



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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JUSTIFICATION AND SANCTIFICATION

The Christian faces many dangers as he pursues the spiritual life. On the one hand, he may begin to regard all his efforts at living a Christian life as earning his salvation. This is a natural temptation for anyone who takes prayer and morality seriously. On the other hand, the Christian may so emphasize the primacy of God's grace in the spiritual life that there does not seem to be room for the Christian to do anything. Then he abandons a structured life of prayer, thinking that God will act in his life with or without it. He thinks that since God predestines him to salvation, then he should not even try to do good works, since that would be a denial of God's free grace of salvation.

These errors are as old as Christianity. They stem from the way God has chosen to redeem us: by His power but with our cooperation. It is a means which uses our human freedom (which He gave us when He created us) and perfects it. The process of our redemption does not circumvent our freedom, as if God were saving us in spite of ourselves. We must somehow hold together the primacy of grace and the effort and activity which is the result of our consent to God's grace.

In understanding how all this works -- and the understanding of it is the basis of our right actions in the Christian life -- there are two theological (and Scriptural) concepts which keep us firmly grounded in the foundations of Christian life: justification and sanctification. These are concepts so central to Christian life that all Christians ought to be familiar with them. If they are rightly understood and practiced, the Christian actively pursuing the life of prayer and moral action will be preserved from the temptations of self-salvation on the one hand, and sloth on the other. As so often, theology is essential to the practice of Christian life.

Justification is what God does to make us righteous. It is His act which effects our salvation. We are, before justification, sinners. We are deserving of the sentence of death before the court of Divine justice. We have disobeyed, and so separated ourselves from God. We have preferred to direct our own lives rather than living in obedience to God. As sinners, we have separated ourselves from the righteous God. Nothing that is not righteous as He is can abide His presence, and so we live in self-imposed exile from Him.

There is nothing that we can do which will undo our sin. By ourselves, we cannot make it right again. Since we already owe God all that we have and are, by reason of being dependent creatures of His, we cannot possibly pay off the additional debt we have incurred by reason of our sin. It is like the slave trying to earn his freedom, but having all his earnings belong by right to his master. He can never earn anything of his own with which to buy himself back, to redeem himself.

So we are in need of redemption from sin, which we can in no way provide for ourselves. This is where the Cross comes in. Jesus alone of all mankind did not deserve death, since He alone was without sin. He alone could die voluntarily, offering Himself in our place. It is by Jesus' death that we are restored to righteousness before God. Jesus shares the merits of the Cross with us. His righteousness (the righteousness which is willing to die for us) is imputed to us. God offers us the righteousness of Christ and counts it as our own.

By imputing that righteousness to us, God makes us just. Our sin is atoned and done away. We no longer stand condemned before God, since Jesus has paid off our sin. This is justification: God's act whereby we are made righteous. It is wholly His act. And it is accomplished through the atonement of Jesus upon the Cross. Thus in justification, our salvation is in a real sense accomplished. God has saved us from our sin, giving us a share in Jesus' righteousness.

Justification is not the end of Christian life but the beginning. Justification gives us the possibility of being centered on God rather than on self. We are given the possibility of living as He intended us to when He created us, rather than the necessity of living as sinners. Indeed, the intent of His justification is that we live a new and righteous life, not that we go back to the old and familiar ways of sin. Justification is intended to bring about a conversion of life, for it is justification that makes us Christians. It gives us the possibility of new life as Christians. The Christian life must be lived out day by day. This is sanctification.

Sanctification is the growth of holiness within the Christian. It includes all that goes with Christian life: the cultivation of the

virtues and the avoidance of sin, the disciplined life of prayer, regular assistance at public worship, fasting and almsgiving and works of mercy. In short, all the works of Christian life are part of sanctification.

In sanctification, God acts in our lives to make us holy (thus the term sanctification -- "to make holy"). His grace enables us to carry out all those works of Christian life: He gives us the grace "both to will and to do of His good pleasure." It is grace which trains our wills in the ways of holiness. Grace remains a necessary part of Christian life in sanctification. Apart from grace we can do nothing -- as we learn every time we try to maintain our Christian lives on our own. But in sanctification, God's grace supports our own wills, and we cooperate with it.

In the life of sanctification, we are remade more and more perfectly in Christ's image. We become more Christ-like, while we also become more ourselves, the people that God has created us to be. It is a process of growth into the fulness of the stature of Christ. It is the process of being made saints. Sanctification is thus the lifetime of making perfect (by cooperation with God's grace) in ourselves that which God began in justification.

All of our efforts at Christian life are part of our sanctification. In sanctification we cooperate with grace. Our efforts, poor though they are, are made worthy by God's grace. These would be meaningless without the original gift of justification. That was God's act alone: Christ dying for us while we were yet sinners. It is the Cross that enables us to be Christians, and to approach God at all. Justification is the foundation of all Christian life; God's act is the cornerstone of all that we do.

But this does not mean that we should do nothing, or that our efforts at prayer and Christian life are meaningless or trivial. For even though we are made just before God when He imputes to us the merits of the Cross, we have still to be made holy as He is holy. Since this involves the perfection of our weak and impure wills, it involves our cooperation. Our efforts are thus absolutely essential. But these efforts do not make us righteous before God; they cooperate with His grace to make us holy.

Practically, a firm grasp upon the truths of justification and sanctification will keep us from trying to earn our salvation through works. It will keep us firmly grounded in the merits of Christ's Cross freely given to us, giving us the privilege of knowing God and receiving His love. It will also keep us working away at Christian life, knowing that our efforts are essential and irreplaceable. We will be awed by the wonder of being allowed a part in the work of re-

demption, a part no one else can play. We will rejoice that God has counted us worthy to share His work of redemption.

We will know that while we are not saved by our works, they are essential at making us holy. Since that which is not holy cannot abide the presence of God, then we will desire more than anything else to be made holy so that we can be with God.

When we are tempted to feel some pride in our spiritual disciplines, to feel that God owes us something because we are so faithful in our prayers, then we should remind ourselves about justification. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. His Cross brings us the redemption we can never earn or accomplish on our own. By the same token, no failure of ours can undo what He has done on the Cross: we are never beyond hope. No doubt, we will fall prey to our pride in our spiritual works from time to time. Then as always, we must apply ourselves anew to the primacy of the Cross in our justification, whereby we are given the possibility of approaching God.

On the other hand, when we are tempted to sloth, either through laziness (thinking that there is still lots of time to be holy) or because we (erroneously) think that God's action is all that matters in our spiritual lives, then we must apply the truth about sanctification. All the spiritual exercises, which seem difficult and sometimes tedious, are necessary. They are necessary because we want to be with God in heaven. To be with Him we must be holy. To be holy, we must cooperate with grace, so that our wills can be holy as well as the rest of us. Our works take nothing away from the Cross. Rather they are one means God has given us to share the Cross, so that we may be Christians in deed and not just in name.

