

“HE’S STILL WORKING ON ME”  
Ezekiel 36:24-31, Colossians 3:1-6, I John 2:28-3:3  
January 20 & 21, 2024

Last year, just before Advent began, I had introduced to you the topic of God’s grace. I was working our way through John Wesley’s understanding of the work that God does on our behalf in order to bring us back into His presence. From the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, humanity has been sinful, rebellious to God’s laws, and committed to following our own way rather than submitting to God’s way, truth and life. Yet, out of His marvelous grace, God did not give up on His creation, but has pursued us desperately so that we might not be cast away from Him, full of sin and meriting eternal death. God has sought us so that we might find the Light of His Son, Jesus, and through Him as our Savior, find forgiveness of our sins and cleansing of our souls, ready and fit for heaven.

We saw how God goes before us in Prevenient Grace to call us back to Himself. The Holy Spirit works hard to open our eyes to our sinfulness, and lead us to a change of heart and life. Then we saw God’s Convincing Grace, helping our hearts to burn for His truth and His way in our life, convicting us of all our sins and leading us to repentance. Then, we saw God’s Justifying Grace in the act of Jesus’ death on the cross paying the penalty of our sins, thereby freeing us from the consequences of our sins that leads to our own eternal death.

Today I want to introduce to you God’s Sanctifying Grace, purifying our hearts and minds and lives from the sin that so easily captures us. God desires to regenerate us out of the ashes of our sinfulness into become devoted and diligent followers of Jesus Christ, who delight in His ways and seek to do all we can to live according to His commands.

Sanctification is the process to make us pure and holy once more. It is the process of elevating us up out of the muck and evil of this world so that we might live in the beauty and righteousness of the Lord our God. It is the process of converting us from sinners into saints, from dejected and despondent reprobates into faithful and loving servants of Jesus Christ.

But sanctification is not an all-in-one step, but rather a long and arduous process; for our lives have become so full of the mindset and practices and lifestyle of this wicked and evil world that it takes

a great deal of time to get it all out of us. Sanctification is a gradual process that steadily moves us from being a wrongdoer against God and His ways to becoming a blameless individual who delights in all of God's ways.

A. W. Tozer writes this prayer in his book, *The Pursuit of God*. "Father, I want to know Thee, but my coward heart fears to give up its toys. I cannot part with them without inward bleeding, and I do not try to hide from Thee the terror of the parting. I come trembling, but I do come. Please root from my heart all those things which I have cherished so long and which have become a very part of my living self, so that Thou mayest enter and dwell there without a rival. Then shalt Thou make the place of Thy feet glorious. Then shall my heart have no need of the sun to shine in it, for Thyself wilt be the light of it, and there shall be no night there. In Jesus' Name, Amen."<sup>1</sup>

Sanctification guides us closer and closer to the Lord our God as we daily devote our lives on following the teachings of Jesus Christ, and following the guidance of the Holy Spirit. God's sanctifying grace steadily exposes all of the sinfulness in our lives and invites us to give up on the worldly things that have become so dear to us. I've invited a young man of our church to help us understand this process by giving his testimony to us. Noah...

*Hello, my name is Noah Ross and I've been regularly attending this church with my wife Leah every other week since this past summer. This is my testimony.*

*I grew up in a Bible believing church here in Sheboygan. I knew all the stories of Jesus, knew some Bible verses, and was involved in all of the church activities my parents could put me in. I believed God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit were real, but I only saw God as an authoritative figure who wanted to withhold the fun of life from me. I wanted to know the why's behind all of the rules I didn't understand in the Bible. And at the time, explaining the whys were not an important part of church culture. You obeyed God because He demands we obey Him, and because His Word tells us too. God was good, His ways were right, and it was His way or the highway to hell. I did not see God's restrictions as His love*

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<sup>1</sup> (Charles Swindoll, *Swindoll's Ultimate Book of Illustrations*, [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998] pg. 550)

*for me. My parents continued to bring me to church and instill in me the truth about God, and I always believed it was true, but it just wasn't for me. "Maybe somewhere down the road I'll understand it better," I thought.*

*By the time I was a senior in high school I was 250 pounds. I was involved in sports, music, and had a lot of opportunities to socialize, but I felt alone. I didn't have any close friends. All I wanted to be was the guy that people thought was cool and the guy that girls thought was attractive. During my younger years I had found pornography. I did whatever I could to get my hands on it, and it greatly influenced my mind throughout high school.*

*After high school I became so sick of feeling like the loser that nobody wanted to be around that I became extremely motivated to completely change my image and perception. I desired to completely reinvent myself. So, I became addicted to exercise, and I lost 65 pounds in a year and a half. Coming into Lakeland University in 2010, I was 190 pounds of lean muscle, ready to play football. My pure motivation was that maybe people would like me more, and women would find me more attractive.*

*Well, to my surprise, I was right. It felt like overnight, women were now drawn to me in a way I never experienced. My attitude was now confident, and nobody could slow me down. I felt on top of the world. I engulfed myself in the world of sex, hoping that each encounter would validate that I was attractive to women - that maybe it would make me feel better about myself. It never did, so I continued because I didn't know where else to go, what else to do, and it became a world of excitement for me. My college life revolved around school, football, drinking and sex. I thought, these 4 years are supposed to be the best years of my life, I'm going to live it up like everyone else and then when I graduate, my life will naturally calm down once I'm thrust into the real world. Well, that was not the case.*

*I graduated college and although I was seeing success in my career endeavors, my addictions remained. Pornography and sex had a grip on me so tight, I couldn't see a way out. There was no way I could resist this lifestyle on my own, and frankly I didn't want to. I loved pleasing myself in any way I wanted to. My life was all about me, fulfilling my desires and getting what I wanted. I was blinded to my*

*great sin. I knew what I was doing was wrong in God's eyes, but His opinion was only one that stood in my way, and I didn't care about His restrictions.*

*Thankfully, this all came to an end. The people in my life that were praying for me to come to know the Lord got their prayers answered. In February of 2016, I was let go from a job in a very unjust way that sent me to my rock bottom.*

*I gave everything to this job and felt I was succeeding. It didn't make any sense to me, and I was greatly embarrassed. So, I did what I always did when I felt down, I coped with sex as my drug of choice. At 25 years old I ended up committing a crime. Knowing I broke the law, hoping nobody would find out, I went on a trip with my ex-girlfriend to the Mall of America. On the way there, I received a private phone call, I answered and was told that I was under investigation and that they wanted me to come in for questioning. I played it off like I had no idea what they were talking about. Sure, I'll come in for questioning I said. I got off the phone and I met God. The Lord pulled back the veil from my eyes and I could finally see my sin for what it really was. I could finally see how messed up my life was and how badly I needed Jesus to save me and to set me on a new path. I surrendered my life to Christ, for real, for the first time in the passenger seat of that car.*

*And my life hasn't been the same since. I began the journey of getting to know who Jesus really was through His Word, beginning to know how He really felt about me and what He really did for me on that cross. I began the process of learning how to walk the righteous path and how to turn away from the sinful lifestyle I was living. It was not an overnight improvement, this took time and it took godly people in my life to show me the way, to show me the narrow path.*

*I joined Crossroads Church here in Sheboygan soon after I surrendered my life to Christ, and I immediately became involved with serving and being in a life-group. Over time I grew in my walk with the Lord through studying His word with other believers and gaining more God-honoring friendships that influenced me to stay on the narrow path. Being in that church led me to meet the man that discipled me to this day. That man helped me see that God could use me and wanted to use me, to help others see*

*the goodness of Jesus Christ in their life, and how God could use them too.*

*Last year I became involved in Ephesians 5 ministries, whose mission is to help men break free from the bondage of sexual sin, while utilizing the hope found in Jesus Christ. This ministry not only changed my life from when I was a student in it, but it's continuing to change my life while being privileged to be a leader in it. I get to help men break free from what once held me captive. I get to help men see that there is hope for them found in Jesus Christ and that He is worthy of us surrendering our lives too, because He gave everything for us.*

*When Jesus sees me now, He no longer sees a man in bondage to sin; He sees me as righteous, clean, and without stain or blemish. He sees me as holy, because I am justified through Christ. Because of the blood of Jesus that covers my sin, God sees me through Jesus's payment for my sins, and calls me His child. 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."*

*The Lord hasn't stopped there with me. Every day that I show up to study His Word, He is doing a work in my heart. See, it wasn't just my outward sinful actions that were the problem. It was what was in my heart - in my sinful flesh. I was a selfish, prideful, glutinous, disrespectful, angry, insecure man. As I remain in Him each day, He is continuing to rid me of the sinful heart I have and change me more and more into His likeness each day. You see, Jesus doesn't just want us to do good things, He wants to transform our hearts so that we will bear fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22). We are unable to produce these fruits in our hearts in our own power. These are qualities that are of the Lord alone, and He wants to help us to bear them as well. But it is a process. This process is called sanctification.*

*1 Thessalonians 4:3 says, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification." All He asks us to do, is to remain in Him, and He will produce the change. John 15:5 says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in Me, and I in you, you will bear much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing." Thank you for listening to my story and God Bless you. Thanks Noah!*

This is exactly what the prophet Ezekiel told to the people of Israel as he gave them God's word to them: *"For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit in you and move you to follow My decrees and be careful to keep My laws...Then...you will be My people, and I will be your God"* (Ezek. 36:24-27, 28).

God loves us so much that He does not want us to be destroyed as enemies of Him, but rather to return to Him and find His blessings as His children. God desires the very best for us, but His best only comes to us as we submit ourselves to His Word that calls us to devote ourselves to following His ways each and every day. God's best for us starts with our compliance with the teachings of His Son, Jesus. God's best demands that we receive Jesus as our Savior and let Him become the Lord of our lives. Without Jesus, we can do nothing that pleases God. God's best comes to us as we humble ourselves before God and follow Jesus.

God's sanctifying grace calls us to turn from the things of this world and realize that He has much more for us than what the world can give to us. Sure, we're living in this world, and we're surrounded by the things of this world, but God invites us to put our focus on Him rather than on the things of this world. By focusing on the Lord Jesus, we are able to get rid of the things that get in the way of our relationship with God. And He gives us the power to change our lives so that we can be useful for Him as the Holy Spirit guides us and directs us closer to the Father.

So the Apostle Paul challenges us to *"set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory"* (Col. 3:1-4). It's only by focusing on Jesus Christ can we have change takes place in our lives. Only by participating in God's sanctifying grace, which draws us closer to Him, can we hope

to be transformed from sinful beings into redeemed souls.

So Paul gives us some specifics that we are to be aware of and work hard at changing. He says, *“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming”* (Col. 3:5-6).

You see, we cannot live by the world’s ways and expect God’s to give us His blessings in our lives. By following all of the sinful behaviors accredited by the world, we fall away from God, because the ways of the world are sinful. If all of us were to pursue only our earthly desires, there would be no safety, no peace, no hope, no contentment, and no end to the wickedness and evil that would be done. So God delights to encourage you to keep growing closer to Him. Only in Him can we find hope and life and love and peace and justice and security and righteousness. And only in God’s sanctifying grace, growing closer to Him each day, can we hope to find those things in our lives.

In the Epistle Letter of I John 2 and 3, we find the apostle inviting us to grow so close to the Lord our God that we can stand *“unashamed before Him at His coming.”* Listen to his encouragement for us. This is I John 2:28-3:3. (READ I John 2:28-3:3)

When Jesus comes back to the earth He desires to find us conforming to His image. In fact, His desire is that we so resemble Him that we will all have the same family features in us. Oh, we may look differently physically, but spiritually we will be so similar that there will be no guessing who are brothers and sisters of His. That only happens as we accept God’s sanctifying grace in our lives and determine in our hearts to follow His will and His ways. And as we do that, we become more and more like Jesus. And it is then that we will be called “children of God (I John 3:1), as we work to purify ourselves even as Christ is pure.

When we focus our hearts and minds on Jesus, we’ll be like Him in the way that we love others; we’ll be like Him in the way that we have patience with another; we’ll be like Him in the way that we have peace in our lives; we’ll be like Him in the way that we remain faithful even in the face of disappointment and discouragement; we’ll be like Him in the way that we have self-control in our lives;

and we'll be like Him in the way that we devote ourselves to following the commands of the Lord our God. The more we give up the things of this world, the more we will begin to look like Jesus and the more that the world will not recognize us, because it does not recognize the things of God. By allowing the Holy Spirit to guide us closer to the Lord Jesus, the more our lives will change and the more the world will be offended by us, because we will no longer be just like everyone else. And the glory of the Lord will begin to shine out from us into the world.

God desires us to seek Him and follow His ways, not that we might be better than another, or be more important to Him than another. God wants us to follow His will and His ways because they are the very best for us, enabling us to work for Him and help others to see the need for God in their lives, too. We live in a world that is desperate for purpose and meaning, but the world cries out for us to seek our own pleasures rather than living according to God's ways. The world does not know that by living according to God's ways, we will find all of our needs met, all of our heart's desires satisfied, and all of our joys increase beyond all measure as we find fulfillment and purpose in Him. As we allow God to sanctify us by His grace, we become precious jewels to Him and His radiance will shine out of us into the world.

Let's pray. Father, we are not our own to do as we please, but we are Your people, called to grow closer to You through Jesus Christ our Lord. Thank You for His example so that we might model our own lives after Him and be Your children. Give us hearts that seek You. Give us the desire to follow Your will and Your ways. Grant us Your Holy Spirit so that the things of this world may become dull and unattractive and even distasteful, and we might delight in all that You have to give to us. Lead us each day closer to You so that we may come to resemble Jesus, having His likeness in us so that the world knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that we belong to You. Keep working on us, Lord, so that we might not fall away from You, but find ourselves in Your presence. Thank You for Your grace in our loves that enables us to keep striving after You with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. This we pray in the powerful and precious Name of Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.



