

Reformation Sunday and Your Personal Sanctification – Phil 2:12-13

Introduction – Reformation Sunday is the remembrance of the day when Luther nailed his 95 Theses on the door of the church at Wittenberg, widely considered the beginning of the Reformation. The first thesis was, “*Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ...willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.*” The Reformation was a time of standing against the corruptions and erroneous teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church, but it was far more than a theological fight. Luther, Calvin, and countless reformers were pastors with a heart for their sheep, a passion for the state of their souls, for them to have a clear understanding of the Gospel and how they should therefore live.

Pastoral Care: Justification and Sanctification – Two ditches had to be overcome in the Reformation regarding false teachings on the nature of justification and sanctification (see WSC #33, 35). The first is confusing justification and sanctification. The second is separating justification and sanctification.

An Improper Mixing – Justification is a one-time act while sanctification is an ongoing work. The Reformers were correcting an error of the church which taught that justification PLUS sanctification EQUALS salvation. The first step in salvation was to turn to Christ but then there were additional works which must occur in order to be justified or truly saved. This leads to an understanding of salvation as Christ plus works and a heavy burden of legalism upon church-goers who would never have a sense of assurance of their salvation. Phil 2:12-13 could be misinterpreted to defend this position.

An Improper Separating – Another error, however, could be made when *Sola Fide*, *Sola Christus*, and *Sola Gratia* were taught, and that was that once we were “justified” it no longer matter how we lived. Justification and sanctification need to be rightly distinguished but not separated in this way. But how do you avoid this second error without falling back into the first?

Union with Christ – Throughout the New Testament we learn about our union with Christ. With regard to our present topic, Paul spoke of having died with Christ (dying to the law) and being raised with Him (Gal 2:20). This union brought about a transfer into a new kingdom (Col 1:13) and a new man (Col 3:9-10).

Positional Sanctification – Sanctification means “to have been set apart for God’s use” and in this sense, we have been sanctified (1 Cor 1:2). Christ became and is our sanctification (1 Cor 1:30). We are set apart from the world and set apart to God. “Saints” are not super-Christians (the teaching of the Roman church) but rather what all Christians are by their baptism into Christ. Having been sanctified (in this way) they are called to live consistent with what they have become.

Conditional Sanctification – We are justified by faith alone; but that faith, if it is genuine, never stands alone. It always brings forth a change of nature and therefore a growing change of works/lifestyle (James 2:14-17, 26). This is the ongoing work of our sanctification (in a different sense). It is also by faith and a work of the Spirit, not our flesh (Gal 3:3-4). And so we are to pursue holiness, not as an act of our individual will (or we are doomed), but as children of grace in whom the Holy Spirit resides. We are to put on the Lord Jesus and make no provision for the flesh (Rom 13:14), growing in the virtues of our faith (2 Pet 1:5-7). However, we do this as free men and women, set free by the Spirit of life (Rom 8:2), keeping in step with the Spirit in us (Gal 5:25). This, then, is how we are to understand the commands and promises of Phil 2:12-13.

Work Out What God is Working In (Phil 2:12-13) – The command is to be understood as an ongoing command, not a one-time event. Salvation is by faith from first to last, but this faith is something we must fight in. There is a real battle against the world, the flesh and the devil. In the devil’s view, there is always hope for your destruction. John Owen said that the hard work of growing in holiness always involves “*stepping on the belly of our lust.*” When we are doing this, we are simply doing what God is giving and working in us. It does not come from fleshly indulgence that looks pious but is actually only prideful legalism (Col 2:16-23). It is desire and ability coming from the Holy Spirit at work in us. And this is the good news: it is the Father’s good pleasure to give us this power to mortify the flesh.

With Fear and Trembling – This is a gift, a grace from God and out of His love for us (Jer 32:38-40), and it is manifest in the corporate worship of God’s people (Heb 12:28). It is the beginning of knowledge (Prov 1:7), it moves us to obedience (Prov 16:6) and hatred of our sin. It keeps us from fearing the disapproval of men (Matt 10:28) and it is a “*fountain of life*” (Prov 14:27). If I have this gift of godly fear before God, I will always contemplate His presence and His holiness.

Not So Fast – It is one thing to understand these doctrines. It is quite another to live them out for this is the stuff of the daily battle we all face (Luke 9:23). Our sanctification is something to be built from the assurance of our justification. We must therefore not forget all that God has done and what kind of person we are now. We are in a different kingdom, we are in the new humanity, we are in the world but we are not of it. God does more than remind us through the disciplines of daily time in His Word and prayer, the worship of Him with His people, the gifts of the Table – He communes with us; He works in us. Look to Christ in your sanctification just as you did in your justification. Amen.