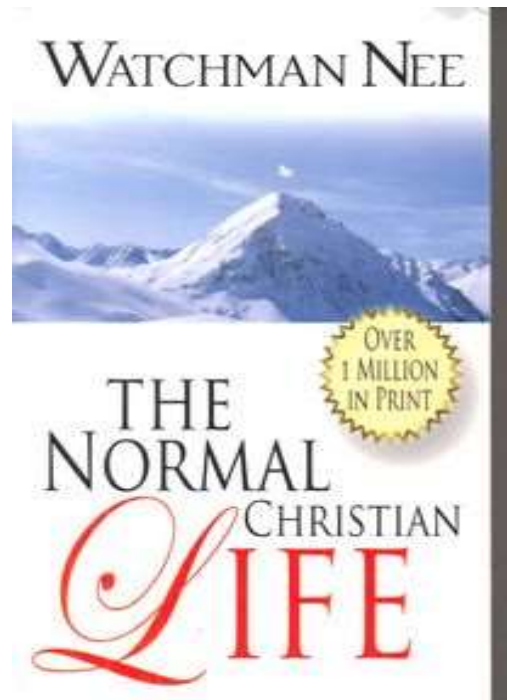


Gospel-Centered Living # 5



Sanctification



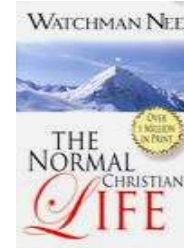
Based on *Sonship*, chapters 8-10,
and *The Normal Christian Life*, chapter 10.
But with caveats...

This is not an unqualified endorsement of everything taught from these sources. These are just some things I thought were good and useful out of their books. Other material in these books may or may not be useful. The one exception to that rule is that I have a quote from Greshem Machen at one point in this sermon, and I think I have read enough of Machen to endorse his books without qualifications. But there are two things in particular to watch out for in *Sonship* and *Watchman Nee*:

2 Dangers to watch out for

1. Spiritual Elitism

- Don't expect every Christian's testimony to be just like yours. Study Church History to see why.
- Don't consider those without your pet doctrine to be less spiritual, instead, look for the good things God is doing in other people and learn from those who are different from you.



Tommy Clayton, Associate Pastor at Riverbend Community Church, in Ormond Beach, FL put it this way, “...Nee got the gospel right. Yet... Nee’s writings show that he adopted this two-tiered system of believers: there are those that are being sanctified by letting Christ live in them, and those that are still carnal (he uses the term “ripened” vs. “unripened”). He also developed one of the first “partial-rapture” views, where only the sanctified believers would be raptured. This then leads to his strange view of the New Jerusalem as a place where unripened believers receive chastisement through the millennial kingdom, so that they will be ripened for eternity.”

<http://thecripplegate.com/beware-the-writings-of-the-watchman/>

Do you see how a good desire for deeper spiritual life led Nee to an extreme of teaching two separate raptures, one for the mature Christians who had internalized his preaching, and one for all those other Christians who had not heard his preaching?

I was a member of a church once where the pastor said you couldn't be qualified to lead a Bible study in the church unless you had taken the Sonship course. Sure, the Sonship course has some good material on spiritual renewal, but taking the Sonship course is not listed among the qualifications for eldership in the Bible.

It happened in the Pentecostal movement too, when some Christians had an experience where they spoke in an unknown language and applied that experience across the board to all believers and said that to be a real, upper-level Christian you have to speak in tongues.

It has been a constant temptation throughout history for those involved in seeking to renew the church to go overboard and consider their pet doctrines or personal experiences as the only important ones and to make those doctrines the dividing line between the real, good Christians and the carnal, low-grade Christians.

So, if you read Watchman Nee, or Jack Miller, or any author from a renewal movement, watch out for that tendency of spiritual elitism.

You can fight that tendency by studying Church history so that you see more of the depth and breadth of Christian experience and can put your personal experiences and pet doctrines into a larger context.

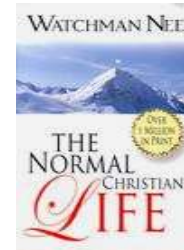
You can also fight the tendency of spiritual elitism by giving others who claim to be Christians the benefit of the doubt and taking an attitude of looking for good things in them and humbly learning from their experiences and knowledge. You may eventually conclude that you just can't believe that person is really a Christian, but then again, you might conclude that they really are Christians with something you can learn from.

2 Dangers to watch out for

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2. Spiritual Laziness



Another problem among Christians that dates all the way back to New Testament times is to hold in proper tension the truths that, on the one hand, Jesus has made me righteous, and on the other hand, I still have to fight sin. These are subjects pretty central to the teaching of Sonship and of The Normal Christian Life, so the temptation is always going to be to downplay sin in order to emphasize God's grace, but these things need to be held in tension.

The session of Briarwood Presbyterian Church in which I grew up wrote a critique of the Sonship material that says...



Briarwood's Pastoral Letter

“We affirm these parallel truths: that in Christ (our position) our sins are completely forgiven and that God sees us as perfectly righteous (as Christ was), and at this level a child of God will never experience God’s wrath or punishment. At the level of our experience, however, we must acknowledge the presence of sin within the believer, which can and does cause us at times to live in a way that is displeasing to God, and that this displeasure can incur God’s fatherly discipline... Chapter 3, page 9 does acknowledge that the believer now faces the chastisement of a son rather than punishment of sinners because of who he is in Christ. We believe that the focus of *Sonship* is proper in that it is primarily on who the believer is in Christ, but we find only minimal reference to the balancing truth that God can be displeased with the believer’s experience. This may lead to the erroneous assumption... that God does not care about our sin.”

The Briarwood session concluded, “The course has two flaws that are particularly significant. These are over-endowment of the doctrine of adoption and lack of teaching on the ongoing use of the means of grace. Because of this latter concern, *Sonship* should not be used as a comprehensive discipleship program. Additionally, there several less significant flaws, but the course does not involve heresy. We commend *Sonship* for its proper desire to recapture the doctrines of grace in the teaching of sanctification.”

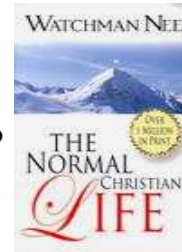
2 Dangers to watch out for

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- Don't expect every Christian's testimony to be just like yours. Study Church History to see why.
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2. Spiritual Laziness

- Don't excuse sin.
- Don't neglect the ordinary means of grace (preaching, prayer, fellowship of the saints, Bible-reading, baptism, communion)



A focus on the “means of grace” is important to balance a focus on adoption and passive righteousness.

The means of grace are the things we actively do in obedience to God's commands:

- “Do this in remembrance of me,”
- “When you pray, pray like this,”
- “Do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together,”
- “Preach the word,”
- “Repent and be baptized,”
- “Bear one another's burdens,” etc.

So just because we are talking about not doing anything to earn God's righteousness, this is within the context of the church where we still move our hands and feet and mouths and such in obedience to God; we are not advocating spiritual laziness.

Sanctification Necessarily Follows Justification

“...cheap grace, the attempt to be justified through faith in Christ without commitment to sanctification, is illegitimate and impossible... There is a deep and indissoluble connection between our appropriation of justification and our experience of sanctification... As Romans 6 makes clear, the ground of sanctification is our union with Christ... ‘Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?’”

~Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*

Now, with those principles of moderation in mind, let us look at the process of sanctification using some good material from Sonship and The Normal Christian Life books. Let me start with this quote from Richard Lovelace, professor emeritus of church history at Gordon-Conwell seminary:

Not Legalism or License, but Love

You who justify yourselves by law are put out of commission from Christ; you have fallen in relation to grace. For we, through the Spirit as a result of faith, are anticipating the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision has any strength nor uncircumcision, but rather it is faith through love that does the work.

~Galatians 5:4-6 NAW

I think that it is this very concept of tension between law and grace and the way that an imbalanced emphasis can stymie spiritual growth which the Apostle Paul references in Galatians 5:4-6. Faith doesn't sever the law or make it of no effect (Rom. 3:31), but trying to use your own law-keeping to earn a right relationship with God can make you of no effect/out of commission from Christ.

I think the words "alienated" and "estranged" are too strong a translation here, by the way. It is serious, but "falling down" in this area is not a total loss for a Christian. The word "from" in the phrase "fallen from grace" is not in the Greek text, it is interpreted from the genitive-ablative case of the word "grace" and I think, indicates movement away from – like a pendulum swing – away from grace rather than a total free-fall, in other words, for a Christian it is a movement away from the peace that comes from knowing you are right with God, rather than a loss of salvation.

In a previous sermon, we looked at the twin pitfalls of legalism and licentiousness, and this verse reviews that for us a bit:

- The phrase "Justified by law" speaks of the legalism of Judaism which said you are not right with God unless you get this certain surgical procedure called circumcision that cuts off a piece of skin. This is an improper use of law. Law is unable to do anything except make you a transgressor of laws. All law can do is point you to your need of a savior in light of the fact that you can't obey all the laws. Trying to make yourself into a good person using laws is all backwards and it won't work.

- Licentiousness, on the other hand, = the lifestyle of paganism, which was slavery to the appetites of the body and total disregard of the moral shape of God's character. But Paul says neither circumcision nor uncircumcision does the job.

We are not saved – we do not have a "hope of being right" – by obeying rules or by ignoring rules. We are saved by faith in Christ. We fight both Legalism and Licentiousness through faith. And what does faith do? Faith expresses itself through love. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength."

This is the path of being "in commission/connected/effective" in Christ, this is the path of growing and being sanctified as a Christian: being "in Christ," having "faith" as a result of the work of the Holy "Spirit in" us, and expressing that faith through love. Let's unpack that some more with a quote from Westminster Seminary founder Gresham Machen...

How do you get sanctified?

“...in the last section of ... Galatians... it is not faith that is there represented as producing the life of love but the Spirit of God; the Spirit is there represented as doing exactly what, in the phrase, ‘faith working through love,’ is ascribed to faith. The apparent contradiction leads us on to the right conception of faith. True faith, strictly speaking, does not do anything; it does not give, but receives. So when one says that we do something by faith, that is just another way of saying that we do nothing – at least we do nothing of ourselves.”

~Greshem Machen, *What Is Faith?*

Do nothing? How can that be? But it's what Jesus said too, in effect:

Faith = the Work

So they said to Him, "What shall we do, in order that we may work the works of God?"

And in answer, Jesus said to them, "This is the work of God, that you might believe in this One whom He sent."

~John 6:28-29 NAW



This is a crowd of Galileans who chased Jesus around the lake to get another free meal after He had fed the 5,000. When they come up to Jesus He tells them in vs. 26-27 that this time they are going to have to work for their meal, but this time He will give them food that will feed their lives forever instead of just food that perishes. So they say, "Cool! What do we have to do to get that kind of food?" We'll do whatever you want! You want us to

- Move a mountain?
- Run for public office?
- Give all we have to the poor?
- Move to Outer Mongolia and preach?

And Jesus says, "This is God's kind of work," and he points to Himself and says, "Trust me; that's all the work I'm asking you to do."

It's the same Greek root word for "work" as that used in Galatians 5:6 – it is "faith through love that does the work"

What does God want you to do? Cultivate trust in Jesus!

Why is that work? For one reason, it means not doing so many other things that we want to do. Moving a mountain or moving to Mongolia might be part of what God leads you to do, but in the process, the real work is going to be to trust Jesus all the way through it.

Watchman Nee told a great story that illustrates how this works:

Do nothing in the flesh



- “Satan’s temptations are not designed primarily to make us do something particularly sinful, but merely to cause us to act in our energy... The divine way of victory does not therefore permit of our doing anything at all... outside of Christ.”

~Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life*, p. 157

Start with Nee’s story about how Chinese snipers rendered Japanese tanks harmless by luring the drivers out of the tanks and then picking them off when the tankers stuck their heads outside of the armor of their tank. That’s an illustration of how it is with us working by faith, not stepping out of the armor of Christ to do something in our own fleshly strength, but staying in Christ, in the Spirit.

How do we Improve after Conversion?

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? 2 This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?— 3 Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? 4 Have you suffered so many things in vain—if indeed *it was* in vain? 5 Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, *does He do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?* 6 just as Abraham "believed" God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness."

~Galatians 3:1-6 NKJV

See the contrast Paul draws for the church in Galatia? Law (performed by the flesh) vs. Faith (generated by the Holy Spirit).

These Galatians were real believers, and they were wanting to do the works of God and live the Christian life, but after they heard the gospel from Paul, some Jewish-background believers came along and told them that if they wanted to be REAL Christians - upper-tier Christians - they had to get circumcised and follow all the Jewish ceremonial laws and holidays and such. Paul is saying here, "Whoah folks. You mature as a Christian the same way you become a Christian (and the same way that believers throughout all of history – like Abraham – have done it), and that is through faith, not through doing extra things. In fact, doing those Jewish ceremonies is called "not obeying the truth" in the first verse!

What does Spirit-led Faith Look Like?

- “Living in the Spirit means that I trust the Holy Spirit to do in me what I can not do myself. This life is completely different from the life I would naturally live of myself. Each time I am faced with a new demand from the Lord, I look to Him to do in me what He requires of me... If I have a hasty temper, impure thoughts, a quick tongue or a critical spirit, I shall not set out with a determined effort to change myself; but instead, reckoning myself dead in Christ to these things, I shall look to the Spirit of God to produce in me the needed purity of humility or meekness, confident that He will do so. This is what it means to “stand still, and see the salvation of Jehovah, which He will work for you (Exod. 14:13)”

~Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life*, pp. 158-159



Fruits of the Spirit

- 19 Now the **works** of the flesh are evident, which are:
adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness,
20 idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies,
21 envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like;
of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told *you* in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.
22 But the **fruit** of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,
23 gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.
24 And those *who are* Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.
25 If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.

~ Galatians 5:19-25 NKJV



•Note that the fruit of the Spirit is not called “works.” That’s what the things of the flesh are called. The “fruit” of the Spirit is something that comes only from God’s Spirit, not from your effort.

•A crucified flesh can’t do any work. It is dead. It is “according to the greatness of God’s power which does the work in me” (Colossians 1:29)

•Living by the Spirit is a “walk” not a “work” – let us “walk by the Spirit”

[Note from Nate: This word in v.25 is not the regular Greek word for “walk” this is the word stoichwmen which is walking done in reference to a particular standard (cf. Acts 21:24; Romans 4:12; Galatians 6:16; Philippians 3:16). It implies “lining up with” this standard of reference and walking according to it.]

•Walking AFTER the Spirit indicates that we are following Him, submitting to Him, not acting independently. Rom 8:14 says “as many as are **led** by the Spirit of God, these are called the Sons of God.”

So is there “doing” involved? Yes, but it is a response motivated by faith in Jesus and empowered by His Holy Spirit.

~Notes from Watchman Nee, The Normal Christian Life, p.175

You've already got the whole deal!

“God ... is not a retailer dispensing grace to us in packets, measuring out some patience to the impatient, some love to the unloving, some meekness to the proud, in quantities that we take and work on as a kind of capital. He has given only one gift to meet all our need: His Son Christ Jesus. As I look to Him to live out His life in me, He will be humble and patient and loving and everything else I need – in my stead... Holiness is Christ... Some are afraid to discover deficiency in themselves, and so they never grow... It does not matter what your personal deficiency, or whether it be 101 different things, God has always one sufficient answer: His Son Jesus Christ... ‘Lord, I cannot; therefore I will take my hands off; from now on I trust Thee for that.’ We refuse to act; we depend on Him to do so, and then we enter fully and joyfully into the action He initiates. It is not passivity; it is a most active life, trusting the Lord like that... letting Him live His life in us as we go...”

~Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life*, pp.161-163



As we grow in faith and love and action in line with the Holy Spirit, there seem to be snags along the way, times when it seems like something is missing, times when you fear you will never get it all right, times when you feel very unspiritual.

Illustration of the chair we just bought for my office. The package was missing some parts. There was the back and the seat and the legs, but no bolts to put it together! It can't be a chair unless it has a seat mounted on some legs and a back, so without the bolts it can't even be considered a chair! Our sanctification is not like that, as Watchman Nee explains in his chapter on “The Path of Progress: Walking In the Spirit.”

Conclusion: Our growth usually is incremental and comes in fits and spurts, but Christ is all there for us.

You've already got the power source!

Romans 8:2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death.

“The law is there, but another law superior to it is operating to overcome it, namely the law of life... God delivers us from one law by introducing another law. The law of sin and death is there all the time, but God has put another law into operation – the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus – and that law is strong enough to deliver us from the law of sin and death. It is, you see, a law of *life in Christ* – the resurrection life that in Him has met death in all its forms and triumphed over it (Eph. 1:19-20). The Lord Jesus dwells in our hearts in the person of His Holy Spirit; and if, committing ourselves to Him, we let Him have a clear way, we shall find His new law of life superseding that old law. We shall learn what it is to be “kept [not by our own insufficient strength, but] by the power of God” (1 Peter. 1:5).”

~Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life*, pp.166-168



But, you may say, I don't have the power to change the broken patterns in my life. Sin has too much control over me; I can't help falling into it.

Illustration of dropping a ball. The law of Gravity pulls it down, and the law of gravity never goes away. However, another law of Physics comes into play if I catch the object with my other hand. I am introducing a stronger power that changes the course of this object, namely my hand which is holding it. Watchman Nee describes it like this in his book:

Practical Applications:

- Problem with my “Service-holiness” mentality
- “Being responsible” to grow in righteousness, be respectable, and do something meaningful = disappointment, black hole, cripples my love
- Tell someone else this week how sanctification by lawkeeping didn’t work in your own experience and how important it is to get it from Jesus!
- “Faith involves giving up my own rightness for the righteousness of Christ... It is far easier to keep a rule I have made up or to do a ‘good deed,’ than to daily face the ugly truth about my heart and my desperate need for Jesus... the first steps of faith *feel like death*...” ~Jack Miller
- “If you could change one thing about me, what would it be?” – Then pray for the change.