

Justification and Sanctification

by
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As I ponder on the fact that scripture sometimes mingles justification and sanctification together, and that the church fathers seemed to do so as well, I wonder if the dogmatic distinction between justification and sanctification is adequate, let alone correct. I sometimes think we are guilty of the confirmation bias, in that we look at scripture through the lens of our dogmatics.

Perhaps scripture blurs the boundaries between justification and sanctification for a reason. Perhaps we do our Lord a disservice by trying to make dogmatic distinctions operative in our daily lives. What does it mean to take up our cross daily, to die daily to sin? By saying that faith without works is dead, James means that justification and sanctification are intimately and inseparably connected. Why do the earliest Christian writings focus more on what we now call sanctification than on justification? More to the point, why does the apostle Paul focus more on sanctification than justification?

James writes: "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world." Isn't it interesting that pure doctrine---which is used within American Lutheranism to divide the church---is in scripture and in the early church secondary to the pure life? For example, the first five chapters of the Didache concern what we call sanctification (and include much of what we Lutherans would dismiss as Law); much of the rest of the Didache is given over to Liturgical instruction and the right ordering of the church. In like manner the Apostolic Traditions of Hippolytus focus on sanctification, Liturgy, and the right ordering of the church. In the Apostolic Traditions, theology exists in the context of the liturgy, not as separate dogmatic instruction. And while the Apostolic Traditions have much to say on the subject of holy living, they have almost nothing to say on the subject of justification; the only reference to justification is made after baptism, when the Bishop lays hands on them and says: "Lord God, you who have made these worthy of the removal of sins through the bath of regeneration, make them worthy to be filled with your Holy Spirit, grant to them your grace, that they might serve you according to your will."

23 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.

24 Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel.

25 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess.

26 Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also.

27 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness.

28 Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.
(Matt 23:23-28)

Is it possible that we Lutherans, by focusing almost exclusively on justification, have negated the words of our Lord?