

Sanctification Is Not A Pollyanna Hope

A Sermon by Pr. David Johnson

I don't know if you remember an old classic children's book called *Pollyanna*, written in 1913 by Eleanor H. Porter. After the novel was published it soon became a favorite and spawned a number of "glad book" sequels and movie adaptations. You will recall the 1960 Disney version with Hayley Mills; it was a favorite of ours when the kids were little. It's a tender story about a little girl who has lost her missionary parents and whose kind nature turns a somber little New England town upside down.

If you recall the story, what often irritated Pollyanna's peers, but soon endeared her to them, was her infernal ability to look for the best in things. In fact, she even introduces a family game to the townsfolk called the "glad game," in which she challenges people to look for the good in even the most unbecoming situations. She explains that her missionary father created this game as a result of combatting the often frustrating concerns of ministry and missions.

However, this mindset wasn't just something for dealing with difficult situations, it was also something that drove Pollyanna (*via her father*) to look for the best in even difficult people. It was this view of life that motivated Pollyanna's dad to research the 800+ "glad passages" of Scripture and observe, "When you look for the bad, expecting it, you will get it." This is an important principle many of us forget as we deal with, as H. B. London put it, the "Joy-suckers" of life.

In fact, it is this very truth that we see the apostle Paul apply as he begins his first letter to the young believers in the Roman city of Corinth. After all, Corinth was a nasty city, one of the worst in the area. It was not only filled with various temples and places of worship, it was also the center of all kinds of immoral and wicked practices and beliefs. As one historical commentator points out:

"Corinth was a wicked city even as larger cities in the empire went at this period. The very term "Corinthian" meant a profligate, and the verb "to Corinthianize" meant to have intercourse with prostitutes. The temple of Venus in the old city boasted that a thousand female slaves were kept there who were free to strangers...Money was freely spent for sinful pleasures. Paul wrote his description of pagan vice (Rom. 1:18-32), in Corinth."

So when Paul begins 1 Corinthians with this greeting, you have to pause and ask, who was he writing to?

1 Corinthians 1:2-3 To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours: ³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Well, the truth is that Paul wasn't being either naïve or dishonest. He wasn't varnishing the truth about who he was addressing, or living in some kind of denial. What

Paul did was just what Pollyanna's father had practiced. Paul was applying a foundational truth that he would later write in his second letter to this very church,

2 Corinthians 5:17-18 Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. ¹⁸ Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation...

When Paul first visited the area of Corinth on his second missionary journey (*Acts 18:1-11*), a church was planted in the area. It wasn't a megachurch, or a flashy worship center like we think of today (*though there were "many people," v.10*). It was simply a group of people who had turned from their former lives and placed their faith in Jesus Christ. Many of them even faced great opposition from their peers in the process. So by the time Paul left for Ephesus (*just 18 months later*), the oldest disciple was only 1 ½ years old, spiritually. Not really long enough to "banish their baggage."

In fact, it was probably the group's youth and inexperience which led to the concerns brought to Paul's attention about the Corinthians. I mean, if you read this letter, you soon see Paul having to address a host of wrong-headed theology and religious practices. But yet, Paul had chosen to see these young believers, not from the perspective of their fleshly achievements or failures, but in light of God's grace and transforming power.

Lenski observes, "*Paul calls the Corinthians "they that are sanctified" in spite of the fact that he has much fault to find with them...When Paul describes the Corinthians he states what God has made of them, "they that are sanctified, that are called saints," the passive idea is found in both expressions...But the passives show that this is praise for what God has wrought and not for anything the Corinthians have done. This fact is quite significant for an understanding of the body of the letter, which has much to criticize in regard to the Corinthians."*

You see, Paul makes no attempt to deny the past sins or failures of his Corinthian readers. He is well aware of their former lifestyles and even their current mistakes as believers. He is not naïve to the weakness of their personal resolve. But at the same time, neither does he doubt the power and transforming grace of God.

In fact, Paul is so convinced that God's grace is more than able to sanctify (*make holy*) these immature Saints, that he makes that declaration part of his greeting (*v.2&4*):

1 Corinthians 1:2 To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours...

1 Corinthians 1:4 I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus...

Paul chose to make God's grace his focus, rather than the "religious" side of these believers. He doesn't address, nor praise, their piety nor spiritual gains. But neither does he condemn their failures nor mistakes. Paul

chooses to see these young Christians for what they are, “sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling...recipients of God’s grace in Christ Jesus.”

I find this to be a marvelous example, especially considering the past track-record within much of the church. For a great part of the church’s history, terms like “saint” and “Christian” were reserved for those who had proven that they deserved the label. But sadly, that puts the burden of growth and sanctification on the person, on their own strength to change and perform well.

Paul, on the other hand, understands and commits himself to see people as children of God, projects to be refined and transformed by the powerful Grace of God. He understood that people can’t change themselves, any more than water can turn to wine, or the dead rise to life. Only God can take the material and make it supernatural.

Paul elaborates on the totality of these believer’s transformation:

1 Corinthians 1:5-9 ...that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge,⁶ even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you,⁷ so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ,⁸ who will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁹ God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

In everything:

- Speech* – God’s grace changes how they talk
- Knowledge* – Grace informs what they know, their worldview
(Both of these have impacted their public testimony as Christians)
- Gifted* – God’s supernatural abilities
- Eternal outlook* – God’s grace give us an eternal perspective
- Eternally validated* – God’s grace keeps you ‘til the end
- Eternally purified* – God’s grace cleanses you completely

No, Paul wasn’t living in some kind of “Pollyanna” world, where everything was wonderful, and every cloud had a silver lining. He wasn’t blind, deceived, nor naïve. He knew these people, and the blackness of their past. But he also knew the power and grace of his God. And he was committed to see past the darkness, to the glory and redemption of Jesus Christ in their lives.

It is true, “When you look for the bad, expecting it, you will get it.” But it is also true, as Paul concluded:

1 Corinthians 1:9 God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

And on that basis, every person who puts their faith in Christ is “*sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling...recipients of God’s grace in Christ Jesus.*”