

GODLINESS

BECOMING MORE LIKE JESUS

Josh Pannell

Pastor, Trinity Fellowship Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)

That sinking feeling still lingers in my mind. It seemed that, in a single moment, I realized that I had everything backward in my marriage, parenting, and fellowship with other believers. I was chasing something that wasn't worth an ounce of my energy. I was chasing the appearance of godliness, but on the inside was nothing more than weariness: weariness from running after the idol of the approval from others and approval from myself. The moment I'm describing was when Jeff Purswell welcomed us to the Sovereign Grace Pastors College and called our class to put equal emphasis on growth in theology and godliness that year. I still can't read 1 Timothy 4:16 without hearing Jeff's voice urging me away from "superficial goodness" and toward a truly transformed life.

Thomas à Kempis summarizes this well when he says,

What good does it do to speak learnedly about the Trinity if, lacking humility, you displease the Trinity? Indeed it is not learning that makes a man holy and just, but a virtuous life makes him pleasing to God. I would rather feel contrition than know how to define it. For what would it profit us to know the whole Bible by heart and the principles of all the philosophers if we live without grace and the love of God?³⁴

Jeff helped me see that godliness is not the same as doing good things. No, the call to godliness is something far more. Why? Because our sin sinks far below our actions and into the very core of our being—so much so that it's possible to have "the appearance of godliness" (2 Tim. 3:5) but on the inside be "full of greed and self-indulgence," "all uncleanness," and "hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matt. 23:25, 27–28). Put simply, godliness isn't external conformity; it's wholistic transformation. Jesus wants nothing less than our whole persons to be changed into his likeness — our actions, yes, but more than just our actions. He wants our desires, affections, motives, and imaginations to be wholly and entirely his.

During my time at the Pastors College, God confronted me in my hypocrisy, self-righteousness, and self-deceit. Godliness isn't something I perform; it's a gospel-virtue that the Holy Spirit must work in my heart to make me truly and holistically more like Christ. Godliness isn't just doing the actions of Christ but

³⁴ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1996), 1-2.

feeling the very heart of Christ himself as we do them. This is the kind of godliness that only the power of the gospel can produce.

Godliness and Gospel-Security

Foundational to our growth in godliness is knowing and feeling our status as justified sinners. The identity of every Christian is found not in our obedience but in the glorious truth that, though we are sinners by nature and by action, God declares us to be “not guilty” because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Theologians refer to this as “justification.” Paul notes in Romans 3 that justification is “a gift” (Rom. 3:24) and is received “by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:28). We who had forfeited a right standing before God with every sinful action, thought, and intent are scandalously declared to be in the right by a holy God. How can this be? The answer is found in Romans 3:24–25, we are justified “through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood.” When Jesus died on the cross for sinners, he took upon himself the judgment we deserve—the full force of divine wrath against our sin—so that, for every person in Christ, “there is now no condemnation” (Rom. 8:1).

This is why it is after—and only after—we have received acceptance through the gospel that we are then called to live lives “worthy of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27) and to “cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit” (2 Cor. 7:1). These texts describe not our justification but “sanctification”—the process in which our actions and desires are increasingly brought into conformity with our justified status before God. We become practically who we already are positionally. Why is it essential that we get the order right? Because the fundamental identity of the Christian is never his performance but Christ’s. In theological terms, our security before God is never found in our sanctification but only in our justification. We don’t obey so that God will love us; we obey because he already loves us.

Justification and sanctification go hand-in-hand in the Christian life, and you can’t have one without the other. Why is that? Because this “righteousness of God” that becomes ours in our justification is none other than Christ himself. Jesus himself becomes to us “righteousness” (1 Cor. 1:30), and we who have been joined to Christ receive all of his righteousness because we receive Christ himself. And when we receive Christ, we receive all of him, so that Paul finishes 1 Corinthians 1:30 by saying that Christ has become to us, not just righteousness, but also “sanctification.” Receiving Christ means that we not only receive his righteousness but that we also receive his sanctifying power in our lives. Martin Luther describes it like this, “Christ daily drives out the old Adam more and more in accordance with the extent to which faith and knowledge of Christ grow.”³⁵ Sanctification cannot be divorced from justification any sooner than Christ himself can be divided.

³⁵ Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen, “Sermon on Two Kinds of Righteousness,” in *Word and Faith*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand, Kirsi I. Stjerna, and Timothy J. Wengert, vol. 2, *The Annotated Luther* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 15.

Gospel-Empowered Godliness

Because Jesus himself is our sanctification, it is Jesus, and his gospel, that motivates and empowers growth in godliness and wholistic transformation. It is the blood of Jesus that purifies “our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.” And it is “the blood of the eternal covenant” (Heb. 9:14) that “equips us with everything good that we may do his will” (Heb. 13:20–21).

Paul says as much at the end of Titus 2, “The grace of God has appeared...training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives” (Titus 2:11–12). When Paul says that grace appeared, he doesn’t mean “grace” in the abstract, but grace in a Person: Jesus is grace incarnate. When Jesus came, he brought the grace of God to us in his person, and that grace not only justifies us before God but also “trains us” to live lives of holiness.

Paul says the same thing in Ephesians 5 with the husband-wife analogy. While we may be familiar with the glorious truth that “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,” the good news is that Jesus’ love for his church doesn’t end when he saves her through his gospel; no, Christ died for the church “that he might sanctify her” (Eph. 5:25–26). What this means is that Christ’s work in us doesn’t end when we hear the declaration “no judgment because of Christ,” but when we hear, “no spots or blemishes because of Christ.” His deep love for his bride didn’t end when he died for her. His love is stronger than that. His love is strong enough to bring to completion in us everything that he started in us.

This is the very point Paul makes when he commands the Philippians to obey the commands of God because “it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12–13). In all the progress we make towards Christlikeness, we say with Paul, “it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (1 Cor. 15:10).

The Urgency of Godliness

Against this backdrop of our warrior King conforming us to his own image, the commands of Scripture demand we fight to achieve Christlikeness. Because we know that Christ is defeating all his enemies in our soul, we can confidently face the commands of Scripture which urge us to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (Eph. 4:1). The command of God to Israel rings just as true for New Covenant believers,

Consecrate yourselves, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves. . . For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy (Lev. 11:44–45).

While we are eternally secure in our justified state, it is equally true that “if [we] live according to the flesh [we] will die”

(Rom. 8:13) and “that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God” (Eph. 5:5). The stakes are high, and we’re meant to feel them.

This is why, when Paul describes our fight against sin, he says to the Colossian church, “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you” (Col. 3:5). This kind of language calls for radical devotion toward godliness. Killing is a violent act. Killing takes courage; it’s not for the faint of heart. After Gideon defeated Midian in Judges 7, he calls Jether, his firstborn son, to personally kill Zebah and Zalmunna, the enemy kings – “Rise and kill them!” (Judg. 8:20). But Jether could not kill them, “for he was afraid.” He looked the enemy in the eye and couldn’t muster the courage to swing his sword and kill the enemy.³⁶

So, too, Christ calls us to something that takes great courage: we must kill sin, the great enemy of our souls. And when the day of mortifying sin comes, we must not be found wanting courage. For if we do, the enemy will continue to wage war against our souls. In the battle against sin, there is room for neither neutrality nor indifference; rather, as John Owen says in *The Mortification of Sin*,

Indwelling sin is compared to a person, a living person, called “the old man,” with his faculties, and properties, his wisdom, craft, subtlety, strength; this, says the apostle, must be killed, put to death, mortified, that is, have its power, life, vigour, and strength, to produce its effects, taken away by the Spirit. . . Do you mortify; do you make it your daily work; be always at it whilst you live; cease not a day from this work; be killing sin or it will be killing you.³⁷

Paul himself echoes the urgency of putting sin to death when he says,

Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life (Gal. 6:7–8).

This call to put sin to death in our hearts extends far beyond our actions into our heart desires. Jesus makes this clear when he says, “you therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). The word Jesus uses for “perfect” is “τέλειος,” meaning “whole” or “complete.” Jesus calls his followers to have a righteousness like God’s: righteous actions which flow from a righteous heart. This is a radical call for godliness that seeks to eradicate not just the unrighteousness others can see but even the motives and secrets of the heart that wage war against God.

³⁶ Yeabtsega Haile Tedla, a Trinity Fellowship Pastors College student, drew my attention to this example.

³⁷ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 6 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, n.d.), 8–9.

The Means of Godliness

How then do we cultivate this holistic godliness in our hearts? If we are commanded to kill sin, what weapon do we bring into battle to put it to death? This is where Sovereign Grace's shared value of gospel-centrality beautifully meets our shaping virtue of godliness. We put sin to death by intentionally exposing ourselves to the gospel for the purpose of being transformed by the gospel. Paul says as much in Romans 1:16, "the gospel is the power of God to salvation," that is, salvation in all its parts. The gospel has the power to free us, not just from the penalty of sin in our justification but also from the power of sin in our sanctification. The same gospel that pardons us of our sin also accomplishes our sanctification and makes possible godly living.

While there are many avenues of doing this, let me suggest three.

Meditation

First, we expose ourselves to the gospel by meditating on the gospel. When the author to the Hebrews exhorts his audience to "lay aside every weight and the sin which clings so closely," he immediately gives us the means: "looking to Jesus" (Heb. 12:1-2). The picture here is that, as we look to Jesus and his work on the cross in our place, we find that the weights of sin fall off so that we're able to "run with endurance." Immediately following these verses, the author again calls us to "consider him...so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted" (Heb. 12:3). That is to say, we throw off our sins and imitate our Savior as we meditate on the gospel.

Thus, we store the Word in our hearts so it stands at the ready to be applied. The Word illuminates our way forward when tempted. The Word adjusts our fleshly impulses. The Word comforts and assures. We meditate so that we are armed for the battle we face as we cast aside that sin which clings so closely.

Confession

Second, we expose ourselves to the gospel as we confess our sins. The purpose of confession is never self-condemnation but worshipful celebration and fresh reminders that Jesus died for all of our sins on the cross. John reminds us that as we confess our sins, God is faithful, not only "to forgive our sins" but also to "cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). What John has in mind is not just forgiveness by means of gospel-centered confession but the eradication of sin and growth in godliness by means of gospel-centered confession.

Thus, we agree with God in our confession those thoughts and actions that are not in keeping with his will. This pattern of confession keeps us close to the cross, keeps us from drifting, and keeps us walking in step with the Spirit. Confession is an essential means toward godliness because through confession we bring our sin into the light.

Community

Third, we expose ourselves to the gospel in community. The church community is given to “stir up one another to love and good works” (Heb. 10:24). But how does the church do this? The answer is by “encouraging one another” to “hold fast to the confession of our hope” (Heb. 10:25), that is, by reminding one another of the gospel and by calling one another to hold fast to the gospel. Paul says the same in Ephesians 4:15 when he calls the church to “[speak] the truth in love” so that we “grow up in every way into...Christ.” What truth does Paul have in mind? “The word of truth, the gospel of your salvation” (Eph. 1:13). We grow in godliness as we are faithfully reminded of the gospel by a local community of gospel-centered believers.

Thus, we commit to building our lives with others and allowing them to see us, at our finest and at our worst. We receive correction as wounds from friends. We express suspicion about our own hearts and charity toward others. We accept the discomfort and inconveniences of fellowship in exchange for the great promises of all God declares will come to us and through us in community.

Conclusion

A proper understanding and application of godliness leaves us with a very big view of God and a sober view of sin. The Christ-follower in pursuit of godliness never toys with sin, tolerates its presence, nor cherishes the short-term payoff it promises. Rather, with divine energy and personal relentlessness, the believer habitually meditates upon God’s Word, confesses sin, and builds in meaningful community with others. Godliness becomes reality when the gospel is central, not just in our beliefs but also in all our practices. In this way, every ounce of godliness is because of the incredible work of Christ in our lives.