

“Burning Questions, Hidden Treasures”

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2 Corinthians 4:5-12

⁵For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. ⁶For it is God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

⁷But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

⁸We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. ¹¹For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. ¹²So death is at work in us, but life in you.”

A little more than 30 years ago, my little Italian mother-in-law named Josephine, who was a widow and the source of the best meat balls in Quincy, Massachusetts, suddenly became enamored by professional football on the television. We cannot be sure where or how it started, who she heard talking about it, or if it was a random happening as she flipped through the channels, but somehow she spontaneously found it quite exciting. At first, she didn't know a field goal from a first down, but she stayed glued to the game on the screen. She was openly upset when Drew Bledsoe was hurt and replaced by this man she had never heard of – this 'Tom Brady' guy. Who did he think he was, anyway, taking Drew's place on the team?

I suppose she began to sense the excitement over certain aspects of the game and she tried to rise to the occasion.

“Oh, look! He caught the ball!” she might say.

“Jo,” I would answer, “It was an interception!”

“I see. Is that bad?”

Until one day she realized that if she was going to really enjoy this game and share the moments with the rest of the family, she needed to understand the game. So, she asked our two sons, who were both in high school and playing football themselves, to write down the basics fundamentals of the game. With each passing visit, she had them write down and explain more and more until she became a walking expert. I once heard her ask our oldest son what was meant by a nickel defense.

I’m glad she didn’t ask me.

And she came to accept Tom Brady as Bledsoe’s replacement and a staunch New England Patriot fan emerged in that house in Quincy, Massachusetts. When we would visit her during football season, she would always have something to say about the team and something she read in the tabloids about individual players. Her enthusiasm was almost contagious.

This had been a gap in her secular life, but not any more.

So, now I am going to commit a mild act of heresy. I am going to compare Josephine’s journey into football to the justification and sanctification we go through in our Christian journey.

I will not be so specific as to say I am comparing the New England Patriots to Christianity because there are a few Steelers’, Eagles’, and Buccaneers’ fans who might run me out of town.

But, there is a rough similarity in the thought process.

As background to our scripture today, part of Paul’s reason for addressing the church at Corinth was to defend his own authority to be preaching the gospel of Jesus. Paul, being the wise man he was, and a

born preacher, used this challenge to focus even more firmly on our relationship with God and on Jesus as the pathway to understanding God's glory.

In justification, we become Christian believers. In sanctification, we decide what we are going to do with our beliefs, how are we going to grow?

First things first; justification occurs when God takes the first step. But we must respond to the music He gives us. We must march to His drum beat, not our own. Too many Christians call themselves justified based on their pious accomplishments. God does not keep that kind of score. Like I told you before, he forgave and accepted a thief on a cross who had no time to accomplish anything.

So, justification is the beginning and then we start our journey of sanctification. Usually, we do not know where to start. Forgive me for using a simple earthly comparison, but just like my mother-in-law, she saw something that pulled her like a magnet and she knew there was a treasure of enjoyment somewhere in that game on the TV. And if you want something bad enough and cannot find a starting point of understanding, you make your own starting point, somewhere. It may be a false start, but we keep plugging away until spiritual momentum takes hold.

Let's be clear about something; sanctification is not a one-time, unique experience. It is truly a journey, a series of steps and levels.

Human kind has always been in search of meaning. Why? Being made in God's image, we have something Holy and sacred in our thoughts. What is it? What treasure do we seek?

Jesus gave us a good clue. In Luke 17:21, he told us the Kingdom of God was within us.

That's why I decided the title of today's sermon should include 'Burning Question.'

We each hold a treasure in our hearts. Why did Paul mention 'Treasures in jars of clay?' That's where folks kept their treasures hidden. What thief would think to look in an old, broken clay jar for something valuable? By analogy, we, our bodies, can be broken, but the treasure remains secure; the treasure in your hearts. Such treasure can only come from God.

Paul felt the need to speak in this way because the church at Corinth was being influenced by people who would distort the truth and deceive the unsuspecting for their own gain.

Paul was quick to tell the church that he was not preaching the virtues of himself or his followers, but rather Jesus Christ as Lord. In mentioning jars of clay, he said 'we are pressed from all sides, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. Could he be talking about the false starts I mentioned earlier?

How would they say it at the Silver Spurs Arena? "Get back on the horse!" As my mother-in-law would say, "That's okay, there's always the second half!"

So, for the sake of the story, let's say you have found a real excitement in knowing the promise of Jesus, but you are not sure about lots of things, including what to do with that knowledge.

Sound familiar?

Something that Phillip Yancey said in his book on prayer was that each day we should ask God to show us what He was doing that day and then tell us how we could be part of it. I have come to live by that rule.

"Lord, what are you doing; how can I help?"

Hear God's Word in the scripture. Read between the lines and put yourself in the verses. Then listen. Listen to what God tells you. If you can form an image, a context, of what God is like, then you will know what fits when you think you are hearing God's Word. God's truth is straight-forward. He is not going to tell you to drive off a cliff. God will guide; take that to the bank.

He will not abandon you.

Learn by listening and by doing.

When you find that hidden treasure, know that it is not based on some decision you made. It is not at the same depth as deciding whether to go fishing today or tomorrow; to eat lunch here or there; to buy this car or that car. It is God calling, God commanding, not you. And he will not call you into something without giving you the courage and the tools.

That assurance goes back, even to the OT, to the book of Joshua. One of my favorite OT verses is from Joshua 1:9. God has just told Joshua to lead the people into the Promised Land and take possession of it.

It reads: *Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.*

Think about that!

Now, tell me, why would God say that and limit it just to Joshua? He meant it for us today as well.

I am on a learning curve and I have a confession to make. The word, 'Sanctify' was not at the top of my vocabulary until just a few years ago. As I said earlier, sanctification follows justification. Bible commentaries hold page after page of discussion on this topic, but my simple mind likes things in simple terms.

To sanctify is to make holy, to separate from the world, to consecrate to God. It means God has laid claim to you and that verse from Joshua should come echoing back.

Sanctification is not forgiveness, victory over sin, peace in one's soul, hope of heaven; He gave us these things at the beginning of our journey, at the point of justification. God's gift in sanctification is fellowship with Him. God gives us nothing less than Himself.

What could be more joyful? It reminds me of the verse from Second Timothy that reads (I like the King James version):

...because I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day.

"I know whom I have believed – I know!"

When we arise each morning, we should realize and remember that we are in God's world. It should make you happy just to be alive. And it should show! People will see it and wonder what you have been thinking! And that's great; let them wonder.

I believe that as we put into practice more and more of what Jesus taught us, we move further and further along that path of sanctification.

Putting it in concise terms of definition; sanctification is becoming Christ-like. Putting it in terms of application is much more; things like service, sacrifice, dedication, humility, patience, forgiveness, compassion. Knowing about something is not the same as living it out. Sometimes being Christ-like can be downright messy.

It starts with attitude, then action. I said people will notice and eventually someone will ask about the source of your joy. It's the itch and scratch idea; the rhetorical statement. Have your answer ready.

You think I am kidding? Ask Stephen Ministers and they will probably tell you about someone who, after many visits and many conversations, would ask, "Why are you doing this for me?"

The sanctified person might answer something like, “Because I have God in my life.” Be truthful and not ashamed to use God’s name. A generic answer that sound like, “Oh, I am just doing the right thing,” doesn’t tell the whole story. Even the Pharisees could say that, and from that standpoint, we still have Pharisees around today.

A sanctified life is a life of speaking out without fear. Not just to such a question, but as a response to seeing injustice and pointing it out. Paul frequently refers to the ‘light’ of God’s glory. We are not the source of the light, but rather, mirrors that reflect the light.

The world expects us to speak out. In my reading from Dr. Shirley Guthrie, he tells us of Albert Camus, an agnostic who fought with the French Resistance in WWII. He was later asked to address a group of Christians and he admonished them in the harshest of terms for not speaking up over the slaughter of millions of Jews. He predicted that Christians would continue to give lip service and compromised actions and lose all the virtue of revolt and indignation that characterized Christianity so long ago. He concluded that if his predictions are right, Christians will survive and Christianity will not.

He was looking for evidence that Christians take their sanctification seriously.

We have genocide ongoing in parts of the world today and where are the Christian voices? Yes, I know, this is speaking out in the most global sense. But what about speaking out against injustice in a local sense? At a personal level?

When we hear of off-color comments or jokes about race, gender, disability, domestic abuse or any other things that are spoken of only in whispers, do we speak up and show our disapproval or do we silently chuckle and say nothing? Do we become temporarily one of those good people who allow evil to grow by saying and doing nothing?

When we speak up, would there be a price to pay for speaking up?
Probably; a social price.

We hear a lot about declining churches. Outsiders are critical of us not so much because of our beliefs, but because we do not always practice the faith we profess. There is no such thing as Christian faith without Christian action.

As Christians, we live in the world and not of the world. How can you make a difference in the world if you are not in it? Private spirituality is selfish. It creates no sacrifice, no cross-bearing. It is like uneaten food; it has no nutritional value.

As we move further into the meaning of sanctification, we learn that it does not involve forcing us to live a miserable life, doing drudgery for the sake of drudgery, suffering just for the sake of suffering. It means we have work to do and God gives us the courage, tools, and ability to do it. This does not mean it is easy. But we can approach it with cheerful confidence. It is not a burden, but a privilege.

But, it does not fix everything. If you remember nothing else from today's sermon, know that being a Christian is not a prosperity gospel. People will still get sick, lose their jobs, stray from the straight and narrow. And you, the sanctified Christian, should be there to show them how a relationship with God still has top priority. It is not a magic solution to all of our problems.

You will not have all the answers. Christianity provides many answers, but it creates even more questions. It gives meaning and purpose to our existence, but it does not eradicate doubt or struggle.

And you will make mistakes. God only knows, I have made plenty of them. We are going to stumble, make bad decisions, cause hurt to others, take the wrong turn, but God's Grace will always be there.

I hope we never stop learning; learning and changing. The hidden treasure in our hearts need not be hidden. We must first believe it is there and then go looking for it.

Amen.