

“We Just Need to Be More Committed”

Half-Truth #11

Pastor Dan Erickson

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Cousin Billy arrived in town from his mountain cabin, dressed in his suit and carrying his bible. He ran into his cousin Jimmy (second cousin, twice removed on his mother’s side) who asked, “Where are you headin’, cousin Billy?” “Well, I am goin’ to take the train to New Orleans. I hear they have lots of drinkin’, lots of gamblin’ and lots of loose women down there.” “Is that right?” Jimmy replied. “But, why in the world are you takin’ your bible with you, cousin Billy?” “Well, if it is as good as they say it is, I reckon I might just stay over ‘til Sunday and go to church.”

Well, folks, I am not sure that is a true story, but it does reflect a rather sobering truth. Many folks who attend church and profess to be Christians, make a lot of lifestyle choices that seem very contrary to what the bible teaches. Even if we don’t engage in the type of sins cousin Billy was focused on, almost all of us continue to do, say or think things which are contrary to what the Lord Jesus desires. That is a problem, and not one for which there is an easy solution. Most bible believing Christians are in agreement that the great salvation God provides for us has three parts. Justification, sanctification and glorification. Each of those are five syllable words, but they are such important terms. Justification means to be declared righteous by God. It involves having our sins forgiven. It includes what is called “the great exchange” where Jesus takes our sin upon Himself on the cross, while at the same time giving us His perfect righteousness that is counted as our own. As I sometimes say, “My failing score has been erased and instead Jesus’ perfect score is written beside my name.” Folks, justification is experienced by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, for the glory of God alone. It is based not on anything we do, but on what the Lord Jesus has done for us. All that is required from us if that we put our faith in Jesus Christ to save us from the penalty our sin deserves. (Ephesians 2:8,9)

Most Christian also agree about glorification, the last phase of our salvation. This will be experienced in the future when we are in the presence of the Lord. We will then be in heaven with new glorified bodies, free from any sin in our lives. This is spoken of in **1 John 3:2 Beloved,**

**we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.**

Almost all of us look forward to this time when there will be no more sin, sorrow or death. Yes, there are a wide variety of speculations as to what the exact nature of heaven will be like, but there is strong agreement that it will be better than we can ever imagine, and that this will be the experience of all genuine believers in Jesus Christ, or a Paul says in **Romans 8:30b Those who he justified he also glorified.**

That leaves the middle part of salvation; sanctification. This is the time in between when we trust in Jesus as our savior and are justified and the time when we arrive in heaven, and are glorified. To be sanctified literally means to be set apart, to become holy. I define it as the process of Christians becoming more and more like Christ, growing in love for God and other people, until he/she is perfectly holy in heaven.

But how, exactly, does this process of sanctification work? How do we grow in love for God and for other people? Well, I think a lot of half-truths are spoken as people try to answer that. I don’t pretend I have the complete answer, but let’s pause and pray through His word and by His spirit, God would give us a clearer understanding of truth that would help us to grow to be more like Jesus.

So, how do we go about seeking **Ephesians 4:1b to live a life worthy of the calling you have received?** Or maybe we could ask it this way: What is the path for growing as a disciple of Jesus Christ, for having a greater love for God and other people, for growing in sanctification and holiness? Well, I am afraid at this point Christians have answered that question with a variety of half-truths. And to clarify, yes, I am confident that people who believe these things are genuine Christians and truly saved. In my opinion they just happen to be wrong, at least partly.

**First,** a common idea in some churches is that sanctification, becoming more like Jesus, is just either an optional goal or a futile one. These folks

emphasize that we have no righteousness of our own, but only what is imputed or given to us through Jesus. They correctly point out that Christians are still plagued by a sinful nature. As Martin Luther said, a Christian is always simultaneously a saint and sinner. Now what some folks say is that the saint part is the righteousness given to us by Christ. In other words, Christians don't necessarily grow in love for God and other people at all. Oh, we will have good days and not so good days, but even our best actions are still tainted by sin. It is only the holiness of Jesus which we count as our own that makes us holy.

Friends, this view does reflect an important truth about the pervasiveness of sin in our lives, but it is built on what seems to be a twisted understanding of what the bible teaches. In this view, every imperative statement is merely a commandment from God that we will fail to obey, and thus, a reminder of our need for Jesus' forgiveness and righteousness. So, for example, when we read Jesus' commandment to love our enemies, (Matthew 5:44) the right response is not to seek to actually do that, but rather to be grateful that Jesus has forgiven us for failing to love our enemies. However, in **Romans 12:18** the apostle Paul says, **"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."** As he gives this commandment, Paul seems aware that no one will ever be at peace with everyone, but he still expects his readers, including us, to seek to do that.

Sometimes this distorted teaching, half-truth, grows out of a misunderstanding of law and gospel. Those are categories Lutheran theologians have devoted probably millions of pages to, but all Christians should think clearly on this topic. We should realize that one purpose of the law, all of God's commandments, is to remind us that we are not capable of perfect obedience to God. Jesus is the only who has ever or will ever accomplish that. Indeed, one reason the Lord gives us His commandments is to help us recognize what sin is and that we are sinners in need of grace. In Romans 7:7, Paul says, "Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.'" I think this means that at one point, Paul thought he was a pretty good person, that he was keeping all of the 10 commandments. But then he got to

the 10<sup>th</sup> one: "You shall not covet." He maybe was not committing a lot of sinful deeds, but he could not pretend he didn't have sinful attitudes. That part of the law enabled Paul to realize he was a sinner in need of grace and forgiveness.

So, yes, every time we read a commandment in the bible, it is appropriate to think about how we have failed to keep that commandment, how we have not loved God or other people as we should, and to realize our desperate need for grace. However, we must not stop there. As Luther said, "The law points us to Christ so we can turn to Him for salvation." "Christ then points us back to the law to show us how to live." Indeed, the new covenant law, the law of Christ, provides a goal for how believers in Jesus should seek to live in both our actions and attitudes. No, we will not ever reach that goal in this life. Yet, it is still a goal for which we are to aim.

**Second**, is the view I will call, "Let Go and Let God." This is a slogan used in what was called "the deeper life" movement and the Keswick bible confers. Now, on the surface it sounds fairly simple, just surrender your will to the Lord. Let the Holy Spirit do the work, and you just rest. In practice, however, many have found it rather confusing. How exactly do you surrender your will, and how do you know if you are doing so? In his book, "Keeping in Step with the Spirit," J. I. Packer talks about his confusion and frustration in his early years as a Christian when he felt he was being told to "try harder not to try." Packer talks about how the New Testament describes sanctification not as a passive process, but as an active one. The Christian believer, a new creature in Christ, is to cooperate with or keep in step with the Holy Spirit, as he or she seeks to follow Jesus. **Ephesians 5:25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.**

**Third**, the view I will call, "Just try harder." This is kind of the ditch on the other side of the road. The focus is often on following rules or disciplines and can easily devolve into legalism. The error here, rather than being passive, is zealous activity, working in the flesh rather than relying on the Spirit. The apostle Paul addresses this in **Galatians 3:2,3 Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?** So, it is not "let go and

let God,” and it is not “just try harder.” Growing as a Christian, sanctification is both, relying on the empowerment of the Holy Spirit and making the effort to follow the Lord Jesus, keeping in step with the Spirit. There are a couple of passages where the apostle Paul’s words reflect this combination. One is his testimony in **1 Corinthians 15:10** **But by the grace of God I am what I am, (Wow...that is an important truth) and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder that any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.** I worked hard, but it was the grace of God, the Holy Spirit, that enabled Paul to work harder than others.

Then we have his exhortation in **Philippians 2:12,13** **Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.** Now, some folks get confused here because they equate salvation with justification. Paul doesn’t. He would never say work out your justification. That is a gift. There is no work involved. But sanctification is what we are called to work out. Yet, even as we work, we must keep in mind that it is God, through the Holy Spirit, who is working in us.

And, just so you don’t think this is just a Paul thing, here is what the apostle Peter says, **1 Peter 4:10,11** **Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.**

**Fourth**, the view I call, “One dose is all you need.” Well-meaning Christians, some of them wonderful people, say, “If you want to follow Jesus, if you want to become more like Christ, all you need to do is...fill in the blank. Surrender fully to Christ; be baptized in the Spirit; be filled with the Spirit; acknowledge Christ’s Lordship; repent of all your sins; turn your life totally over to Jesus; switch to Geico car insurance. No, I have not heard anyone suggest the latter, yet. Now, I

actually think all of these are good things we should do. Maybe not switch to Geico, but we should surrender fully to Christ, be baptized and filled by the Holy Spirit, acknowledge Christ as Lord, etc. However, these are not things you do once and then it is all good. None of them mean you have now found victory over sin and have reached the highest level of spiritual maturity. Now, I do think the baptism of the spirit is a one-time experience for all believers in Jesus. **1 Corinthians 12:13** **For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body- whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free-and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.** All the other things I mentioned are things we should do not once but repeatedly, regularly, maybe even daily. In **Ephesians 5:18**, Paul tells, **And do not get drunk with wine..., but be filled with the Spirit.** In the Greek language which Paul writes, he uses a present imperative, which implies a continuous action. That means the phrase may be better translated as “keep being filled with the Spirit.” As D. L. Moody once said, “I need to keep being filled with the Spirit because I am a leaky vessel that can easily become empty.” It is not a one and done thing. Acknowledging Jesus as Lord and repenting of sin are things I think I should be doing daily. Why; because I am simultaneously a saint and sinner. Oh, I do pretty well at avoiding bad actions. But attitudes? I could use improvement there. And I know there are good things I ought to have done that I have left undone. The bottom line, I don’t always love God with my entire being and don’t always love other people as much as I love myself. I wish I did, but I don’t.

At times, I have wondered, “What is wrong with Me?” Maybe the folks I preach to on Sunday are just better people than I am? Yet, then I remember what the apostle Paul wrote about his experience in **Romans 7:19** **For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.** Friends, that is part of the Christian life we don’t always like to talk about... our continual struggle with sin. We are simultaneously saints and sinners. “Simul Justus et peccator.” A little Latin spices up any sermon. Now, I realize that some Christians, very good people, believe that Paul is describing his life before he became a Christian and that after his conversion he was able to live a life free from sin. I would be glad to discuss why I don’t think Romans 7 teaches that, but I would also note that complete victory over

sin is simply not the experience of any Christian I know. It seems that those who make that claim do so by redefining sin. I remember a bible study I was in many years ago where the Pastor said, "I have not sinned in 22 years." A woman in the congregation said, "Do you ever get angry?" He replied, "Well, that is a mistake, not a sin." Yes, there is such a thing a righteous anger, but that describes very little anger that I see, including what I find in the mirror.

Martin Lloyd Jones, the pastor of Westminster Chapel in London for many years, once told his congregation, "You folks will never get out of Romans 7, while I am your pastor." By that he meant he would always be talking about the daily struggle with sin that he thought was part of every Christian believer's life. Well, folks, I don't think you are ever going to get out of Romans 7 while I am your pastor or anytime until you are glorified in the preciousness of Jesus. Until then, sanctification, becoming individuals who truly love God and other people as we should, will not only be a process, but a struggle. The world, the flesh, and the devil will do everything they can to knock you down. And sometimes you will fall down, but by the grace of God, you will always get back up again. Unfortunately, there is no "one dose, one and done," solution that will spare you that struggle.

What is the best path to sanctification? I think our strategy should be to turn to the Lord each and every day, confess our sins, and ask for His grace, wisdom and strength to live in a way that pleases Him. And then I would urge you to focus on the glory and grace of the Lord Jesus. Let your mind dwell on who Jesus is, on His nature and character and on all that He has accomplished for you through His life, death and resurrection. Allow that truth to fill your heart with gratitude and then let that gratitude grow into love. That love for Jesus will enable you to better obey Him, to obey Him even when it is not the easy thing to do.

Friends, we make a mistake when we think of holiness and avoiding sin, as somehow separate from our love for the Lord. As our love for Him grows, our hatred of sin and desire to obey His commandments will grow. That love gives us a desire and ability to keep in step with the Spirit and become more like Jesus in our attitudes and actions. Friends, I would urge, in the midst of what is often a struggle to follow the Lord, to keep

you focus on Jesus, pray that you will be able to 2 **Peter 3:18 Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.** Pray that you will be able to see **2 Corinthians 4:6b the knowledge of God's glory displayed the face of Christ.**

If we do that, not only will we be much less likely to take a trip to New Orleans for the reasons cousin Billy did, but we will begin to realize that in Jesus, we have a treasure of greater worth than everything else in our life combined, and that knowing Him is always a reason for joy.