

Grace-driven Sanctification

An Introduction to the Centrality of the Gospel

“And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build *you* up and to give *you* the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32). The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the very “food” of the Church. The Gospel, or as Paul describes it at times, the “word of grace,” is the sphere in which the church operates. It is her life breath and atmosphere. For it is by the Gospel that the Church worships, progresses in her knowledge of God, wars against her soul’s enemies, maintains purity, pursues unity, and fulfills her mission to the world. The Gospel is “our canon within the canon.” It was the Apostle Paul who said, “For I determined, while among you, to be unconscious of everything but Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2).

True believers love the way God has saved them. They love the truth and feed upon it; they “*preach the Gospel to themselves.*” They cherish Christ as revealed in the Gospel. They meditate upon the word of God’s grace, marveling at God’s wisdom in the cross. Therefore, the Gospel is their constant meeting place with God; for it is the revealer of the heart of God toward us (1 Jn 4:9-10). Our boldness to draw near to God in prayer and the confidence we are heard is because the Father has graciously called us to meet Him at the *altar* of the slain Lamb of God (Heb 13:10).

I. Ongoing faith in the Gospel is the source of our *spiritual renewal*.

As Luther said, *the fiends of sin and guilt are always beating up the believer and assaulting his conscience. How the saint needs to see that Christ was given for his sins.* Renewal by means of the Gospel is our constant need. Those who are willing to continually drink deeply from the well of the “word of grace” are **renewed** by fresh views of God—views that produce awe, adoration, wonder, fear, and satisfaction (Rom 12:1-2; Col 3:10). The Gospel which reveals God’s holy character *in the face of Christ* (2 Cor 4:6), the saint is **renewed and transformed** as He continues to behold God in Christ (2 Cor 3:18).

The believer is frequently confronted by the *gap* that exists between what the N.T. requires of him, and his actual obedience. The true believer is always to be about the business of ***closing the gap*** by ongoing repentance. But his efforts to close the gap must be Gospel-driven—grounded upon the fact of our union with Christ (Col 1:27). Evangelical repentance looks to Christ as our *completeness, our entire eligibility for God’s acceptance favor, and right-standing with God and for our qualification to be sons of God in the kingdom of God.*

Our efforts in pursuing holiness MUST flow from *grace motives* that stimulate *evangelical repentance*. Ongoing repentance for the true believer flows from his foundation of union with Christ. Paul guarded against all forms of legalism; he anchored N.T. commands on the foundation of the ***gospel truths*** of grace and

redemption. His arguments for obedience were soundly developed from the believer's *union with Christ* (Eph 1:3-4; 2:10, 13ff.).

Without an understanding of union with Christ, Christians are left with free-floating exhortations that have the hollow echo of “be-good and try harder.” A ministry approach of attempting to improve the Christian life by right attitudes and behavior modification falls woefully short of the grace-based pattern set by the Apostle. If the precepts we teach are disconnected from the word of grace, the struggling believer can be left with the impression that his Christian life is merely a non-stop effort to *measure up*. To keep our sanctification *gospel-driven*, biblical principles must be joined to the reality of our union with the majestic Savior.

The Apostle Paul's controlling burden for his converts was that they would be granted by the Holy Spirit a “spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Christ” (Eph 1:17ff.). This prayer for his converts involved a Spirit-imparted understanding of God's grace in a way reaching their hope and affections. The Christian life is a life of *walking worthy of our calling* (Eph 4:1). The believer who understands, and highly esteems his calling by the Gospel of grace is in the best position to obey his Lord from right motives of gratitude.

Our sanctification progresses as our experiential knowledge of God increases (Grk. *epi-ginosko*) (Lu 1:4; 24:31; Col 1:6; 2 Pet 2:21). *We mature in the knowledge of God* as we keep on considering the Lord's saving work toward us as it is spelled out in the Gospel of God's grace (Eph 1:15-23; Phil 3:8-12).

II. Ongoing faith in the Gospel produces a *passion for God's glory*.

Once the saint begins to understand *in his deepest affections* that God's sovereign mercy is not just how God is taking poor sinners to heaven, but it is the very center of God's plan to glorify Himself. *“If this be so; if you were raised with Christ, if you were translated into heaven, what follows? Why you must realize the change. All your aims must center in heaven where reigns the Christ who has thus exalted you, enthroned you on God's right hand. All your thoughts must abide in heaven, not on the earth. For I say it once again, you have nothing to do with mundane things: you died, died once for all to the world: you are living another life” (Col 3:1-3).*ⁱ

In the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the believing sinner discovers to his utter astonishment that God has planned from all eternity to join His matchless glory to the unending blessedness and welfare of the believing sinner. God's glory is forever joined to His plan to make you glorious in Christ. In response to such infinite grace Calvin says, *now let us fall down before the majesty of our good God, with acknowledgement of our sins, praying Him to make us perceive them more and more. And may He enliven us with the Gospel that we may see our own sins and shamefulness and be ashamed of ourselves, and also behold the righteousness which has been shown us in our Lord Jesus Christ, and lean upon it with the endeavor to be*

*fashioned thereafter, so that daily we may come nearer and nearer to it, until we cleave thoroughly to it.*ⁱⁱ

Without this dynamic animating grace, religion can become a spiritual compartment characterized more by deadening duty than delight. Instead of glorying in an all-pervasive relationship with Christ that dominates exceptionally in his life, his heart is smothered in layers of guilt, doubt, and fear. He is like a prisoner in his grey castle of self. The Gospel of grace is the cure. The grace thinking enjoined by Paul is what is necessary to raise us from a state of spiritual lethargy to a pervasive consciousness of all that God is toward us in Christ. Only by a grace awakening can we be lifted out of carnal self-concern to function from the *Divine View Point* laid out by Paul in **Ephesians 1-3**.

And what a vantage point it is! Meditate for a moment upon God's plan revealed in the Gospel. Consider what it means to be taken from dust to glory: *"What is [God's] goal? What does He aim at? . . . His ultimate objective is to bring [redeemed mankind] to a state in which they please Him entirely and praise Him adequately, a state in which He is all in all to them, and He and they rejoice continually in the knowledge of each other's love – men rejoicing in the saving love of God, set upon them from all eternity, and God rejoicing in the responsive love of men, drawn out of them by grace through the gospel."*ⁱⁱⁱ

This is God's glory and man's glory bound up together in a setting in which the whole created order has been transformed.^{iv} Oh, how the Church needs to feed on the grace of the Gospel! A passion for God's glory in our lives is the blessed result of walking through the gates of Ephesians chapters one through three, and understanding what God is doing in the world—He is glorifying His grace, and He desires that the saints align their entire lives with His plan.

III. Ongoing faith in the Gospel produces a series of sanctifying "Grace Awakenings."

The maturing saint has numerous "grace awakenings" as his Christian life progresses over time. The spiritual cycles of these awakenings bear a strong resemblance to one another. Every time, it is the Gospel order—first there is a withering and stunning view of our weakness, sin, pride, pettiness, unbelief, and frigid love for God. Exposure precedes 'clothing'—as with Adam when he hid.

Then, just when we are ready to write ourselves off as useless to God, as unfruitful and failures as Christians, then the Holy Spirit inspires us to exercise "mustard seed" faith in a passage of Scripture, or a promise from the Word. Even a single line of living Scripture believed anew with struggling faith can be a staging area from which God can give us fresh revelations of His faithfulness and from which He can do new things in our lives (see **Psalms 42 and 43**).

Amidst our self-loathing, the Holy Spirit "shows us the blood" yet again (Jn 16:14). We feed our faith again upon the grace of God in Christ. We fall at

Lord's feet and consent to be loved by Him for Christ's sake alone. Suddenly duty becomes delight—we move all the way into renewed enjoyment of all that God is towards us in Christ. Have you ever felt this cycle?

“Grace-awakenings” have a sanctifying effect upon the Christian life. The inescapable repetitive theme of Scripture from cover to cover is *sin and grace*. We are heralds of a message that is always timely: *Repent, confess, mortify sin—experience renewed cleansing and restoration. Delight in God again, find new wonder and gratitude as you commune with Him; have the joy of your salvation restored. Walk in the light again (Is 57; 66).*

But for so many the private world of their spiritual lives is a place of defeat. What lies behind the guarded shutters of their souls is quiet desperation and fear that if their weakness and failure came to light, they would be devastated. As a result, they shore up the little protective shack that conceals their depravity with strategies to defend against judgment. The flesh works overtime to shield itself from any feelings of condemnation, shame, judgment, and failure.

What is needed is a grace awakening, a fresh sense of amazement at God's grace. This is a function of knowing our ill desert by reason of sin. The greater our apprehension of our need for Christ, the more we will marvel at God's grace. The reverse is also true—without a deep awareness of our ill desert and ruin by sin, we will unintentionally devalue divine grace. When we lose amazement at God's grace, it's generally because we have drifted into a lifestyle of managing our own fallenness and failures with something other than the grace of God in Christ. Preaching the Gospel of God's grace to ourselves each day is the solution!

IV. Ongoing faith in the Gospel shows us that sanctification is driven by *relationship* more than *rules*.

Historically, the Church has always found it a battle to keep the doctrines of justification and sanctification joined and operating in their logical relation—especially as the two doctrines are set forth in the Pauline epistles. Of all the groups in church history, the Puritans seemed to have best understood the essential and practical relationship between justification and sanctification, many of the Reformers did as well, but they did not write on it as prolifically as the Puritans.

As servants of Christ, our doctrine of man ought to reflect an extremely keen insight into the hearts of our hearers. We should always keep in mind how enormous our capacity is to forget the Gospel. Natural carnal sense has no trouble understanding ethical responsibility, duty, performance, reward, merit, and law, BUT, it requires the ongoing work of God's Spirit to understand and live by the grace of the Gospel. The flesh loves the illusion of control more than grace.

The flesh of man prefers a formal, manageable approach to religion. True religion always tends to degrade in the direction of *heartless orthodoxy* which is characterized by formalism (Is 29:13). Only fresh acts of faith take us off ourselves

and dislodge self from being at the center. Christ bears witness to this propensity in His hearers; a tendency to work rather than believe (**Jn 6:27-29**). Due to this bent in all of us, the challenge is to keep the union of justification and sanctification.

God has made us His possession that we might know and enjoy Him and in so doing glorify Him—all flows from Christ, our “Source Person.” We are saved to *commune with the Trinity* and in that transformation, realize our identity in Christ. Grace is a love relationship with our Heavenly Father through Christ our Lord in the power of the Spirit. Sanctification is the outworking of this love relationship. When the believer *maintains* his relationship with the Lord, he is living a “separated unto God,” or “sanctified” life. Thus, *sanctification involves caring for our relationship with God*. God’s grace is relational throughout.^v

V. Our relationship with God is manifested in our relationships with others (Jn 15:9-12).

As John Piper says, “*It is my greatest joy to experience the in-filling grace of God overflowing from me for the good of others.*” The habitual consciousness of who God is toward us in Christ in all His mercy and love is a major part of our equipping to love the brethren (**Col 3:12-13; 1 Thess 3:11-13; 4:1, 9-12; 1 Pet 1:22-23**). Through the word of grace, and union with Christ we are made “fit” to wear the *garments of grace* in order that we might serve the Body. The “garments of grace” are described especially in **Ephesians 4-5** and in **Colossians 3-4**.

The language used by the Apostle in these chapters is “put on”—put on like a garment the character qualities of Christ. *Put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience (Col 3:12b).* Our practical sanctification is lived out as we wear the *garments of grace* in our relationships with believers. In this way, others see that we have become partakers of Christ and of grace. The Gospel of grace provides the rationale for us to love sacrificially; to be spent on behalf of the brethren; to live for the edification of others (**1 Jn 4:17-19**).

The word of grace gives us the reasons why we are to identify ourselves completely with Christ’s purposes. The believer is a member of Christ’s Body. As such each member is to contribute his part to the maturation of the Body of Christ as a whole (**Eph 4:15-16**). Each member is to commit him or herself to the Great Commission, which is not only directed at evangelism, but equally at discipleship. *And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man that we present every man complete in Christ (Col 1:28).*

Such radical identification with Christ and His purposes requires that our affections be captive to the grace of God in the Gospel. Only then does the believer gladly make the purposes of Christ his life’s direction. The Gospel of God’s grace keeps liberating us from the pressure to measure up to be loved and accepted by God. Preaching Christ in the Gospel of grace is the key to an “identity-based” ministry that makes *who we are in Christ* the cause of *what we do for Christ*.

As Christian servants we should personally master an understanding of the relationship between justification and sanctification. Folks who have been church members for decades have difficulty explaining the relationship between these two doctrines of justification and sanctification; most cannot do it—especially being able to explain how life in Christ issues forth in sanctification and service. Consider keeping at least one book on your nightstand that deals with this topic of justification and sanctification and union with Christ. When we preach the Gospel to ourselves daily, it keeps reminding us of the holy character and loving heart of God toward us in Christ, and of who we are in Christ. The beauty of reckoning our union with Christ is a growing recognition of His Person.

VI. Ongoing faith in the Gospel allows us to *reckon* Christ's righteousness imputed to our account.

Our carnal bent is to dress in *fig leaves*. The Apostle Paul reminds us in **Galatians 3:27** that, “You have *clothed* yourselves with Christ.” When believers lose their wonder at God's grace, it's often because they have been seeking to *clothe* their souls with something other than Christ. I think of the behavior of the self-deceived Laodiceans of **Revelation 3:14-22**. Their behavior typifies the universal tendency of seeking counterfeit *clothing of the soul*. They boasted that they were *rich, wealthy, in need of nothing*. What a shock it must have been when Christ the Lord, with eyes like a flame of fire (**1:14**), peered into their hearts and declared them to be *wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked* (**3:17**).

There is a certain specter of ominous horror that rises at the prospect that the bulk of the professing Church today may see itself far differently than Christ the Lord does. The mindset of the Laodiceans was the opposite of utter dependency upon Christ. Their boast was in things which they imagined would *clothe their souls*. As a result, not a small part of their blindness involved ignorance of their desperate need of divine grace. The mirror of God's Word alone can keep us from self-deception in this matter.

How does God deal with our sinful tendency to seek “clothing” for our souls in things other than Christ our completeness (Col 2:10)? The answer is we must exalt Christ in His offices of Prophet, Priest, and King. God's Son displayed to the saints causes them to understand that in His offices, Christ lives to represent us and bring us to God. The Father convinces us that apart from Christ we are like the Laodiceans, *wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked*.

The safest place for the believer is to be constantly undergoing a “grace awakening.” Welcome views of personal sin, of your depravity, dereliction and utter dependency—let them drive you to Christ. Invite the Sunrise from on high to shine upon your life (**Eph 5:14**). Ask Him to show you where you are building with wood, hay, and stubble. When you keep *consenting to be clothed by Christ* alone; you will find the exit to the “grey castle of self.”

VII. Ongoing faith in the Gospel lets God's verdict about us become the "loudest voice in our conscience."

The man who walks in the light of the cross learns to take in the glorious word of justification as the "loudest verdict" in his conscience. How liberating this is! We're all too often in a 'grace-less' mindset. When in that posture we tend to be overly critical, sensitive, self-protective, and walking on eggshells because the *verdict of conscience* is suspended upon the opinions of men instead of the verdict of Almighty God (**Rom 8:32-34**). So many professing believers are virtually undefended against the accusations of the evil one who works to keep the consciences of the saints in a heavy, joyless, and defensive state (**Rev 12:10-12**).

The theme of sin and grace concentrated in the Gospel is about God actively confronting our sin that we might be brought close to Him, the source of all life, light, love, and blessedness. The cross brings us down that we might be raised up to live in overflowing gratitude for the "exotic love" inherent in our sonship (**1 Jn 3:1**). John Owen states in his work, *Communion with God*, our depravity is a huge point of interface with God. As we take our sin to the Lord and take Christ for our righteousness again and again, we are having *communion with the Lord*. God is honored—He takes delight in our frequent appropriations of Christ for our entire righteousness. God's verdict reckoned is communion with God realized. How much this differs from the carnal conclusions of our fleshly minds. When we make efforts to *clothe the nakedness of our souls*, we always do so at the cost of leaving word of the cross at the entrance gate of our salvation. But the cross must be a daily reality for all the needed "bookkeeping" of our consciences with its outstanding accounts and consciousness of guilt.

VIII. Ongoing faith in the Gospel provides the proper motivation to maintain our relationship with the Lord.

We must get it into our heads and hearts that God desires to meet with us at the cross when we deal with sin His way. It's true for the newly converted as well as the more mature brethren. When we begin to understand and practice this care for our relationship with the Lord, we will be better equipped to preach the Gospel theme of sin and grace to a needy people (**Heb 10:22-25**).

The cross brings the sinner low; it dashes to the ground all human strategies for managing personal depravity. The man brought low abandons all false refuges and hiding places from judgment; he comes clean and owns his guilt. He judges himself worthy of divine judgment; he flees to the atonement. Only then, through this Spirit enabled conviction and repentance does the "altar" of the cross become the sinner's treasured everlasting *meeting place* with God (**Heb 13:10ff.**).

IX. Yielding to God's Spirit involves ongoing mortification of sin (Rom 8:12-13; Col 3:5ff.).

At these junctures of putting to death sin, we *put on the Lord Jesus Christ* (Rom 13:14). Our striving against sin is not merely moral exertion at work. The cross-centered saint *puts on Christ* by reckoning Him as our entire *sphere of grace, our righteousness, our covenant*. The saint abides in this sphere, reckoning all that is his by union with Christ. This is the Christian's staging area for his battle against sin.

Putting on the Lord Jesus Christ by reckoning ourselves in His sphere results in fellowship with Him. We gladly submit to His Meditorial Kingship—we say “yes” to the Spirit at those junctures where sin is to be mortified. The result is: the Spirit's filling and control, joy in the Lord, and intimate fellowship with God.

We must learn to exhibit Christ not only in His sinless life, but in the perfections of His Saviorhood—for He is perfectly suited to the sinner's need (Heb 7:26-28); His Saviorhood matches our sinful ruin. Living by the Gospel of God's grace produces *the dynamics of grace* in the life of the Christian. For the Gospel is our very food and nourishment, the Gospel is our weapon by which we overcome the world. The Gospel is the bond that holds the saints together in the mystical Body of Christ. The Gospel is our divine window to knowing God. The Gospel lets God be God and we the needy creature. The Gospel produces devotion to Christ and every instinct of worship in the new creature.

Therefore, we are to be ever about the business of setting forth the Gospel of sin and grace and of displaying the Son of God. Apart from this blessed priority, the individual will attempt to clothe his own soul (who is doing the covering of your sin? God or you? Proverbs 28:13). “He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes *them* will find compassion.”

God's answer has been clearly given—let us set our course to emulate the Apostle Paul who said, “For I determined, while among you, to be unconscious of everything but Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). We believe that God's justifying and pardoning grace should not be separated from His sanctifying power. And that is our purpose to open up how the two are joined and operate together.

End Notes:

ⁱ J. B. Lightfoot's Commentary, p. 208

ⁱⁱ Calvin's Sermons on Ephesians, pp. 445, 446

ⁱⁱⁱ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 81

^{iv} Ibid, pp. 81-82

^v David Peterson, *Possessed by God*