

“GRACE: CONNECT THE DOTS (#3): SANCTIFYING GRACE”

(Hebrews 6:1-3; 12:1-3)

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[PROPS NEEDED: (#1) “Grandpa Pooh” stuffed animal on top of stool in preaching area; (#2) My HealthMiles Pedometer; (#3) “Chariots of Fire” Video Clip]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 3-15-09]

–I–

1. [Traditional Service ONLY:] Read NRSV Text: Hebrews 6:1-3; 12:1-3 and Pray.
2. Two weeks ago we began a new sermon series for Lent in which we’re focusing on the grace of God – “*Connecting The Dots*” (so to speak) to help us better understand WHAT grace is, WHY we need it, and HOW its various forms/manifestations function in our lives.

A–Now at that time, I introduced to you “Grandpa Pooh”, who (really) was my wife’s favorite stuffed animal when she was a little girl, and I used him to illustrate how grace works to overcome our human condition:

1–The Bible teaches that all of us are created in the image of God [**Hug Pooh**], but that Sin breaks that image and causes a separation/a gap [**Demonstrate...**] between who we *are* and who we were *created* to be.

2–And we learned that “Prevenient Grace” is God’s initiative of love to each of us to overcome that gap – like a wind or serenade, calling us home [**Demonstrate...**]

3–Then, last week, Mary Mincy and Jim Huston shared (at different services) about the “Justifying Grace” of God which we more popularly call “*conversion, accepting Christ, being born again, or saved,*” etc., but which in this metaphor is essentially nothing more God’s grace enabling us to turn [**Demonstrate...**] and take the *first step back* towards a right relationship with God. ¹

B–Today, I want to talk about the rest of those steps back to God’s image [**Demonstrate...**] which the Bible refers as “Sanctification,” “Holiness”, or “Sanctifying Grace”– by whatever words, though, *it’s the grace of God (given after we’re converted) enabling us to become more and more like Jesus for the rest of our lives.* ²

–II–

3. Now, many of us have been raised in Christian traditions in which we’ve been taught that “conversion” is kind of the goal towards which we should all be striving – that if we can just get “born again/saved” then we’ve done everything we need to do, and everything will be great from there on! ³
4. And yet, anyone that’s been a Christian very long knows that while this may be true from God’s *eternal* perspective, it’s NOT the reality of the way things are from our imperfect, finite *human* point of view in which the restoration of the image of God in us is a journey – a process – that takes the rest of our lives. ⁴

5. In fact, the Bible is quite clear about this, & even though today's two scriptures don't use the phrase "sanctifying grace" (it's found elsewhere), they illustrate its concept very well: ⁵

A–In Hebrews 6:1-3, for instance, it talks of the [(MSG) "*basic foundational truths*" (NRSV) "*basic teachings about Christ,*"] which consist of experiences like [(MSG) "*turning away from 'salvation-by-self-help', baptism, laying on of hands, resurrection, and judgment*" (NRSV) "*repentance,... faith, baptism, laying on of hands, resurrection, and judgment.*"]

1–But notice how (in Verse 1) the writer actually *begins* that passage... he says (MSG) "*Come on, let's leave the preschool fingerpainting exercises on Christ and get on with the grand work of art. Grow up in Christ...*" (NRSV) "*Therefore let us go on toward perfection, leaving behind the basic teaching... and not laying again the foundation [of these things]."*

⁶

2–In other words, "*Don't get stuck on the basics! Instead, learn to grow up and mature in the faith, because there's more to salvation and the Christian life than merely being 'born again /saved' (as important as that is).*"

B–And in Hebrews 12:1-3 (today's second scripture), the writer gives a great metaphor for WHAT that "more" is – listen to what he says there...

(MSG) "*Do you see what all this means – all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down [and] start running – and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed – that exhilarating finish in and with God – he could put up with anything along the way: cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. [So] when you find yourselves flagging in faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. [And] that will shoot adrenaline into your souls!"*

(NRSV) "*Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart."*

6. In other words, according to this writer, the Christian life is a track race that each and every believer is called and equipped by God to RUN and participate IN, *rather than* merely sitting in the stands watching.

A–Now, I don't know about you, but I know a lot of "Spectator Christians"– you know, they're great at watching *others* participate in the "race" of faith.

1–And they often love to call out what the racers could do different/better, giving advice from the stands, or the comfort of their own home – Do you know folks like that at soccer or football games? Or when watching sports on TV?

2–But these kinds of “Christians” rarely “dirty their hands” by actually getting in the race or the game themselves.

3–No. They *have* their entrance ticket to the event, and that’s all they think they need – they were “*saved, sanctified, and washed in the blood*” at a crusade 10 years before, so they don’t need to be actually *running* the race by coming to worship, or being in a Bible Study group, or Sunday School class, or serving at a soup kitchen, or being in an accountability group – they’re perfectly content with their faith as it is.

B–And yet, the writer of Hebrews warns against this very mentality. He says that in the end, the *only* ones who’ll be cheering on the sidelines are the ones who’ve actually *participated in* and already *finished* the race of faith, and who’ve now received the “prize” of life with God forevermore. ⁷

C–*That’s* the work of “Sanctifying Grace” – to help every one of us “run the race” of faith so that every day, in every way, we become more and more like Jesus in our thoughts, words, attitudes, and actions. ⁸

7. Let me ask... How many of you like to exercise? Well, I have to confess that I don’t... not at all! Yet, the older I get, the more I realize how important it is for good health.

A–So, in addition to trying to go the gym several times a week, this past January I signed up for something with my insurance company that lets me measure the steps that I take each day using this pedometer [**Show HealthMiles Pedometer...**].

1–And if I average 7000 steps every day for a year, then they reward me with cash back (they figure that good health is cheaper than an insurance claim).

2–Now, I’ve already found that 7000 steps a day is not always easy – there are days that I’m tired, or doing visitation by car, or sitting in meetings, and it’s tough!

3–But for the past two months, most days I’ve managed to push myself to get to that goal – some days walking more to make up for days that I missed it.

4–And what’s interesting about all this is that while it might be the prize of *money* that keeps me going, the *real* prize I’ll end with at the end of the year will be a healthier body that I’ll have as a result of the *journey* I will have taken to get there.

B–You know, the Christian life is a lot like that: ...

1–In the end what counts most is not the intensity of any individual spiritual event(s) or experiences of our lives, or even our focus and intent on “getting into heaven.”

2–Instead, we’ll find that what counts most will be the *JOURNEY* of faith (“*Sanctification*”) that we take along the way, made possible by God’s “Sanctifying Grace.”⁹

8. On April 6, 1923, following one of his competitions the famous track athlete, future Olympic gold medalist, and Christian missionary Eric Liddell (known as “the flying Scotsman”) spoke to a crowd. From the 1981 movie *Chariots of Fire*, listen to the true story of what he said.¹⁰
[WATCH “*Chariots of Fire*” VIDEO CLIP (00:25:30-00:27:39, Time 2:09)]

–III–

9. You see, the truth is that there is none of us here today that can honestly say, “*I have ALL that I will ever need in my spiritual life*” because if we’re not growing, then we’re dying.

A–And “Sanctifying Grace” reminds us that biblical salvation is not a *place*, but a *journey*... not a *state* to be achieved, but a *relationship* (with God) to grow and live in... not a *destination* to reach, but a *race* to run in.¹¹

B–So, perhaps you gave your heart to Christ last week, or last year, or last decade, or earlier. That’s great! But my question is: what have you done with that relationship since then?

1–Have you been intentional about learning and growing and stretching your faith? ...Or are you just a “*Spectator Christian*”?

2–Well, if you’re tired of being one, then today’s a great day to come out of the stands and join in the race “already in progress” – not to beat *others*, but to finish and receive the “prize” of Jesus Christ *yourself*.

C–And if you’re already out there running, remember that it’s going to be hard – ...

1–...There’ll be days we trip and fall, or get “booed” or second-guessed from the sidelines by spectators who’re too lazy to join in.

2–But *we’re* called to persevere – to pick ourselves back up and continue the race, and no matter what happens around us, to keep our eyes *focused* on Jesus.

10. Now, next week we’ll talk about some specific ways to do that in our journey, but *today* all God asks is our willingness to stay (or get back on) the track, ...and RUN for God!!!

11. [PRAYER]

12. [For TRADITIONAL SERVICE: In today’s closing hymn, the African-American songwriter compares Sanctification to climbing a ladder, going ever higher and higher as we climb the “rungs” of salvation...HYMN: #418 -- “We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder”]

ENDNOTES:

1. In this sense, “Prevenient Grace” deals with God’s OFFER of a renewed relationship with Him through love that leads us to repentance, whereas “Justifying Grace” deals with our ACCEPTANCE of that offer through conversion (consisting of God’s forgiveness and our being “born again.”

2. The early Methodist Christians used to refer to this as “holiness of heart and life,” and it was a key practice of their faith. Sanctification is a growing power -- given to us by the Holy Spirit -- to be able to “Just Say No!” to sin. It’s a growing ability to “love as God loves” -- to love others the same way that God loves them: unconditionally; completely; and without prejudice.

3. One basis for this belief is the fact that “Justification” and “New Birth” (the two components of “Conversion” discussed in the previous sermon) *are* things that one experiences at a particular *point* or *moment* in time. This often leads us to think that the *experience* of conversion, being saved, etc. is the goal of full salvation itself, rather than merely the *entrance* to that goal.

4. It’s true that from *God’s* perspective, once we have Jesus in our hearts, we have all that’s necessary to perfect the image of God in us again – and so from that *divine, eternal* perspective sanctification IS a one-time “done deal!” This is why various New Testament scriptures use the term “sanctified” in the *past tense* – to signify and illustrate this divine perspective. It’s also why some Christian traditions (like Reformed theology, which includes most Baptist, Presbyterian, and many Pentecostal churches) define “Sanctification” as an *event*, rather than as a *process* – they will claim that it is a *position*, not a *process*. The reality is that it is *both*. Methodist/Wesleyan theology doesn’t deny this fact, but merely stresses that we don’t live life in reality from God’s perspective, but from the *human* perspective in which “Sanctification” is *not yet completed*, and so is more accurately a *process* or journey of growth *into* that position.

The problem is, however, that we don’t live life from *God’s* perspective, but from our own imperfect, finite *human* point of view, in which the restoring of God’s image in us is *not yet complete*, but is instead a process, a journey that we take for the rest of our lives (Read Philippians 2:12). We all recognize that even after Conversion, “converted/born again/saved” Christians continue to sin (Read Romans 6-7). Is this because their conversion experience wasn’t valid or genuine? No. It’s because we actually experience and live-out our salvation from a limited, finite human point of view in which we *don’t* reach the goal of total and complete reunion with God instantly. “Conversion” is the beginning-point of the process of salvation, but not it’s end or goal. Biblical “full salvation” does *not* happen all at once, but occurs over a process of time throughout our lives.

5. Read, for example, 1 Corinthians 1:30.

6. In this passage, the Greek word that some Bibles translate as “perfection” simply means “maturity.” In other words, here in Verse 1, to “*go on towards perfection*” merely means to look at the ways in which God in Christ is “perfect/mature” and to allow His Holy Spirit to help us imitate Him in those ways – to be gradually be made “perfect” by His grace and power. We find the same idea in Matthew 5:48, where Jesus urges his followers to “*Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” Here again, Greek “perfect” means “mature.” It is true that we can’t expect to be able to imitate Jesus in EVERY one of these ways *immediately* after we’ve been converted, but Sanctification is the process whereby we are given the ability (through the Holy Spirit) to do this more and more as we walk with the Lord over time, or (in the words of Hebrews 12:2) as we run the “race” of salvation, we should “*look to Jesus [as] the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.*”

7. All too often today, I meet people who say, “*I don’t need church to be a good Christian, and I’m not part of any organized congregation, but I WAS saved X-number of years ago,*” as if their conversion was all that there was to their salvation. And yet, if we were a track-athlete in a race, and we heard the gun go off, sounding the beginning of the race, would we quit running as soon as we crossed the *start* line? Of course not! And yet, that’s precisely what some Christians do -- they cross the start-line (Conversion), and then they stop, thinking it’s all they need.

Yet, as important as it is, a one-time “conversion” event is only the *beginning* of a *lifetime* of

opportunities that God gives us to encounter Christ. Personally, I can't recall a specific time/date when I accepted Christ for the first time (and I don't believe the Bible teaches that it's necessary to). However, I *can* recall retreats, youth choir tours, revivals, Law School, seminary, marriage, and even pastoral ministry in which I felt the Lord stretching me in new spiritual directions and ways. And all of these were God's ways of helping me to experience salvation and the Christian life as a race to be run, not a spectator seat to sit in.

8. For example, read Philippians 2:1-11, Ephesians 6:11-17, and 1 Thessalonians 5:8.

9. It the gradual process of "Sanctification" (made possible by God's "Sanctifying Grace") that *actually* makes us INTO the kind of Christian that our "Justification" (made possible by God's "Justifying Grace") merely makes *possible*. In other words, the former is God's instrument/tool for the *actualization* of the latter.

Hopefully, too, it is obvious that the more one grows in Sanctification (i.e., the more one becomes like Jesus), then the more that person will manifest the "*fruit of the Spirit*" in their life (See Galatians 5:22, especially the fruit of "love" described in I Corinthians 13). Consequently, it doesn't matter how "gloriously" one's "conversion" experience may have been, how many "spiritual gifts" one possesses, how often we have been "slain in the spirit," how many Bible verses we've memorized, or even how often we go to church. If we don't manifest our faith by our fruits (especially love for others), then our salvation is false.

10. For more information about Eric Liddell and the testimony he gave at Armadale, Scotland following one of his track competitions, see the "InspiritNews" website at www.inspiritnews.com/Liddell.html.

11. Another analogy that is helpful in understanding Sanctification is to imagine **THE CHRISTIAN LIFE AS A GREAT HOUSE**. We have a sense of this in 1 Peter 2:5, where the writer says that we Christians "*are being built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*" (Read also Hebrews 3:6 and 2 Corinthians 5:1). In this "house," "repentance" is the "front porch," with God's Prevenient Grace represented by someone on the porch gesturing for passers-by to "come on inside." "Conversion" can be compared to going through the "front door" of that "house." And here, "Sanctification" is like us opening up and exploring all the rooms of that house over the rest of our lifetime.

Notice that in this analogy, it will take time to enter and explore all of the rooms – it doesn't happen all at once. On a Christian retreat called "Walk to Emmaus" that I once worked as a clergy leader, I had someone tell me that when they were "saved," they had let God into ALL of their "rooms" – that they had already experienced "full salvation" – so there was no need for continued growth. But this person had forgotten that just when we think we've let God into "every room" of our life-house, God (or life itself) *adds another room onto our house!* They had forgotten the biblical reality that at *no point* in our Christian walk can we say "I've arrived" – since the "house" of our life is constantly growing and changing, so must our Christian salvation be constantly growing and maturing and expanding, as well.

Over the course of my own Christian life, as I've turned more and more areas of my life over to God, it's kind of like I've invited Him into different rooms: first my heart; then my relationships w/others; my marriage; my finances; my career in ordained ministry; – and I continue to give Him some of my "dirty, messed up rooms" even today. For that matter, we *all* have "dirty rooms" in our lives that we need to let God deal with – private things that we haven't let anyone else see, even God. But that's *precisely* the purpose and point of Sanctification: letting God into all the rooms of the "house" of your salvation and Christian life.

If you've ever been to Walt Disney World in Florida, you know that when the doors open to many of the theater-type attractions there, the ushers/attendants tell the patrons... "*Please move all the way in BEFORE you are seated in order to make room for all guests.*" Well, that's exactly what biblical Sanctification is all about: moving *all the way in* in our Christianity *instead of* stopping only after we've gone through the front door of conversion. Sanctification, then, is like opening up and exploring the "rooms" of the great "house" which is our very lives.