

Adored or Deplored: The Doctrine of Sanctification

Jeremiah Dennis
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Well as Christians, there are certain doctrines that we hold very dear, doctrines that we love and cherish. For example, we love the doctrine of justification because it reveals the beauty and brilliance of the gospel. Justification teaches that God declares a sinner righteous, not on account of the sinner's own righteousness, but rather on account of the righteousness of Christ imputed to, or credited to the sinner's account. In other words, a sinner is accepted by faith alone and Christ alone apart from works of his own and we rightly love that doctrine. There are other doctrines however, that we accept and embrace less readily. One such doctrine, I believe, is the doctrine of sanctification, which explains how believers are to grow in Christ likeness. Perhaps we don't like the doctrine of sanctification quite so much because we fail to understand what it really means. After all, it is a doctrine that has been abused and misused by so many over the years.

For example, some teach about sanctification, your growth in godliness, and they say it depends all upon you. You better work hard, you better try harder, you better grit and grind your way through the Christian life because if you don't, nothing will happen. So it's all on you and don't forget it. And so because you think maybe that's right, you you gather your strength and you say, I'm going to work hard for this. Maybe you do well for a season, but then inevitably, invariably as always happens, you sin and then you're disappointed and then you're discouraged because you know it's on you, but you can't bear the burden of the weight of sanctification on your frail shoulders, and you don't like sanctification anymore. There are others, however, who take a different approach and they say good news, you don't have to do anything for your sanctification. You have no part to play whatsoever, in fact, let go and let God, and he will swoop in and wave his magic wand and presto, you're made perfect. And that sounds very good to us. And so when we hear that and we respond to that, we stop going to war with our sin and we take a backseat and we wait for God to do it all for us. And we keep waiting, and we keep waiting and we wonder why are we not growing? And so then sanctification becomes frustrating because either I'm burdened with guilt because of my constant sin, or I really don't treat sin as that important because hey, if it was a big deal, God would do his work in me and I'd overcome this stuff.

So there is much confusion surrounding the doctrine of... Or sanctification. And in the midst of that swirling, whirling mess of teaching about sanctification, what are we as believers to understand properly about this critical doctrine? Thankfully in our text today, the apostle Paul clears the air. You see in Philippians two, 12 and 13, he gives us four truths about sanctification. For realities you could say that reveal the beauty of this doctrine and motivate you to greater Christ likeness. Here are these four truths regarding sanctification, which will be our outline.

Truth #1, it is patterned after Christ, patterned after Christ. Truth #2, it is motivated by love. Truth #3, it is required of us. And truth #4, it's empowered by God.

Well, let's begin with our first truth regarding sanctification, namely that it is ***patterned after Christ***. And you may say, well, I didn't see anything about Christ in that passage, where did you get this idea from? Well look back at verse 12 and go no further than the very first word, therefore. Therefore functions as a link in a chain, and it connects what preceded with what follows. So it ties the immediate section before, 5 through 11, with this two verses on sanctification, 12 and 13.

In verses five through 11 as a quick summary, Paul painted a portrait of Christ for us and he highlighted Christ's perfect submission, Christ's perfect obedience and Christ's perfect humility. And that was very purposeful, because the therefore tells us all that I just mentioned about Christ is the pattern for your sanctification. And there's another textual clue that tells me that is the case. And that textual clue is in verse 12, and it is the word obeyed. I want you to see that, as you have always obeyed. That word stitches together verses 5 through 11 with verses 12 and 13. Because if you would notice in verse eight, Paul uses a similar word. He says, he Jesus humbled himself by becoming obedient. So Paul very deliberately uses the language of obedience to stitch these two passages together, and here's why? Because the pattern for our obedience and sanctification is none other than the obedience of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are to obey as he obeyed. And you may say, well, how did he obey? Well, let's look at that.

First, ask yourself, were there any limitations on his obedience? Were there any limitations on the obedience of Christ? Well, not if verses 5 through 11 are true, which they are. Verse eight says, he was obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. You cannot obey further than the point of death. That is the maximum extent of obedience. And Christ, our Lord went there in his obedience. And so just as Christ obeyed to the maximum extent, so are we to obey even if God calls it unto death. Now, I want you to consider further. What was the attitude with which Jesus obeyed the Father? What was the attitude with which he obeyed? Well again, verses 5 through 11 tell us it was an attitude of perfect submission. Go back to verse eight. Jesus humbled himself. What is that? But submission. He humbled himself, it wasn't forced upon him, it was willing, it was free, it was voluntary and it was Christ who humbled himself.

So he was so submissive in his obedience, and that's the pattern for us. In a similar way, we also are too with tranquility and humility, surrender our will submissively that we may pursue the Father's will. And that's not easy in obedience, but it is the model provided by Jesus. And let's ask one more question about his obedience. For whose sake did Jesus die? Well, you could properly say man's sake, he died for man, and you would be correct, but in a greater way, we could also say, he died for God. Indeed, all of his humiliation, all of his exaltation, verses five through 11, were at the end of verse 11 to the glory of God the Father. And so it is to be with us. Our obedience is to be carried out in pursuit of the glory of God. That's why Jesus says in Matthew five, 16, let your light shine before men so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father who is in heaven. And so this precious truth about sanctification is God did

not leave us to figure it out on our own, to find out how does this happen? No, he says, look to Christ. Let Jesus be a model. He is the perfect pattern indeed. And so his obedience is a pattern for our obedience. And Paul tells us that before he ever gets around to issuing a command about sanctification.

Which brings us to our second truth, *sanctification is motivated by love, it is motivated by love*. And again, Paul gives us this insight at the very beginning of verse 12. Look back with me at the text, therefore, and we know what that means now, my beloved. Notice thus far in verse 12, Paul has said nothing about working or doing anything. He's not a drill sergeant barking out command, jabbing his finger, commanding, demanding that they obey without question, he will give a command very shortly, but I want you to notice preceding the command is a reminder of his affection. He calls them my beloved, my beloved, and that is a reminder of his tender care for the Philippians. And Paul's care for the Philippians is merely a foretaste of the much greater love of God for the Philippians and indeed for all Christians. You see, Paul's love for the Philippians, as rich as it was, was a flickering candle compared to the blazing sun of God's love for his children.

Let me show you that. Let me show you that. In Colossians three, 12, Paul says this of the Colossians believers. You are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved. Same word except this time they're beloved by God. And did you know that exact same word is what God, the Father, says about Jesus, the Son? Yes, in Matthew 17 at the Mount of Transfiguration, God the Father booms fourth in heaven and he says this about Christ, "this is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased." Isn't that a glorious thought that the same term of endearment that God uses for Jesus, he through the pen of Paul, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit applies to believers? But that's not it. Jesus takes us swimming even deeper in the ocean of God's love when in John 17:23, his high priestly prayer, he says this about God's love. He says, "I in them and you, father, in me, that they may become perfectly one so that," and listen from here on, "so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me." I want that to just settle in your minds a moment. You love them even as you have loved me, which is to say God loves believers with the very same kind and quality and intensity of love with which he loves the son. Therein lies the sweet motivation for sanctification. It is God's love for us. As believers we do not obey out of terror or fear, even though many religions operate that way.

Indeed, I had a friend once, an Indian fellow, he told me the reason I go to the temple, the reason I offer incense in prayer is because I'm afraid if I do not that my God will be mad at me. So he was confessing all of his religious activity was carried out so that he would appease God's wrath, so that God would not be mad at him. Well, as believers, nothing could be further from the truth for us. We love because he loves us. We don't love because we're trying to win his love, because we're hoping to gain his affection, although many people live that way. In fact, most people, the way they practically operate is they live in such a way that they could accumulate enough good deeds, enough of an impressive religious scorecard that God would look at their record of righteousness and say, you have done it. You've won my love because you're so lovable. Come

into heaven with me. That's how most people live, even if they don't know it. But that's not how believers live, because that is a mere human attempt. May a pathetic attempt to win a holy God's favor through feeble human righteousness, but that's not what motivates our obedience.

What motivates our obedience is the extravagant love for God displayed for us on the cross. And Paul wants you to know that, that's why he hasn't even given a command yet, but he's reminding them of love because before you ever enter into the domain of your responsibility and sanctification, you must be impressed with the fact that God loves you and that is meant to motivate you, to love God through obedience. It's what I John four 19 says, we love because he first loved us. We do not love out of fear or out of a desire to win his approval, and he doesn't love us because we love him. No, no, no. The motive for sanctification, hear this, is God's great love for us.

Now having set that foundation, the apostle Paul gives us a third truth regarding sanctification. Not only is sanctification patterned after Christ, not only is it motivated by love, but **#3) it is required of us, it is required of us.** And how wise of God to tell us that Jesus is the example and that love is the motive before them communicating our responsibility. And in case you're wondering, why would I say it's required of us? Because by the way, such and such teacher told me that I didn't have to do anything and God will do it all for me. Well, Paul makes that clear, his language is unmistakable, verse 12, look at verse 12. He says, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. Work out. That's a command. It's not an option, that is requisite required participation in their sanctification. And notice it's not something they have the option to do only if Paul was with them, because he says, not only is in my presence but much more in my absence. So really no matter what, it is your duty to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, and that's a plural command, and your is plural. So it says, he's saying to the Philippians individually and corporately as a church, work out your salvation. And so that would equally apply to us on an individual level and on a corporate level, as a body, as a church.

So you may say, well, hold on a minute, you keep saying sanctification, that says salvation. Why do you say salvation or sanctification when he says salvation? Is he not talking about works? Is he not talking about laboring to earn your salvation? After all, its work out your salvation. I mean it sounds like Paul is preaching works. This is legalism. This is what I ran from in Catholicism or Hinduism or Buddhism or every other ism. It's all works based. And now Paul sounds just like those other people. Well let's look very closely at what he says. Verse 12. He says, work out. He does not say work for. If he said work for, he would indeed be telling you, earn your salvation. But he doesn't say work for, he says, work out, because Paul in no wise believed that we could earn our salvation. If he did, how are we supposed to make sense of Ephesians two, eight and nine? For by grace you've been saved through faith and this is not your own doing, it is a gift of God, not as a result of works so that no one will boast.

What are we to make of Romans 4:5 in which he writes and “to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.” His what is counted as righteousness? His faith not his works. So Paul cannot be saying, earn your salvation.

He cannot be saying that. What he says is work out your salvation. And that verb, in the original language, means to carry out a goal to its intended completion. Carry it all the way through to the end. Don't stop halfway. Don't stop most of the way. Go all the way through. It was used in mining to talk about how in mining they would seek to extract all of the silver and all of the gold or precious metal from the mine. It was also used in farming to talk about how a farmer would diligently labor to produce the maximum harvest. After all, that's why they farm to produce a crop. And so work out your salvation has nothing to do with earning it, instead it has everything to do with bringing it to its final intended purpose.

You may say, well, what is the intended purpose of my salvation? That's a good question. Paul answers at Romans 8:29. He says that God desires that we be conformed to the image of his son. The apostle John says something different or rather similar, different metaphor. He says in I John 2:6 that we are to walk in the same way as he walked. So what Paul is saying is not earn your salvation. He's saying no, work hard to carry the work that Christ already did to its ultimate completion in your life, which is Christ-likeness, which is being conformed into his image. Don't stop. Don't think you can just pause and hang out. No, no. Keep working until your salvation has so transformed you that you look like Jesus. Now there's there's no way that in your fleshly body you're ever going to, in this life, be perfect. You won't reach perfection. That's not what he's saying, but he's saying you ought to diligently strive to be as much like Christ as humanly possible, bearing in mind that you have a wicked flesh that wants to subvert every good deed you do.

So he says, work out your salvation, become like Christ. And incidentally, that word work out is a present tense, which means the action continues, it's constant, it's continuous, it's habitual, perpetual. So this is a lifelong pursuit. We are on a road to sanctification, to Christ's likeness that doesn't end until our life ends. And then we'll be glorified and we will look just like Jesus. But today we're called moment by moment, day by day to give all of our energy and effort and all of our faculties to become like Jesus Christ. We ought to vigorously pursue this. See, the Bible doesn't know anything of a lazy Christian. There's no let go and let God. Whereas the country song says, Jesus, take the wheel. There's no Jesus take the wheel Christianity, where I take the backseat, he takes the driver's seat and he just does it. And I'm along for the ride. That doesn't exist. But again, some people live that way.

When I was in seminary, guy at the church, I met with him for counseling, and his life was an absolute train wreck. Sin had just ripped his life to shreds. And the interesting thing about it was he was an interesting, and were interested in working to fight his sin. Instead, he more or less told me, I just want God to do it for me. I want God to fix me. I want God to make sin not look tempting, not look attractive. Why won't God just do it in me? And as you could expect, he progressed none in his fight against sin because there was no fight.

So salvation doesn't work that way, there's no crisis moment where in the flash you become just like Jesus. It'd be nice, but it's just not a reality. The truth is salvation rather our sanctification, the bringing our salvation to completion requires vigorous vigilant, diligent, disciplined effort.

We got to work hard at it. That's why Paul says, I Timothy 6:12, fight the good fight of the faith, because sanctification requires fighting. That's why the author of Hebrews says in 12:14, strive for peace with everyone and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. Because sanctification requires striving.

So make no mistake, sanctification does require us, and it requires all of us. It's an all-in, all out, all of me kind of effort. But I better pause here because you might be thinking, oh my goodness, if the standard is Christ, how am I ever supposed to reach that? I am such a weak Christian. I can barely keep from yelling at my kids when I get home from work. If you're a wife, you think I can barely keep from yelling at my husband for getting home late from work without calling me, now dinner's cold, the kids are grumpy. Or you think I can barely keep from looking inappropriately at someone in the gym? How am I supposed to be perfectly holy? I thought this was supposed to be encouraging to me, instead I just feel burdened and weighed down. It's all on me. I have to put in all this effort. Does he have any idea how weak I am? How feeble is my faith? How even the slightest puff of temptation blows me away? This is disheartening, discouraging. I cannot measure up to this. And moreover, I'm supposed to do it as he says in the end of verse 12, with fear and trembling, which means reverence for God, all for God that I so love and respect him, that I don't even want to approach sin for fear of treating his holiness as if it was a small and inconsequential thing. How on earth am I supposed to do this? Yeah, you're right. If that's where Paul stopped you and I would be miserable creatures, because that's just too much. Can't do it.

But look at verse 13. Here is the good news. Here is the fresh wind of hope in verse 13. For it is God who works in you, both to willing to work for his good pleasure. See, here is the beautiful balance. The divine counterpoint to human responsibility comes in verse 13, and we all need to hear this. And this is our fourth and final truth regarding sanctification. ***You need to know sanctification is empowered by God. It is empowered by God.*** And maybe you should underline that in your notes, because this is a vital truth to the Christian life. Yes, it is true that sanctification is required of us. I am commanded to work hard with all of my might to be like Jesus Christ. But remember, I do it because he's the pattern because of God's love for me. But even still, that's an exhausting effort, seemingly impossible. And it would be, whether or not divine resources available to us.

Paul says, it is God who works in you. And incidentally, in the original language, the word God is at the very beginning of the sentence. As if Paul was saying, Philippians, take heart. Don't feel burdened. You're not left alone to live this out. No, no, no. God is active. The God who created the universe, who spoke to stars into existence, who created you out of dust, that very God is at work in you. And does he lack resources? Does he lack power? Of course not. So therefore, you don't lack resources. You don't lack power.

Listen, if it all depended on you, you'd be a hopeless mess. We would all be a hopeless Rex. We'd be hamsters on a wheel running with all of our mites, spinning, spinning, spinning, but moving forward none at all. That would be our Christian life, and that would be terribly

frustrating, tormenting, hopeless, but God did not leave us in that position. That is not the case with us. Bask in the sunshine of this truth, all this supply of power that you need with which to fight sin and pursue obedience is readily available to you, because God works in you.

Go back to verse 13, go back to verse 13. For it is God who works in you. And this is an important point, that verb God who works, that's not the same verb for work that was used about us in verse 12, different verb in the original language, this one in verse 13, which is used of God, it's the word from which our English word energy comes from. It was for this reason that John Calvin said, the grace of God is the engine of our sanctification, because he supplies the energy. And by the way, this is also a present tense verb. So just in the same way as we are always required to be working out or pursuing greater Christ-likeness, yet at the same time, God is always supplying everything you need. He is always energizing your obedience. So there's never a moment, Christian, never a moment where you will be left without the energy you need to obey, because God has seen fit to perfectly perpetually supply the energy and the power that you need. God works in you. And the apostle Paul captures this duality in Galatians 2:20. Listen closely to who's doing what. "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me." Same idea in Colossians 1:29. "For this, I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works in me." Let that sink in for a moment. In both verses, Paul works, but who's also working in both verses, God is working, Paul works, but his working is empowered by God.

Let me see if I can't flesh that out for you with an illustration from my childhood. So when I was a kid, I suffered the pains and anguish of a certain household appliance known to mothers as a vacuum cleaner. The bane of my existence as a boy was a vacuum cleaner. Here's what I would be doing, I would be on the couch in the living room reading a book, minding my own business in quiet repose, growing in knowledge as a noble son would, and who should appear? My delightful mother. And she would see me resting, contrived to disturb my rest and say, Jeremiah, I need you to vacuum the living room. By the way, the stairs are dirty, you should do that too. Well, because you know that I am a cherub, an angel, I always obeyed the first time every time with a smile just like this. No, listen, I never obeyed. I always crumbled, I always complained and I always fought. And it was only the pain of death that I put down my book and I obeyed, because I got a wretched heart, even as a child. And so I would go to the hall closet and I would lug out the vacuum cleaner into the living room and I'd plug it in and then I would get to work in my slave labor. That's what it looks like in Arkansas. Unpaid, mind you. It was an unjust childhood. So there was I dutifully, albeit unwillingly, vacuuming. So let me ask you a question. If I did not plug in the vacuum cleaner, how much cleaning would I actually do? None. Which would've been a clever way to get back at mom, but it wouldn't have worked. Yeah, I got to plug in the vacuum cleaner if I'm going to clean anything, because it needs power to turn the rotors, to move the brushes, to suck up the dirt. I mean I could have conceivably just tried to do it on my own and move it really hard, but I would've picked up no particles of dirt, would've been a wasted effort. That is a picture of sanctification.

You see, we are commanded to work out our salvation, but it would be holy, fruitful and fruitless and foolish to try it in our own strength. If we tried to pursue Christ-likeness by ourselves with our limited resources, we would accomplish nothing just like trying to vacuum with no power. And so that is not the way God designed it, that we should seek on our own, in our own effort, in our own strength, by our own willpower to do it ourselves. No, God designed it that we should rely totally and fully on his strength, his empowering grace. And Paul hints at this in Ephesians 3:16. He says, "according to the riches of his glory, he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his spirit in your inner being." Let me say that once more, "that according to the riches of his glory, he God may grant you Christian to be strengthened with power through his spirit in your inner being." So we see that the secret is the indwelling Holy Spirit who energizes our obedience. Yes, we must respond, we're commended to, but we respond in reliance on the Holy Spirit. And he explains that in the end of verse 13, look at it. He says, it is God who works in you both to willing to work for his good pleasure, which simply means God works the working in you or rather the willing, which is the desire, and he also works in you the working, which is the actual act of obedience.

St. Augustine describes it this way. Our deeds are our own because of the free will producing them, and they're also God's because of his grace causing our free will to produce them. God makes us do what he pleases by making us desire what we might not desire. In other words, when we choose God's will, it's evidence of his work in us. And when we do his will, when we carry it out, it's evidence of his power flowing in us. So it is certainly true, the responsibility is ours, but it is equally true that the ability is his. Responsibility is ours, but the ability is his. And God uses means to accomplish this. The Holy Spirit, yes, energizes it, but he uses means.

Let me give you four means by which God accomplishes this, willing and working for his good pleasure. And incidentally, these are ways that you and I can grow in our sanctification, because we're not left without resources. No, first, here's the means that God uses. ***He uses scripture.*** Paul says in II Timothy 3:16 and 17, "all scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training and righteousness that the man of God may be complete equipped for every good work." Do you want to be equipped for every good work God has prepared for you? You must have the Bible. The Bible is the bread that feeds us, the compass that guides us, the light that leads us. And so would it not stand to reason that as Christians we ought to regularly may daily be in the Bible feeding and feasting upon its truths so that we may be equipped.

Second, God uses prayer. ***He uses prayer.*** Hebrews 4:16, "let us then with confidence drawn near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." Do some of you feel like your sanctification is stifled and stalled? That you're not progressing in the way in which you wish, that you could, that you just haven't become as much like Jesus as you desire? Take heart through prayer you can avail yourself of the abundant resources of God for your sanctification. So how about you and I be regular visitors at the throne of God where we humbly plead and receive all the grace that we need to grow in Christ?

The third means ***God uses is fellowship***, which is to say the body of Christ. Hebrews 10: 24 and 25, and "let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works. Not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day drawing near." It is utterly vital that you and I not only be in church and in Bible studies, but that we be involved in the lives of others. Listen, I need you for my sanctification. I'm not a lone ranger. I'm a really bad one if I try, but you aren't either. You need me for your sanctification. So the way God designed it is that we would help one another grow in Christ. So let us not forsake the body for our own pleasures or pursuits because we will cut ourselves off from this channel of grace.

Lastly, ***God uses providence***, Romans 8:28. "We know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." And how wise of God to use all the troubles and triumphs of life to make us like Jesus. So may I suggest the next time providence seems to frown and dark clouds build on the horizon, let's not grumble when work gets hard, when family members are mean, when relationships get spoiled. Let's not complain. Let's rejoice instead, knowing that God has designed that to make us like Christ. And the reason why he would use all of these means and do all of this is stated at the end of verse 13, for his good pleasure, which means God derives significant joy from seeing you look more like Christ.

I don't know where you were when you walked in this morning as you thought about sanctification, whether you loved it or hated it, adored it or deplored it. I don't know even where you're at in your own sanctification journey, whether you would be an infant or an adult, very mature spiritually speaking. But know this, if you're struggling in your sanctification, I'm right there with you. I understand how hard it is to fight sin. I wish I was further along. I hate to see the ugliness of my own sin. So don't be disheartened that you are not where you want to be. Instead, go back to these four precious truths about sanctification. Remember that the pattern is Christ, the motivation is love. The responsibility is ours, but yet the power is God's. May we be built up and strengthened by these truths, labor hard to become more like Christ. But may we lean hard on the enabling power of God to do so. And in that manner, we will look more and more like Christ to the glory of God and to his good pleasure. Let's pray.

Thank you, father, for a rich mine of truths from which we could grab these nuggets of gold. I ask that you would work in our hearts, our flesh is so weak, the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. May we depend on you. May we take seriously the call to grow in Christ's likeness, but may we do it with full and total dependence upon your enabling grace so that we as a body individually and collectively would reflect the beauty of Jesus Christ to a dark and distorted world, because when we do that, it brings you great pleasure. Do this for your sake and for the sake of Jesus. Amen.