasing to the extent that you are more and more aware of the inherent sinfulness and vileness of your own nature; and to the extent that you satisfy more and more the demands of the great commandment that you should “love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:27)

As you “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18) you leave sin behind, and endeavor increasingly to glorify God and magnify His grace. Your life will not be negative or passive, but active and virile, as you seek to know Christ better and obey and serve Him more truly.

That is what our Savior desires above all else from every one of us!

**AMEN.**