

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church / Foundations
The Christian Life (1)

***The Christian Life:
What is Involved and How do I Live it?
Part One***

The Nature of Christian Sanctification

In order to manage this massive topic, I will summarize the doctrine of sanctification in twelve inter-related points.

(1) Holiness is transformation through consecration. The Greek word often translated “sanctification” (as well as “to sanctify”) carries both the sense of consecration (dedication, set-apartness), which is more positional (and less experiential) in force (see 1 Cor. 1:30; 6:11), and the sense of transformation (renewal, change), which is more experiential (and less positional) in force (see Rom. 6:19, 22; 1 Thess. 4:3). By God’s grace, the believer is set apart unto God as his own possession, and inwardly energized by the Holy Spirit to put to death the deeds of the flesh and to grow into Christ-likeness.

Perhaps the best definition of holiness is provided by J. I. Packer.

“Holiness is consecrated closeness to God. Holiness is in essence obeying God, living to God and for God, imitating God, keeping his law, taking his side against sin, doing righteousness, performing good works, following Christ’s teaching and example, worshiping God in the Spirit, loving and serving God and men out of reverence for Christ. In relation to God, holiness takes the form of a single-minded passion to please by love and loyalty, devotion and praise. In relation to sin, it takes the form of a resistance movement, a discipline of not gratifying the desires of the flesh, but of putting to death the deeds of the body (Galatians 5:16; Romans 8:13). Holiness is, in a word, God-taught, Spirit-wrought Christ-likeness, the sum and substance of committed discipleship, the demonstration of faith working by love, the responsive outflow in righteousness of supernatural life from the hearts of those who are born again” (*Keep in Step with the Spirit*, 96-97).

(2) Sanctification or growth in holiness is primarily an inner transformation of the intellectual, spiritual, and moral essence of a person such that one’s beliefs, values, desires, and choices are increasingly renovated and renewed and brought into alignment with those of Jesus Christ himself.

Jesus is himself the perfect man and model for our lives, the one in whom the image of God is most completely embodied, and our holiness is authentic only to the degree that we are progressively reshaped to resemble him in all ways. Thus, the aim for our lives must be his righteousness in us: his love for the unlovely, his humility in place of pride, his self-denial as over against self-seeking; wisdom and boldness and self-control, together with faithfulness to the Father and strength under pressure.

(3) When talking of sanctification we need to avoid the two most obvious extremes. There is, on the one hand, the legalistic hypocrisy of pharisaism in which one conforms externally to a standard of rules while largely devoid of inward sincerity. There is, on the other hand, the antinomian freedom of those who would turn God’s grace into an excuse for immorality.

Thus holiness/sanctification is not primarily an issue of style or fashion. Certainly we must embrace modesty and not clothe ourselves in such a way that we are sexually seductive. But aside from that, holiness has little if anything to do with clothing or hair or makeup or other related items.

Holiness/Sanctification is not primarily concerned with choices relating to culture. It has very little to do with what kind of *music* you listen to or what forms of *art* you prefer or what *films* you enjoy watching.

Holiness/Sanctification is primarily about having one’s *character* shaped by the Holy Spirit and how that transformed inner life expresses itself in *conduct*. Holiness should never be defined merely in terms of what you don’t do but

primarily in terms of *how closely you resemble Jesus in your relationships, how closely you reflect Jesus in all your behavior*.

(4) Progressive sanctification is most often a gentle and imperceptible process. Although one rarely sees it or feels it happening, it is not unusual for the believer to realize at differing stages of life that they are different from what they once were. This difference, we must observe, is altogether the result of the Spirit's empowering work. In other words, explains Packer,

“holiness of life is not precisely a human achievement, however much it demands of human effort. It is a work of the Holy Spirit, who prompts and energizes the human effort as part of it. It is a supernaturalizing of our natural lives, a matter of becoming and so of being what we are as new creatures in Christ – a living out behaviorally of what God is working in us transformationally. We do not sanctify ourselves. . . . Self-reliance is not the way of holiness, but the negation of it. Self-confidence in face of temptation and conflicting pressures is a sure guarantee that some sort of moral failure will follow” (*Rediscovering Holiness*, 91-92).

(5) That being said, we must never forget that the Holy Spirit works through *means*. That is to say, holiness is not something imparted immediately, as if by divine infusion, independently of what the biblical authors call us to pursue, but rather precisely through or by means of those spiritual responsibilities and rituals set forth in Scripture. Here I have in view such things as the preaching and hearing of God's revealed truth in Scripture, worship (both corporate and private), prayer, fellowship with other Christians, and the celebration of the Eucharist.

(6) There is no holiness or Christian life that does not have repentance at its core. Repentance is not merely one element in conversion but is a habitual attitude and action to which all Christians are called.

The most important dimension in godly repentance is the fundamental alteration in one's thinking with regard to what is sin and what God requires of us in terms both of our thoughts and actions. Repentance thus begins with a recognition of the multitude of ways in which our thinking and attitude and belief system were contrary to what is revealed in Scripture. We are by nature and choice misshapen and warped in the way we evaluate truth claims. What we cherish, on the one hand, and detest, on the other, are fundamentally at odds with God's value system, and repentance must begin with an honest confession that such is the case.

But that is only the first step in genuine repentance. The most sincere of apologies is at best only a start down the pathway of repentance. There must follow a change in behavior. There must be a conscious and consistent abandonment of those courses of action to which our sinful and rebellious thinking gave rise. Thus repentance “signifies going back on what one was doing before, and renouncing the misbehavior by which one's life or one's relationship was being harmed. In the Bible, repentance is a theological term, pointing to an abandonment of those courses of action in which one defied God by embracing what he dislikes and forbids. . . . Repentance [thus] means altering one's habits of thought, one's attitudes, outlook, policy, direction, and behavior, just as fully as is needed to get one's life out of the wrong shape and into the right one. Repentance is in truth a spiritual revolution” (*Rediscovering Holiness*, 123).

There is also an emotional or subjective sorrow and remorse that true repentance requires. Merely feeling sorry for one's sins is not itself repentance, but it is impossible for repentance to occur in the absence of a deep conviction, and its attendant anguish, for having lived in defiance of God. Thus whereas one may well, and indeed should, feel regret for a life of sin, repentance is never complete until one actively turns away from those former dark paths in order to face, embrace, love, thank, and serve God. Whatever feeling is entailed in repentance, it must lead one to forsake all former ways of disobedience. To acknowledge one's guilt before God is one thing; to abandon those actions that incurred such guilt is another, absolutely essential, dimension in genuine repentance. Thus there is in repentance not only a backward look at the former life from which one has turned but also a commitment both in the present and for the future to pursue Christ and to follow him in a life of devoted discipleship.

(7) Regeneration or the new birth is an entirely *monergistic* act of God's grace in bringing to life the formerly dead soul. Subsequent growth in grace means going on from there in the sense that the newly born-again believer now lives out in ever-increasing moral maturity the life that God has implanted within.

Sanctification, also, is in one sense the work of God. God is the one who is at work, gradually demolishing our bad habits and the wicked ways of the old man in Adam. God is the one who is actively constructing with us good and godly new habits of Christ-like action and reaction.

However, sanctification is also “in one sense *synergistic* – it is an ongoing cooperative process in which regenerate persons, alive to God and freed from sin’s dominion (Rom. 6:11, 14-18), are required to exert themselves in sustained obedience. God’s method of sanctification is neither activism (self-reliant activity) nor apathy (God-reliant passivity), but God-dependent effort (2 Cor. 7:1; Phil. 3:10-14; Heb. 12:14)” (*Concise Theology*, 170-71).

In other words, there is the human side of willing obedience in addition to the divine work of enabling grace. Thus sanctification “is both a gift (that is one side: God working in us to renew and transform us) and a task (the task of obedience, righteousness and pleasing God). And we must never so stress either of the two sides that we lose sight of the other. Think only of the task, and you will become a self-reliant legalist seeking to achieve righteousness in your own strength. . . . Think only of the work of God in your life, and the chances are that Satan will trick you into not making the necessary effort and not maintaining the discipline of righteousness so that, in fact, even as you rejoice in the work of God in your life, you will be dishonouring it by your slackness” (“Predestination and Sanctification,” 320).

(8) In sanctification, says J. I. Packer, God in sovereign grace

“unites the individual to the risen Lord in such a way that *the dispositional drives of Christ’s perfect human character – the inner urgings, that is, to honour, adore, love, obey, serve and please God, and to benefit others for both their sake and his sake – are now reproduced at the motivational centre of that individual’s being*. And they are reproduced, in face of the contrary egocentric cravings of fallen nature, in a dominant way, so that the Christian, though still troubled and tormented by the urgings of indwelling sin, is no longer ruled by those urgings in the way that was true before. Being under grace, the Christian is freed from sin . . . ; the motivational theocentricity of the heart set free will prompt the actions that form the habits of Christ-likeness that constitute the Spirit’s fruit (Gal. 5.22f.), and thus the holiness of radical repentance (daily abandonment of self-centred self-will), childlike humility (daily listening to what God says in his Word, and daily submission to what he sends in his providence), and love to God and humans that honours and serves both, will increasingly appear. This thorough-going intellectual and moral theocentricity, whereby Christians come to live no longer for themselves but for him who died and rose to save them (cf. 2 Cor. 5.15), is first God’s gift and then the Christian’s task, and as such it is the foundation not only of sound ethics but also of true spirituality” (“Evangelical Foundations for Spirituality,” in *Serving the People of God*, 259; emphasis mine).

(9) The gracious, progressive nature of sanctification is nowhere better seen than in what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:18.

“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18).

In the inner core of every Christian, in the depths of the heart, there is movement, as Paul says, “from one degree of glory to another” (v. 18). Literally, he writes that we are being transformed “*from glory unto glory*.” The preposition “from” points to *source* and “unto” highlights the ultimate *goal* in view. In other words, God began a work of grace in us at regeneration or the new birth that consisted of the experience of his glory that is building momentum and progressively moving toward the final experience of the fullness of that glory at the return of Jesus Christ.

The process of sanctification comes only as or because we behold the glory of God. *Apart from beholding there is no becoming*. The more we know him and behold him (cf. Ps. 27:4) in the splendor of his glory, the more we are changed into the very image of Jesus himself, in whose face God’s glory has shined or is reflected (2 Cor. 4:4,6). Sanctification, therefore, is the fruit of seeing and savoring. Ignorance, on the other hand, breeds moral paralysis (if not regression).

Paul is clearly talking about the transformation of the *inner* person. “When Jesus was transfigured, the change was outwardly visible (Matt. 17:2), but when Christians are transformed, the change is essentially inward, the renewing of the mind (Rom. 12:2), and becomes visible only in their Christ-like behavior” (Murray Harris, 316).

As much as we all might wish otherwise, sanctification is *progressive*, not instantaneous. As noted earlier, we are gradually moving by the power of the Spirit from one stage or degree of glory (first "seen" in the gospel when we turn to Christ) to another (that of the glorified Jesus, whose glory we will not only see on that day but in which we will also participate).

Sanctification is *by grace* (we "*are being* transformed"), the agent of which is the Spirit of Christ. This doesn't eliminate human effort but rather makes it possible. We act because acted upon. We work out our salvation with fear and trembling because God, *who is always antecedent*, is at work in us to will and to do for his good pleasure (cf. Phil. 2:12-13)!

We see here that "***beholding is a way of becoming***" (Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, 17). That is to say, we always tend to become like or take on the characteristics and qualities of whatever it is we admire and enjoy and cherish most. Fixing the eyes of our faith on Jesus is transformative. Gazing on his glory as seen in the gospel and now preserved for us in Scripture has the power to ***bump us along***, as it were, whether minimally or maximally, whether in short spurts of sanctification or great and notable triumphs, toward the fullness that is found in Christ alone but will one day be found in us, by grace, as well!

(10) Holiness is a community effort! Holiness isn't something you seek after in isolation from other believers. Holiness must be lived out in the context of community, in a small group setting or something similar. You do not have the strength of will or the maturity of character to go it alone! Simply put, you will never advance far in the Christian life or deepen in the development of biblical holiness until you embed yourself in a community of other Christians who can hold you accountable and ask the hard questions. You will never get far in the Christian life *until you find the courage to give other people the right to get in your face and challenge you* about your speech, attitudes, thought life, use of money, relationships, etc.

To sum up: Holiness can only be found and developed and intensified in relationships of mutual accountability and encouragement with other Christian men and women.

(11) Holiness of life or sanctification entails substantial growth in Christ-likeness, but never reaches the point of absolute sinless perfection in this life. In this regard, we should closely examine 1 John 3:9.

One thing the Apostle John emphasizes is the reality and gravity of sin. In 1 John 1:8 he forcefully labels those who say they have no sin as self-deceived and void of the truth. In 1:10 the claim not to have committed sin is tantamount to calling God a liar, and in 2:1 John clearly implies that Christians will sin (although he writes to help them avoid it). How then do we understand the statement in 1 John 3:9 that the one who is begotten of God "does not do sin" (lit.) and in fact "is not able to sin"? The ESV renders this: "No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God."

Following are the major interpretative options (excluding the suggestion of some that John simply contradicts himself):

- (1) To avoid the difficulty some have narrowed the definition of "sin" to notorious crimes or offences against love (this was the view of both Augustine and Luther).
- (2) It has been suggested that what John means is that a Christian cannot sin because what is sin in the life of an unbeliever is not regarded as such by God when committed by a believer. This is contrary to both John and the rest of the NT.
- (3) One interpretation draws a distinction between the "old" nature in the Christian and the "new" nature. The "old" nature may continue to sin but the "new" cannot. But how do we isolate a "nature" from the "individual" himself/herself? We may speak of "flesh" and "spirit" in a person, but it is always the *person* who sins or does not sin, not merely a "nature".

(4) Others say John is speaking about the *ideal* and not reality. The argument is: Since all anticipate that sinlessness will be characteristic in the age to come, and since John believed that the age to come had come (2:8), he naturally asserted the sinlessness of Christians!

(5) Some say that John, in the heat of controversial circumstances, breaks forth in holy passion and speaks with apparent exaggeration and over-emphasis.

(6) One view stresses 1 John 3:6 where it is stated that the one who "abides" in Christ does not sin. They contend that this "abiding" in Christ is not descriptive of all Christians but is a condition which only some (those "in fellowship") believers fulfill. The degree of a believer's holiness, then, and his ability to sin or not sin are dependent on whether or not he "abides". When one is abiding in Christ he cannot sin. When one does not abide, one does sin. But 1 John 3:9 makes it clear why a Christian doesn't practice sin, indeed, is unable to sin, and it has nothing to do with abiding. It is because he/she "*has been born of God*".

(7) Others say that the sin of which John speaks in 1 John 3:9 is willful and deliberate sin. The Christian, so they say, cannot commit such deliberate sin in the face of the Lord. Oh, really?

(8) A few take John quite literally. Hence they believe he is teaching perfectionism. 1 John 3:9 proves that sinlessness is attainable in this life. The statements in 1:8,10 and especially 2:1 are describing the immature believer who although not yet sinless may still become such through diligent activity and love.

(9) Some argue that the "sin" which a believer does not and cannot commit is the "sin that leads to death" in 1 John 5:16, namely, hatred of believers and denial of Jesus. In other words, John isn't saying that a Christian cannot or will not commit acts of sin, but only that the true believer cannot and will not live in hatred of other Christians and cannot and will not deny that Jesus is God come in the flesh.

(10) The view adopted by most commentators is that the sin a Christian does not and cannot commit is *habitual, persistent, unrepentant sin*. John is not concerned so much with the momentary, individual acts of sin as he is with the overall characteristic tendencies and inclinations of a person's life. John is looking at the *pervasive temper* of one's *overall experience in life*, not at the singular incidents individually. John is not taking a snapshot, but a moving picture. His repeated use of the Greek present tense appears to bear this out. He focuses on the habitual character of the activity in view.

In 1 John 3:6 John says that the believer who abides in Christ "sins not" (present tense; rendered "keeps on sinning" / ESV). Also, the one who "does sin" (present tense) shows that he has neither seen nor known God. John nowhere denies that a Christian commits acts of sin. He does deny, however, that the Christian sins persistently, habitually as a reflection of the characteristic inclination of his soul. When the Christian sins, he/she will come under conviction from the Holy Spirit, will experience grief, brokenness, and sorrow, and will repent, or if not, will come under divine discipline.

Note that in 3:9a he says, literally, the one begotten of God "does not *do* sin." "Again," notes John Stott, "it is not the isolated act of sin which is envisaged, but the settled habit of it, indicated by the verb *poiein*, to do or to practice, which is used of 'doing' sin in 3:4a, 3:8 and 3:9, of 'doing' lawlessness in 3:4b, and of 'doing' righteousness in 2:29, 3:7 and 3:10a" (126).

John also says the one begotten of God "*is not able to sin*". But again notice that "to sin" is not an aorist infinitive but a *present* infinitive. If the infinitive had been aorist John would be contradicting what he said in 2:1. The present infinitive again indicates that he has in mind the inability of the born-again believer to habitually live in sin as if it were the prevailing temper of his soul.

If the Christian "does not" practice sin, indeed, "cannot" practice sin, wherein lies this "impossibility"? That is to say, *how* does a believer avoid the life of persistent sin so characteristic of the non-believer? Stott's answer is excellent:

"Wherein lies this 'impossibility'? John's answer is given in two phrases: *for his seed remaineth in him and because he is born of God*. . . . *his seed* is accurately rendered in the RSV text 'God's nature', or 'the divine seed' (NEB), and . . . *in him* refers to the child of God. In this way the two parts of verse 9 become exactly

parallel, each part consisting of a statement that the Christian does not or cannot sin, to which is added the reason for such an assertion. The implication will then be this: the new birth involves the acquisition of a new nature through the implanting within us of the very seed or life-giving power of God. Birth of God is a deep, radical, inward transformation. Moreover, the new nature received at the new birth remains. It exerts a strong internal pressure towards holiness. It is the abiding influence of *his seed* within everyone who is *born of God*, which enables John to affirm without fear of contradiction that *he cannot* go on living in sin. . . . Indeed, if he should thus continue in sin, it would indicate that he has never been born again" (127).

In summary, we must acknowledge that there will always be the inescapable conflict that we encounter throughout the duration of our earthly sojourn. At no time should the Christian expect to emerge from the struggle with indwelling sin or attain a level of holiness that entails insulation from the onslaught of Satan and external persecution. To suggest otherwise only serves to afflict the believer with disillusionment and will eventually demoralize his efforts as daily experience runs consistently counter to his idealistic expectations. The pursuit of holiness, then, is something of a life-long school in which we daily learn the hard lessons that only personal experience can teach us.

(12) One of the more instructive paradoxes of the Christian life is the fact that as we grow in holiness of both heart and hand the distress and pain of sin only intensifies. Many have embraced the unbiblical notion that with personal growth in godliness there comes a diminishing sense of the presence of sin and the pain that it typically evokes. But the more holy and mature one becomes the more offensive and painful sin is to their hearts. Says Packer:

“Those . . . who have been instructed in God’s law and gospel, as found in the Bible, will ordinarily have a more vivid awareness of their sinfulness, and of their particular sins, because the divine light that shines on them from Scripture to show them to themselves is brighter. This is one reason (there are others) why converted Christians regularly experience deeper conviction of sin after their conversion than they knew before, and why one dimension of spiritual growth . . . is growth downward into a more thorough humility and more radical repentance. Though not much is said about this nowadays, a deepening sense of one’s sinfulness remains a touchstone of the genuine Christian life” (*Rediscovering Holiness*, 52-53).

An inescapable principle of the spiritual life is that the farther you go, or the deeper you progress, the greater is your sense of distance from where you know you should ultimately be. As your desires for God expand and increase, as your longing for greater intimacy deepens, you become ever more conscious of how far you have yet to go in knowing and loving God as you ought. Again, “intense distress at one’s continuing imperfection, in the context of an intense love of goodness as God defines it and an intense zeal to practice it, is the clearest possible sign of the holiness of heart that is central to spiritual health. The paradox – too hard a nut, it seems, for some to crack – is that increase of real holiness always brings increase of real discontent, because of what has not yet been achieved” (*Rediscovering Holiness*, 222).

Discussion Questions

- (1) Define sanctification. How does it differ from justification? What is the relation between the two? Can one be justified and not sanctified? What does the absence of discernable sanctification in a person reveal about their claim to having been justified?
- (2) What is meant in saying that sanctification is “synergistic”? Does this mean that whereas we are justified by God’s grace we are sanctified by our own works? Explain your answer.
- (3) What does 2 Corinthians 3:18 tell us about the nature and experience of sanctification?
- (4) Is it possible for a Christian to attain sinless perfection in this life? If so, how? If not, why not? What biblical texts support your answer?
- (5) How do we avoid turning sanctification into legalism? What is the difference between the two?