

"Christianity, Inside and Out"

Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Grace and peace be yours in never-ending supply from God our Father – the Giver of all good gifts – through the Messiah, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I'm sure you've heard the expression by which someone claims to know a particular subject "*inside and out*." Maybe the expression made sense as it was originally used, but it certainly is used in nonsensical ways today. What, for example, does it mean to know math inside and out? Or fishing or politics? What exactly is the *outside* of something like math, fishing, or politics?

We are supposed to know our Bible "inside and out." We get what that means but, again, the expression really doesn't make a whole lot of sense. God wants us to know the *inside* of our Bibles; I'm not sure he cares how familiar we are with the outside .

The problem here is that using the expression "inside and out" as loosely as we do tends to mask those areas in life where it really *does* have meaning and application. A doctor, for example, can know the human body *inside and out*. A mechanic can know an engine *inside and out*. The particular topic we examine this morning is Christianity in general and the individual Christian in particular, and there we do find an inside and out.

We will therefore focus this morning on the difference between justification and sanctification. One happens outside the Christian and the other happens inside. This is a critical distinction that every Christian needs to understand thoroughly. The goal of our study of God's Word this morning is to make sure each of us does have that solid understanding of the difference between justification and sanctification, and to thereby understand Christianity, inside and out. We find the basis for our study in Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, the Fifth Chapter:

^{ESV} **1 Thessalonians 5:16-24** *Rejoice always,* ¹⁷ *pray without ceasing,* ¹⁸ *in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.* ¹⁹ *Do not quench the Spirit.* ²⁰ *Do not despise prophecies.* ²¹ *Test all things; hold fast what is good.* ²² *Abstain from every form of evil.* ²³ *Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.* ²⁴ *He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.*

These are the words of our God. We would do well to read and study these words as if they were a hand-written letter, addressed to us, and signed by God himself. These words are *that* certain and *that* personal. Confident then of these words, and desiring one of the very things that we study today (sanctification) so we pray, "**Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth.**" Amen.

What do you suppose would happen if we were to simply declare each and every person in every prison or jail in our nation to be innocent of all charges and then to simply release them?

We do have some Biblical backing for that sort of thing, don't we? Isn't that exactly what God did for every human being in connection with his Son? Don't we hear every Sunday how God the Father has declared the whole world of sinners not guilty, having condemned his perfect Son in their stead and as their substitute? Why then don't we apply this Biblical example in our prisons? Why not declare all convicted criminals to be not guilty, as God has so declared us? Why not set them free, as God set us free?

Clearly this would not be a particularly good idea. To suddenly release our entire prison population into society would create instant terror and chaos; it would cripple our society. A substantial percentage of those released would undoubtedly pick up where they left off when arrested. They are in prison for a reason.

But how do you know unless you try? Isn't that what God did with us? Rather than just destroy sinful mankind before we could do any more harm, God sent his Son to pay for our sins, and then declared the whole world not guilty. What's the difference?

The answer is that no change will necessarily have taken place *inside* of each human heart. The only change that will have occurred would be *outside* of the prisoner, and would affect him only in that way.

Yet this ill-advised notion of simply declaring all prisoners not guilty and then releasing even hardened criminals back into society helps us to understand the difference between justification and sanctification. It also reveals at least one of the reasons why the unbelieving world around us often regards the Christian faith as both ridiculous and, more to the point, *dangerous*.

Justification is a *declaration* by God, and therefore takes place outside of the human being. That's not to say that God's actions in justification have no effect on man. We are, after all, the ones being declared innocent of sin. Justification however remains true even if the whole world were to reject it as false. In other words, the fact that man rejects God's proclamation of forgiveness does not make that proclamation false. That declaration, again, takes place outside of man and stands as true whether we believe it or not.

The point here is that God's declaration that the debt for all sin has been paid by Jesus does not, in and of itself, necessarily change anything *within* the human being. In fact if Christianity were only what the godless think it is, such a religion would make the wholesale release of murderous prisoners look tame in comparison. Imagine a church or religion made up of human beings who continue to give themselves over to every imaginable sin and depravity, but who nonetheless still believe that they have God's assurance that every one of those sins is forgiven. Talk about a world gone mad.

Yet understand that this is exactly how the world understands the Christian faith. They hear of sins forgiven and of a debt paid in full by another, and they envision something like a herd of meth-addled, wild-eyed sociopaths on a permanent spring break – with diplomatic immunity and unlimited credit cards. What they fail to take into account is the other aspect of the Christian faith that we study this morning: *Sanctification*, which we here identify as "*the change on the inside.*"

First some clarification so we have our terms straight. You may well recall from confirmation class that the Bible uses "sanctification" in what we call a wide and a narrow sense. This is not as complicated as it might sound. This morning we use the word in its most common narrow sense, where it refers to the internal transformation that the Holy Spirit works *within* the sinner once he has been brought to faith.

This definition is critical, in part because it is this very thing that separates the Christian from the sociopath. The world cannot fathom how individuals who have been told that another has already paid for every one of their sins would not simply run wild with such information, such implied impunity. They know nothing about sanctification.

Justification, again, takes place outside of man – which, when you think about it, offers tremendous comfort and assurance. Justification (God's declaration that the debt for all of mankind's sins has been paid by Jesus Christ) takes place *outside* of us and exists as an accomplished fact

whether we believe it or not. The comfort comes in knowing that this declaration from our God remains true and valid no matter what I do and no matter how I feel about it. It remains true even if every human being rejects it as false. The comfort then is that according to God's own proclamation, my sins cannot now condemn me. The only thing that condemn me is my rejection of Jesus' sin payment. In other words, how I *feel* about Jesus can never cancel what he did for me. The fact that justification happened outside of me, and is in no way affected by how I think or feel, provides a most unique peace and comfort.

Sanctification is different in that it takes place within us. It follows after justification and conversion but, more than that, it is a divine action that changes man on the inside. What the Holy Spirit accomplishes in us – the moment the new man is created in us – is a change of will. Where once we knew and desired only evil continually, the new man in us *wants* to do God's will. A moral transformation is thereby worked within every single Christian.

Those who fear Christianity don't understand sanctification. They don't understand the change that is worked in man by God the Holy Spirit. All have been declared not guilty, but only those who have been brought to saving faith in this promise undergo a dramatic *internal* change or transformation – a rebirth. With the rebirth of the new man in us comes the loathing of sin and the desire to live in perfect harmony with God's will. While prior to conversion human beings might attempt to obey God's commands only out of fear, or in an effort to earn something from God, conversion leaves us with a *desire* to obey. There is no fear or compulsion involved, for obedience is the natural desire of that new man within us.

Our text lists some of the changes that take place – some of the desires that Christians share: "**Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks... Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.**" Just listen to those words, and let them form an image or picture in your mind of the kind of person who now *wants* to put them into practice. Does this sound like the kind of person that any society ought to fear? Does it sound like the kind of person that revels in sin because someone else agreed to suffer the punishment? Obviously not. When he brings us to faith, the Holy Spirit changes us on the inside. This isn't something we do; the Holy Spirit alone works this change in us.

Yet this then presents another question. Why does Paul even mention these things if this transformation is alone the work of the Holy Spirit within us? Why does Paul bother with such evangelical admonitions if the Holy Spirit has already worked this inner desire for righteousness in the Christian? Our text answers this question in the next verse: ***"Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."*** The problem, of course, is that this inner transformation is never complete, not as long as we still have our sinful flesh. Paul prays for a total, complete sanctification for the believers in Thessalonica, but he also knows that such things cannot be fully accomplished until we are finally rid of the old Adam in heaven. So also Paul, when he wrote to the Philippians, spoke of his own *life-long struggle*: ***"Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."*** (Philippians 3:12-14)

You and I hear such things, and we acknowledge that these things are true and right, but what real and practical advantage is there to knowing such truths? What, in other words, is the great advantage in learning that the Holy Spirit works to bring about a moral transformation within me *if it is indeed the Holy Spirit alone who does such things?*

The answer is that because we are both old man and new man we lose sight of the target, which is perfect obedience. The Holy Spirit brings us to faith and thereby creates the desire, but it is man who is to carry out the works. ***"It is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure,"*** yet it is not God ***"who does his good pleasure."*** It is you, the child of God. For that desire to be continually rekindled we need to feast regularly on Word and Sacrament. That's the part that we often miss, isn't it? We imagine that we only need to hear God's Word to create and then maintain saving faith. We also need that Word to fulfill our calling and to remain singly dedicated to the work of the gospel. We need the strength of that Word to be what we are supposed to be – witnesses for Christ and ambassadors of the gospel.

Do you find yourself failing to ***"rejoice always"***? Failing to ***"pray without ceasing"***? Failing to ***"give thanks to God in everything,"*** failing to ***"hold fast what is good,"*** and failing to ***"abstain from every evil"***? The solution – the only solution – is a greater measure of the Bread of Life – the Word of God. That's how and where God gives Christians not only the

ability to believe the objective facts of justification but also the desire and the guidance we need to walk in harmony with his will.

Thanks be to God both for our justification and our sanctification. Meet with him regularly in his Word, and know, as we are assured in the last verse of our text, that he himself will preserve you in that saving faith until he calls you home: ***"May your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it."*** Meet daily with God in his Word, and then trust him to do what he promised. Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Isaiah 61:1-3, 10-11** The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; ² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; ³ to grant to those who mourn in Zion-- to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified. ¹⁰ I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. ¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations.

^{ESV} **John 1:6-8, 19-28** There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸ He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. ¹⁹ ¶ And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." ²¹ And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." ²² So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." ²⁴ ¶ (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) ²⁵ They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" ²⁶ John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, ²⁷ even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." ²⁸ These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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The Third Sunday in Advent – December 17, 2017

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 66

"Hark the Glad Sound, the Savior Comes"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Epistle Lesson: (Isaiah 61:1-3, 10-11) When asked by John the Baptist's disciples if he was the Promised Messiah, Jesus himself answered by quoting this very prophecy as that which identifies him as the One that was promised. Just as Jesus is the fulfillment of this ancient prophecy from Isaiah, so also Jesus can and should be seen throughout the Old Testament. Jesus is the One – our only Lord and Savior.

Psalm 100 (Supplement page 35) (Brown Hymnal)

The New Testament Lesson: (John 1:6-8, 19-28) The Jews of Jesus' day were big on form over substance. They demonstrate as much in our second reading by asking John the Baptist not about the substance of his teaching and baptism, but about the formal authority (or lack thereof) to do what he was doing. As the Great Forerunner of the long-promised Messiah, John pointed to the One who was coming. Our calling today is to point our neighbor to the Savior who has now come, and is coming again.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed (Brown Hymnal page 15)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 65 (Stanzas 1-2, 5) (Red Hymnal)

"When Sinners See Their Lost Condition"

The Sermon – 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"Christianity, Inside and Out"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 55 (Red Hymnal)

"Come, Thou Precious Ransom, Come"

The Prayers

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 65 (Stanza 6) (Red Hymnal)

"When Sinners See Their Lost Condition"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

Attendance – Sunday (37) Ave (40) Wed (26) Nov Mortgage Balance (\$21,490)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Christmas Eve Rehearsal
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:30 a.m.	– Fellowship Meal
	-12:00 p.m.	– Annual Voters' and WF Meetings
Wednesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Christmas Eve Rehearsal
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time
	-5:00 p.m.	– Christmas Eve Service
Monday	-10:00 a.m.	– Christmas Day Worship Service

CLC News – Pastor Nathan Pfeiffer has returned the call to Immanuel of Mankato, MN.

Church Council Notes – All members of the Church Council were present for the meeting on Monday, December 11. Treasurer Adams reported a negative balance of \$1,227 in the General Fund. The Council voted to recommend to the Voters that our CEF note with the Synod be cashed in, and that the proceeds be used to pay off our mortgage and to purchase a new copy machine. The balance of that note (about \$2,000) would be placed into the General Fund. The following have been nominated to fill the two open Council positions: Travis Hill, Ty Jonas, Mike McEnroe, Dan Meyer, Gary Miller, and Loren Ollenburger. Gary Miller is currently serving and has agreed to serve again. The other incumbent, Fred Adams, has asked to be relieved of his duties. Two 2018 Budget alternatives will be presented to the Voters (one assuming the use of our CEF note funds, the other not). The next Council meeting will be an organizational meeting following the Voters' Meeting on Sunday.

Schedule – Please note the schedule for the coming week, as listed above. Parents and children in particular please note the Christmas Eve rehearsal next Sunday at 9am. Sunday School and Bible Class are scheduled to resume on December 31.

Fellowship Meal and Meetings – All are invited to join in the fellowship meal planned for this morning, as well as the appropriate meeting after.