

Practical Sanctification**1 Thessalonians 4:1—8**

We've been discussing things related to our Christian walk the past few weeks. Paul brings it up throughout 1 Thessalonians because spiritual growth is so very important for a Christian. This growth is only possible by understanding what the Lord expects from members of the Body of Christ, found only in the 13 books written by the Apostle Paul. The things that are done by the outer man are often an indication of whether or not we are walking in the Spirit but not necessarily so. It's possible for me to teach this class in the power of my flesh while you think I'm doing it in the power of the Spirit. In other words, the outward expression does not necessarily indicate the power behind the action. A Christian can change an outward action, like stop swearing, without doing it in God's power. However, a believer can only please God when he or she allows God full control to change that person from the inside out.

Sanctification

Sanctification and holiness are nothing more than setting apart. When I am sanctified I am set apart from the world and set apart for God's service. Positionally I have been set apart by the power of God thus making me sanctified. Sin does not affect this form of sanctification therefore it is only by my position I have in Christ that I am sanctified and will forever be sanctified.

However, by experience I need to become sanctified. My flesh (old nature) desires to please itself instead of God and therefore instead of being separated for God's service, I have separated myself for my own pleasure. I need to continually reckon the old nature to be dead and remove all traces of it, I need to renew my mind, transforming it from the natural mind and I need to put on and do the things that will please the Lord. The trick is, I am not able or even desirous to do this because self (the old nature) wants to only please itself. If I am to do things that please the Lord then I need to allow the Lord to work in me, to change my vile, sin-filled mind (renew and transform it) so I will please Him.

Many Christians try to change the outward man to show they are walking in the power of the Spirit. They will make promises to God to change. They may make a list of things they need to change and prioritized each item checking them off as they feel they have gained victory over each sin. If they stumble on a previously conquered sin they start over in frustration because of their failure and eventually give up their quest to be holy because it seems so impossible. Taking Ephesians 4:22—24 as their guide, beginning with the putting off of the old nature, many have attempted to live godly lives but have failed so many times it seems like an impossible task even while asking God to help them.

Three steps or one step?

There are many portions of Scripture that appear to be giving a step-by-step approach to daily living. Romans 12:1—2 says we need to present, don't conform and transform. Ephesians 6:10—17 instruct us to put on the breastplate, shoes, shield etc. Ephesians 4:22—24 tells us to put off the old nature, renew the mind and put on the new nature. In reality, what Paul seems to break down in steps should actually be understood to be one directive.

By dissecting Ephesians 4:22—24 we should be able to see how it is impossible to do each portion separately. The first thing Paul mentions is for us to take off the old nature, or quit doing the things that please self. The only way for a believer to be able to accomplish that is to be walking in the power of the Holy Spirit. If the believer is truly walking in His power then he would have not only taken off the old but have clothed himself in the new nature given to each believer by God. Not only that but the believer's mind would be in a state of being renewed. The believer who is being renewed in mind would naturally have taken off the old nature and have replaced it with the new. As long as the believer is allowing God to take complete control of his life, that believer is completely within God's will.

Renewing

At birth we are given a mind that only understands worldly things. Our mind is incapable of understanding godly things. It is capable of only pleasing self. With salvation comes the indwelling Holy Spirit and a new nature. The natural mind needs to be renewed (transformed, reprogrammed) in order for it to operate in spiritual things. We are capable of operating in the power of the sinful nature if we so choose; likewise we can allow God free will in our lives to operate our mind to please Him. It is impossible for us to operate both the old and new natures at the same time (Galatians 5:16—17). God is either in control or He isn't. If God is not in control then you (self) are the one directing the operation.

Even if we have given God complete control, there is still a maturing process that takes place. The mature believer is better equipped to handle trials and temptations and therefore is better able to continue to walk in the power of the Holy Spirit. The immature believer is much more prone to stumble because he/she does not understand the process. Our goal is to become completely sanctified on a practical (or experiential) level but unfortunately even the most mature believer will struggle with doing the right thing all the time. I praise the Lord that He gave us insight into Paul's struggle with his old nature in Romans 7.

We walk where we are looking. If we are looking at the pleasures of this world then our walk will be one to please self. If we walk to only please God it will be because we are looking to Him. The only place we can find out about God and learn about Jesus Christ is in Scripture. Study of Scripture helps us keep our eyes on Him and therefore our walk will naturally follow. By feeding our new nature, the old nature starves. The more we starve the old nature, the weaker it becomes and it will be easier for us to turn away from the things of the world. When we are tempted, Jesus Christ has already given us the tools needed to be able to stand firm in Him without falling back to the urges of our old nature. 1 Corinthians 10:13 promises that there is no temptation that will be too great for us to overcome with God's help.

Most people trying to live a godly life will concentrate on overcoming sinful traits. They are continually reviewing their sins and failures. Even those who know they can only change by the power of God will soon feel defeated in their inability to overcome these pervasive habits. Paul describes this conflict between the old and new natures in Romans 7:17—20. The solution is Jesus Christ according to verse 25. Notice Paul did not say he needs to try harder to live a good and righteous life but that his answer was Jesus Christ. In other words, he focused on living his life by the power of the Spirit (Galatians 5:16, 25). He didn't try harder to fix the negative but allowed God to work in him. By filling his mind with the knowledge of His will he was able to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord (Colossians 1:9).

The admonition to take off the old nature and put on the new in Ephesians 4:22—24 is in the aorist tense. It should be a one-time event. Renewing the mind is said in the present tense with the implication it should be done continually, without stopping. As long as we live a life of continual renewal we will be wearing the new nature, we will have put on the whole armor of God (Ephesians 6) and we will be walking in the power of the Spirit (Galatians 5). At the same time we will not be wearing the old nature (and therefore doing the things the old nature desires), not be walking in our own power. So, the key to overcoming bad, sinful habits is not to focus on the habit itself, but upon Christ. Trying to live a godly life by eradicating bad behaviors is like taking an aspirin to get rid of a fever. The fever may have left temporarily but unless the underlying problem is taken care of the fever will return. In a similar fashion we need to take care of the underlying problem in our spiritual life by allowing Jesus Christ full control over our being. The fleshly desires will fade as we learn to live by the Spirit. We are not to dwell on our failures but strive to reach full sanctification (practical sanctification) by giving God full reign in our lives (Philippians 3:12—14). Our mind will be renewed and therefore transformed when we fill our mind with the things of the Lord (Romans 12:1—2; Philippians 4:8—9; Colossians 3:2).

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