

8 Characteristics of Gospel-Centered Sanctification- by Dustin Crowe

One of the things I enjoyed most about my previous job was the direct connection between how hard I worked and the results I saw. If I just put my head down and pushed hard I could get where I wanted. It was an independent role and I liked the fact that my production rested on no one's shoulders but my own.

Much of my frustration in growing as a Christian is because sanctification isn't exactly like my job. Yes, my effort does affect my growth but I can't simply produce the desired outcome from my performance alone. I'm learning that while I certainly play a part in my maturity I can't just will it through hard work. This has not only shaped my own spiritual formation but it changes how I encourage other believers. When a brother comes to me sharing a struggle with sin I realize I can't just take him to the mat for not working hard enough but I must take him to the cross to rest in Christ's work for him. I find many Christians genuinely desiring to grow but they end up throwing up their hands in discouragement saying, "I'm trying but things don't seem to be changing." I think as weary believers, we can go from feeling frustrated to feeling free as we take the yoke off our own backs and place it on Jesus.

Gospel-centered sanctification tethers becoming (growing) to being (identity) by making Christ's accomplishments and provision for us the catalyst of our lives. Here are eight characteristics of gospel-centered sanctification that frame our theology of the doctrine while also steering our practice.

1. NEWS, NOT ADVICE

"And this word is the good news that was preached to you." (1 Pet. 1:25)

The gospel is first and foremost an announcement. It is news about the historical events related to the life, death, and resurrection of the God-man Jesus.^[1] And it is good news because the objective events have personal significance; they are for us so we might be redeemed from our sin and reconciled to God. I do my brothers and sisters in Christ little good when I resort to offering sage advice, giving opinions, or dispensing the latest spiritual maxims.

For the gospel (and no shabby replacements) to remain the center, we must regularly remind one another of the good *news* of Jesus Christ. We retell this accomplished, objective, historical news and unpack the never-ending applications gushing from it. If the majority of my conversations sound like "you should try doing this or that" instead of

“Jesus has already done this for you” then I’m headed out to the stormy sea of advice and opinion.

“Advice often masquerades as the gospel. Messages filled with advice to help people improve their lives or turn over a new leaf are in contradiction to the nature of the gospel—news we respond to, not insight we should consider heeding.”^[2] Also see: [1 Cor. 15:1-8](#); [Eph. 1:13-14](#); [Acts 15:6](#).

2. REPENTANCE, NOT RESOLVE

“Confess your sins to one another.” (Jam. 5:16)

The gospel grabs us and shakes us back into the reality we quickly forget: sin is a big deal and our hearts reek of it. I avoid thinking of myself or my sin in these stark terms. I’ve noticed that instead of confessing my sin, I settle for praying that I would “do better.” Instead of seeing my cutting tongue as sin requiring humble repentance I might piously say, “I’ve not done a good job in my speech this week and I need to make that a higher priority.” Through my language of “trying harder” or “being more disciplined” I create the mirage of being a good person. All I need, I tell myself, is to dig deeper into my inner reservoirs of strength and goodness. In reality, I need more God-dependent and self-humbling repentance and less self-sufficient and God-ignoring resolve.

“In confession, we become authentically Christian, agreeing with God about our judgment-deserving sin and trusting in his sin-forgiving grace. We return to the reality of grace, in Christ, which in turn compels real obedience.”^[3] Also see: [1 John 1:8-9](#); [Ps. 32:5](#); [2 Cor. 7:10](#); [Rev. 2:5](#).

3. NEEDY, NOT SELF-SUFFICIENT

“God opposes the proud, but he gives grace to the humble.” (Jam. 4:6)

Once we turn to repentance from sin instead of improving on our weaknesses, it becomes clear we can’t dig out of the problem we got ourselves into. I don’t just need more discipline. The problem isn’t primarily that I’m not giving it all I’ve got or trying with enough vigor. The gospel unshackles us by allowing God to be in charge of my sanctification instead of me (deep exhale). When I stop relying on myself and my resources and collapse into trust in God, I see He possesses the power I needed all along.

God promises help to the humble but leaves the self-reliant to their own resources. My generation laughed when Stuart Smalley picked himself up by looking into the mirror and saying, “I’m good enough. I’m strong enough.” Unfortunately, we failed to see that this kind of thinking had slipped into how we live our lives.

“This bruising makes us set a high price upon Christ. Then the gospel becomes the gospel indeed; then the fig-leaves of morality will do us no good.”^[4] Also see: [Rom. 8:9-11, 13](#); [Phil. 2:12-13](#); [Eph. 3:16](#); [Gal. 5:16-17, 25](#); [Col. 2:20-23](#).

4. HEART TRANSFORMATION, NOT BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION

“I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts.” ([Heb. 8:10](#))

The biblical view of sanctification requires a genuine change of the heart (root) in order to have the long-term effects of reflecting Christ (fruit). Heart transformation takes time and work. Because most people “don’t have time” and don’t like work we try to short-circuit this process by simply altering a few behaviors. Since the person hasn’t actually changed—including their motives and desires—it’s a near-sighted solution at best. For example, instead of actually dealing with the pride in my heart that fuels sarcasm, I just tone it down a couple notches.

If others are less offended by my words than I assume I’ve fixed the problem. Despite the better version of me on the outside the heart remains unchanged. We might know this cognitively but think how often when someone shares a struggle with sin the first thing they’re told is how to work on the behavior. These might be helpful strategies, but they aren’t solutions. Care for the root and healthy fruit will eventually ripen.

“It’s all too easy to turn the fight of faith into sanctification-by-checklist. Take care of a few bad habits, develop a couple good ones, and you’re set. But a moral checklist doesn’t take into consideration the idols of the hearts. It may not even have the gospel as part of the equation.”^[5] Also see: [Mt. 15:19-20; 23:25-28](#); [Luke 6:43-45](#); [2 Cor. 3:3](#).

5. FREEDOM IN CHRIST, NOT SLAVERY TO LAW

“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” ([Gal. 5:1](#))

The gospel promise is that at the moment of faith our condemnation is removed and we are declared righteous—with the results of full acceptance and fatherly love. Hearts changed because of grace are given a stronger motivation than a person striving to merit God’s favor through works. Grace jolts us into joy because of an undeserved redemption and we can now live out of gratitude and love for Christ. We seek to grow in sanctification, not to receive favor but as a result of tasting such favor. This does not eliminate the role of law completely, but it does change our relationship to it.

The difference between gospel-centered sanctification and its performance-based counterfeits is that the former prompts heartfelt obedience out of gratitude and the rest provoke external compliance out of guilt. The fruit of the Spirit are not what we bring to God for approval. They are the result of walking in the freedom Christ brings to children freed from the law’s enslaving power.

“Even the Christian with his nose to the obedience grindstone can miss out on this transforming positional view. I may outwardly look very diligent in the faith and dutiful in good works, good words, and good manners, but if inwardly that is all the result of an insecurity about my standing with God, the hardest work I can muster will be both worry-inducing and worthless. The performance treadmill simply leads to exhaustion.”^[6]
Also see: [Rom. 5:1](#); [8:1](#), [15-16](#); [Gal. 5:14-16](#).

6. UNDER THE RULE OF CHRIST, NOT APART FROM IT

“He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son.” ([Col. 1:13](#))

In the gospel, God heaps good news on top of good news. We’re not only freed from slavery to sin and Satan but we’re also redeemed to the kingdom of the Son. There we receive the guidance, protection, and presence of the all-powerful King. Imagine if God had freed Israel in Exodus—people who had been slaves all their lives—and then left them in the wilderness. They lacked wisdom, understanding of righteousness, and knowledge of how to live consistently with why they were created. Thankfully, for Israel after the exodus and for Christians after redemption in Christ, God does not leave us as refugees but makes us full-fledged citizens.

When I see sanctification through gospel-centered lenses, living under the rule and reign of Jesus doesn’t steal my joy but maximizes it. The biblical concept of kingdom unites gospel and law. God’s law for those already in the kingdom is not a criteria for citizenship. Instead, it is just as much a demonstration of his care and grace as it his

authority. In Christ's kingdom, his laws are not to be loathed but to be loved, and his rule is not dreadful but delightful.

“The gospel of the kingdom is the announcement that life with God, under the rule of God, is made immediately available to us through Jesus, our King. He arrives as one who restores, rules, and provides access to God's kingdom.”^[7] Also see: [Rom. 6:6-7, 22](#); [1 Cor. 6:20](#); [Ex. 20:1-2](#); [Matt. 13:44-45](#)

7. IN COMMUNITY, NOT ISOLATION

“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.” ([Heb. 10:24](#))

Many of the frustrations and shortcomings in the Christian life occur from trying to play a team-sport on our own. The kid playing basketball alone in his driveway never becomes great without instructional coaching, the complementary strengths of his teammates, and the sharpening of skills that only comes from other people. When we start thinking we're strong enough and good enough on our own we believe self-reliant lies opposed to a gospel of need. If you're not in a biblical community focused on Jesus and anchored in the authority of the Word, who will ask tough questions when you choose sin or share your joys when God is faithful? Who will speak the gospel of grace when you think you've blown it? Who will pray with you when you feel alone or shaken in your faith?

Sanctification within community is a two-way street. God matures us as others love us in word and deed, but he also strengthens us by stretching us to share our faith, serve with our gifts, and enter into messy relationships—which all of them are of course. Being plugged into a church body and committing to grow in maturity alongside others isn't an option. Gospel-centered sanctification only happens as you humbly receive the gospel and the gifts other believers bring to you, and then doggedly commit to doing the same for them in return.

“We are to be sanctified by living lives together that are honoring to God and marked by growth and maturation. Bonhoeffer anchors the goal of Christian community in ‘meeting one another as bringers of the message of salvation.’...A life-giving community is one that is continuously being transformed by the gospel as a people.”^[8] Also see: [Heb. 10:24-25](#); [1 Thess. 5:11](#); [Col. 3:16](#); [1 Cor. 12:25](#); [Gal. 6:1-3](#).

8. PROGRESSION, NOT PERFECTION

“But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.” ([Phil. 3:13](#))

Unfortunately, we often talk in a way that fosters misunderstandings about what the Christian life will look like. Our speech can make it sound like the Christian’s life should be characterized by complete victory over sin instead of continued repentance from sin. Martin Luther provides a good counter-balance in Thesis 1 of his famous 95 Theses: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said ‘Repent,’ he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance.”^[9] In this life we will always remain simultaneously sinners and saints—people who have been justified and yet remain nagged by indwelling sin.

The Puritans portrayed this lifelong perseverance in their picture of the Christian carrying a weight on his back but the Word in his hand on his pilgrimage to the celestial city. Since we never arrive at perfection in this life we must daily bring our sins before God and receive fresh grace from his hand. We not only confess our sins but we by faith look to Christ to find assurance of our forgiveness and the help to change. This is why many church liturgies include confession of sin and assurance of pardon, modeling the rhythm of our own lives. Just as sure as the sun comes up after the night so also we awake daily in need of grace that pardons and grace to persevere.

“This life therefore is not righteousness but growth in righteousness; not health but healing; not being but becoming; not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it. The process is not finished, but it is going on. This is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified.”^[10] Also see: [Phil. 3:12-14, 20-21](#); [1 Thess. 5:23](#); [1 Pet. 5:10](#).

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FOOTNOTES:

[1] The language of the gospel being good news and not good advice began with Tim Keller:

<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2007/05/23/keller-gospel-centered-ministry/>

[2] Eric Geiger, Michael Kelley, and Philip Nation, *Transformational Discipleship* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2012), 72.

[3] Jonathan Dodson, *Gospel-Centered Discipleship* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 68.

[4] Richard Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, Reprinted 2008), 4.

[5] Kevin DeYoung, *The Hole in Our Holiness* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 34.

[6] Jared Wilson, *Gospel Deeps* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 47.

[7] Daniel Montgomery and Mike Cospers, *Faithmapping* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 35.

[8] Brad House, *Community* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 40.

[9] <http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/history/95theses.htm>

[10] Edward M. Plass, *What Luthers Says*, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1997) 234-35.