

Sanctification: Balancing Grace and Obedience through the Ages



by D. CLAIR DAVIS

My calling was to learn and then teach the history of Christ’s church. David Powlison was my student at Westminster Theological Seminary, and he went on to teach us all. The story of God’s people is one of ongoing trust in the kind love of Jesus in uncluttered hearts as we joyfully learn to do his will. While the story of church history has foolish chapters within it, its recent joyful chapter features David leading us to where we should always be—with Jesus—in great gospel variety. Like the Lord Jesus, David showed us, Jesus.

[Jesus] said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. (Luke 24:44–48)

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Notice these wonderful words of Jesus. Everything about him in God's Word must be fulfilled! And in particular, the fulfillment of Scripture here means that we see Jesus and his gospel. Jesus leads the way in helping us to see him. And we thank God, too, for those people in our lives who have shown us so much of Jesus. David Powlison was this kind of person. He taught us by how he lived. And in his book *How Does Sanctification Work?*, he used stories from his life to teach us why this kind of

Christian obedience is so much better understood as a response (and not a precondition) to God's wonderful love and grace.

interpersonal ministry is so powerful. As we remember what we have learned from him, we should also remember those from whom he, himself, learned.

In what follows, I will trace a key tension in the Christian life and in the life of the church—God's grace and our obedience. I will do this through a discussion of highlights in church history, and I will show how the vision of sanctification that

David offered us was a wise synthesis of Christian wisdom from times past. I'll follow the development of the church's understanding of God's work, grace, and truth, and its personal relevance for our lives—the response it calls for from us. We'll see that this old debate requires clear theological thinking, but it also requires variable application. In some seasons of our lives (and in the life of the church), we need to hear different points of emphasis from the same gospel. In casting this vision for the Christian life, I have a particular burden for how we engage younger people, who may struggle to see the direct relevance of the gospel to their lives here and now. Many of us, younger and older, default to a sense that the gospel was important to us once, for our conversion, but now we have moved on to more fresh or fascinating sides of life. I invite you to appreciate with me the power of the gospel for both justification and sanctification, conversion and Christian obedience, born-again new life and here-and-now abundant life.

The Reformation: Grace First!

Begin with Martin Luther. Before him, of course, there were many true believers who knew Jesus well. But somehow by the end of the Middle

Ages, it had become too complicated to enjoy God's grace, with so much for people to do in order to get the probable assurance of his love. Then, what a gift God gave us all in Luther's story:

I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, "As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!" Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted. At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me.¹

We know what Luther is saying. We have been there ourselves. For us to hear that God is holy and that he judges sinners is not easy. But listen to Luther's bold clarity: Yes, God really is holy; yes, he really loves you. Thank you, Martin, we need to appreciate and love again our good God in all his holiness—his holiness with his goodness for us! Pro me, for me!

1. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 34, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1960), 336-337.

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