

The Holiness of God: Can't Make A Touchdown at the 20 Yard Line

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1 Thessalonians 5:14-24; 2 Timothy 2:20-22; John 12:12-19

Our final Scripture reading today is John 12:12-19. Listen now to God's holy, sacred, and perfect Word. "The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the King of Israel!" Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written, "Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt." At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him. Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. Many people, because they had heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him. So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!"

Can you imagine playing a game where you didn't know the rules? It would be very hard to win. When Cam and I recently went to see the Pistons, there was a late call by a ref that changed the outcome of the game. Lots of fans were really upset, and I think the thing that was most upsetting was that nobody really understood the ruling. But sometimes teams lose because they forget the simplest rule of all – you can't win a game if you don't shoot the ball. Imagine if at the next Michigan game the football team just decided their goal was to make it to the 20-yard line. All of you Michigan State fans might be cheering about that. Because no matter what you do, if your sights are short of that end zone, you're not making a touchdown. This applies to almost any area of life. You can't do a job part-way. That's what our discussion today is about.

Palm Sunday is the start of Holy Week. It's the week when Jesus entered triumphantly into Jerusalem, He did His final works and proclaimed His final teachings, and He so thoroughly enraged the religious leaders that they had Him crucified, only for Him to rise again on Sunday. But what's easy to miss is that as far as the crowds were concerned, everything they expected happened on Palm Sunday. Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey and the crowds are overjoyed to see Him. They've heard that Jesus has raised Lazarus from the grave – a man four days dead, nothing ever heard of before. Their shouts of "hosannah" are directed at him. People have come out to welcome Him. They lay their cloaks down on the ground and the palm branches along the road. This is a royal welcome. The crowds are welcoming the man they would crown king.

Jesus accepts their praise and welcome because it is rightfully due Him, and yet this is not the end of the story. Holy Week doesn't end with Palm Sunday; it begins with Palm Sunday. The crowds expect this is the grand finale, because they believe Jesus is going to lead Israel into its great final age where they overthrow the Romans and God's eternal Kingdom is physically established on earth. They believe He is the long-awaited Messiah. They're right, of course, but they don't realize exactly what that means. They don't know that the Messiah will one day come to rule the nations forever, but first He must give Himself up for the sins of the world.

Palm Sunday is Jesus' 20-yard line. I have to imagine how hard this week was for Jesus. For Him, in His earthly self, He is finally receiving the recognition He is due. I can just think that if it were any one of us, we'd probably have been fine with the crowds installing us as king, protecting us with their lives, giving us all the glory. Palm Sunday is a glimpse of what will happen at His second coming, when He arrives with all the heavenly hosts to set things right and to bring about the new heaven and new earth.

But as Sherlock Holmes would say, "the game is still afoot." Had Jesus ended things on Palm Sunday, we would still be left in our sins. If the people had crowned Jesus King of Israel on Palm Sunday, we would not crown Him King of Kings and Lord of Lords on Easter. If Jesus had looked at all that was coming and stepped away, had said, "Father, this is too much," our salvation would not have been accomplished and we would be hopeless.

That's why this week heading towards the cross is so special, so weighty, so important. Jesus is heading towards the destiny His Father has called Him to. He has predicted many times that He was going to be killed at the hands of the religious leaders and would rise again. They didn't understand it; Peter at one point fought it; yet they all knew Jesus was resolute to accomplish the will of the Father. Right after He enters Jerusalem, Jesus speaks about His coming death, and He says, "Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour." And because of Jesus' perseverance, we can all gather here today and worship Him and celebrate Him as our Savior.

This leads us into the theme that we've been talking about the last several weeks in our series on The Holiness of God. We've talked about God's holiness and how it presents a problem for us – how we in our unclean, sinful state cannot enter God's presence. We talked about how the old covenant God made in the law made a temporary way for the Israelites to draw near to Him, and we discussed how Jesus provides a permanent solution – how His once-for-all-time sacrifice cleanses anyone of their sin who turns to Him in faith and trust. When Jesus saves us, our sins are removed from us, not just glossed over, and not just one sin or sins we've done in the past but all sins that we will ever commit. We give all honor and glory and praise to Jesus because only through Him do we become clean in the sight of the Father.

But the last thing that we haven't discussed in full is our sanctification. We've touched on it, mentioned it, but we need to dive into it fully. Because believe it or not, our justification by Jesus – the being declared "not guilty" part – is not the final goal of our lives by itself. The apostle Peter, in verse 9 of chapter 1 of his first letter, tells us the goal of our faith is the salvation of our souls. Meanwhile, Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:9 says that our goal, our ambition, is to please God no matter our circumstances. In Philippians 3, Paul writes about pressing towards the goal to win the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Sanctification – which literally means the process of being made holy – is the next big step. After sanctification there is only one thing, glorification, which is time-based; it happens when we arrive in the Kingdom of God complete and whole and ready to live in His presence forever. Glorification comes at death and God has complete control over that. So sanctification is literally the last thing on our list when it comes to our salvation before our homecoming. As far as Christians are concerned, in this life, sanctification is our goal line.

As a church, our priority in evangelism, our stated desire, is not to have an end point of having people pray a prayer asking for God's forgiveness or a prayer stating they believe in Jesus. We talk about becoming fully-formed disciples of Jesus. Look in the Bible and you will never find the so-called "sinner's prayer." It's because Jesus didn't tell the disciples in the Great Commission right before He went to be with the Father to give people new facts.

He told them to make disciples. Jesus' followers went and spread the news about Jesus wherever God led them and then organized those new believers into churches where they could become disciples. A fully-formed disciple is someone who has been transformed, who is being sanctified, who is being changed into a holy person. The New Testament is mostly a bunch of letters from Jesus' disciples to Christians about their new way of life in Jesus and how to live as His holy, sanctified people.

The process of being made holy is super important. Scripture speaks about our sanctification being complete but also still happening – it's true of our salvation, too. In Hebrews 10, the author states that by one offering Jesus has perfected for all time those who *are being* sanctified, present tense. But in 1 Corinthians, Paul speaks to the believers in that city as having *been* sanctified, past tense. In the book of Acts, Paul speaks about it in the perfect tense – they *are* sanctified and *continue to be* sanctified.

The point is, when you are saved by Jesus Christ, when you are justified before the Father and your sins are forgiven, your sanctification – your actually being made holy before the Father – is completely and totally assured. It will happen, period. But nevertheless, it is still a process throughout our lives, a process that we know will come to its proper completion. We are saved by Christ alone and His holiness, yet we will truly share in His holiness and possess it ourselves in the Kingdom.

So if God calls us to holiness – if we must have holiness to see the Lord, as Hebrews 12:14 tells us – what do we need to know about sanctification, the process by which we are truly made holy in God's sight? There are a few things.

One, true *sanctification is only possible once you are justified by Christ alone through faith alone*. There is no possible way for us to become fully holy on our own. When the Hebrews returned home after 70 years in exile, they realized that it was the nation's sin over hundreds of years that led to their banishment. They were much more devoted to God than they had been in the past. But a problem sprang up. There was a movement to fence the law of Moses – to make rules around those rules so they could never be broken. Rigid definitions beyond the law became all important. (That fence beyond the law is the reasoning why observant Jews today don't open their refrigerators on the Sabbath for fear of turning on the light inside and thus doing work on the Sabbath, for example.) There was a sense in which this was good – people were far more aware of the Law of God than ever before.

But the problem was, they mistook their fence for holiness. Follow the fence around the Law, you've never broken the Law, you are acceptable before God – that was the thought. But the problem with the fence was, it was rickety. It had huge holes where sin could walk right in. While the fence dealt with the letter of the Law, it didn't deal with the Spirit of the Law.

Follow the fence and you'll never murder anyone, but you could still hold hatred and animosity in your heart. Follow the fence and you'll never commit adultery, but you could lust all day long. You could divorce your wife and find another for as trivial a reason as burning your breakfast. (That sounds like a law made up by a guy, doesn't it?) The fence itself was corrupt, because the fence made special exceptions for the rich and powerful. It made it hard on the poor and easy on the wealthy and well-connected.

When Jesus said to the crowds, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven," He was speaking about the holiest, most righteous people of the day. We might be surprised by that because the Pharisees showed their true colors with Jesus – vicious, enamored with their own importance and position, unfeeling towards others. And yet they were the ones most engaged with the Scriptures and most determined to live a perfect life before God! It went to prove that you cannot truly sanctify yourself without God's deep and rich and true involvement.

And when the believers in Galatia tried to do the same thing, relying on the Law rather than Jesus to make them holy, Paul sent them the fiercest letter he ever wrote, telling them that if they tried to justify themselves by following all the rules of the Law, Christ was of no use to them – they wouldn't be saved! Instead, Paul told them to live by the Holy Spirit's guidance, and then they would not be under the Law any more.

That leads us to the next thought: *God sanctifies us, yet we have the privilege of participating in our own sanctification.* We do not save ourselves. We cannot sanctify ourselves. But after we have trusted on Jesus for salvation, we get to play a part. God calls us to be conformed to the image of Jesus. The Holy Spirit makes that possible, but we live it out.

God is fully involved with our sanctification.¹ The Father sanctifies us in His truth (John 17:17). The Son cleanses us through the Word (Ephesians 5:25-27). The Holy Spirit washes us, regenerating us and renewing us (Titus 3:5). God is deeply engaged with the process of transforming our lives and making His image shine through us once again.

Yet we also have many significant parts of our sanctification to attend to. In our sanctification, we are united with Christ, and so we are to have the same attitude as Christ (Philippians 2). Hebrews 12:4 says that we as Christians are to fight against sin and not grow weary in the battle. Paul tells us in Romans 12 to offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God in light of God's great mercy to us. Paul wrote to the Philippians to continue to work out our salvation with fear and trembling – to give God the honor and respect and reverence He is due.

But isn't it amazing that in our sanctification, we not only become more like God, but God becomes active in our lives more and more? What Jesus did on the cross frees us from the power of sin, and because of it, we are enabled to walk in newness of life, as Paul writes in Romans 6:4. In Romans 6:5, Paul confirms that we are united with Christ in His death and resurrection. We die with Christ to sin, and we live with Him and for Him forever.

¹ For this section and its wording, I am indebted to Mike Sullivan's summary and extrapolation of the book *Five Views on Sanctification*, found at <https://dwellcc.org/learning/essays/five-views-sanctification>.

Last thought about this for today: *sanctification is a process over time, so do not fear when you realize you are inadequate for the task.* The Dunning-Kruger effect is a psychological truth that people with low abilities in a subject overestimate their ability, while people with high ability in a subject underestimate theirs. It's why a person who's been playing guitar for six days is more likely to volunteer for the praise band than someone who's played for six hundred. Someone who's never done taxes likely thinks it's a lot simpler than someone who's had to file taxes for a business. It's a human trait that when we are genuinely ignorant about a task, we think it's easier than when we explore it and learn just how deep and difficult it really is.

In the same way, at the beginning of our discipleship journey, we expect things will be easy. God's on our side, so it *should* be easy, right? We get to bypass hardships and struggles, right? And acting good shouldn't be a problem. Now that I'm on the right path, it's going to be smooth sailing. Sadly, many who start on the path of discipleship never get past this because they get a glimpse of what the road is really like and they decide to veer off their own way.

But discipleship and sanctification are difficult. Jesus called it "daily carrying our cross." If that's not hard, I don't know what is! And yet, slowly but surely, God does His work and we cooperate with it to be more and more like Jesus our Savior. In Philippians 3, Paul lays out all the reasons he had confidence in his own self-righteousness as a Pharisee before he came to know Christ. Yet after coming to Christ, he considers all that worthless; he calls it garbage, and that's putting it politely, because now he knows Jesus. He hasn't obtained all that he's called to or been made perfect, but he forgets what is behind and he strains towards Christ.

In the same way, the more you pursue Christ, the more you become a disciple, the more likely you are to be disappointed in how far away from the goal of holiness you are. When you start paying serious attention to being more like Jesus, the more you become aware of your flawed thinking, your serious shortcomings, your besetting sins that keep coming back even though you'd thought you'd slayed them. You think you've made progress only to realize, wow, I'm still a sinner saved by grace because I am not very good at being Christ-like.

You know what? That's OK. Not to settle into mediocrity or some sort of second-class Christianity, but it's OK to feel like you haven't made the progress towards God you've wanted. Because now you see that you need God all along the way to become a truly holy person. You cling to Christ as your hope more and more as you recognize the depths you could sink to. You bring yourself more and more often to the feet of Jesus, turning yourself over to Him, knowing that He is your true hope, not your own self-righteousness. And in a beautiful twist, as we rely less and less on ourselves, the more we cooperate with the work of the Spirit in making us the godly people the Father desires us to be. While we will never reach perfection in this life, we know that when we reach our eternal home, we will have it – that holiness that God has created in us and we have cooperated with Him to see.

This week, we see how Jesus pressed on in the face of scorn, abuse, and then death to reach His goal – our salvation purchased with His blood on the cross. May we push towards our goal as well – not being complacent in Jesus' work for us, not waiting on the 20-yard line, but actively cooperating with the Spirit in the sanctification of our souls so that we may live in the joy of the Lord, knowing His smile is upon us as we grow closer to Him day by day.