

Biblical Sanctification - Part 1

(A Series from Terry Landrum)

Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.
Leo Tolstoy (1828-1923)

The immutability of God appears in its most perfect beauty when viewed against the mutability of men. In God no change is possible; in men change is impossible to escape. Neither the man is fixed nor his world, and he and it are in constant flux.
A. W. Tozer (1897-1963)

Do you remember the last time that you left a church service all excited about wanting to make a change? You were determined to be different. "This time," you said, "I mean it; I am going to become the person that God wants me to be!" By the end of the week the desire had burned out. Things had already returned much to the way they were before. You meant well, but nothing significant happened. In fact, nothing significant ever seems to happen. Perhaps you have been trying, but not really making it. There has been some change, some growth, some blessing, but not the kind that you would like to see. (Jay Adam, Godliness through Discipline)

Now, that is the experience of many Christian people, so you are not alone in this problem. Some have given up hope of ever becoming significantly different. Perhaps you have too. However, there are Christian people whom you meet from time to time whose lives are different. Somehow they must have found the answer. So what is the difference? Why is it that you have failed in your attempts? Why is it that you rarely succeed in your determination to change in even small ways? You want to do the right thing, yet you rarely achieve it. (Jay Adam, Godliness through Discipline)

God's command is "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16). But as soldiers involved in the battle against sin, Christians are often prone to give up the fight, or to compromise with sin in its more difficult forms. Many Christians have a basic desire to live a holy life, but have come to believe they simply cannot do it. They have struggled for years with particular sins or deficiencies of character. While not living in gross sin, they have more or less given up ever attaining a life of holiness and have settled down to a life of moral mediocrity. The promise of Romans 6:6-7 seems impossibly beyond them. The strong commands of Scripture to live a consistently holy life only frustrate them. (Bridges, Pursuit of Holiness, pg 52)

There are questions that ought to be deeply considered by all true Christians. Questions such as, am I growing in grace? Am I making progress in my Christian walk? These questions are always useful, but especially so at certain times of the year. The beginning of a new year almost always has us thinking and looking within. Time is flying by fast. The hour is daily drawing nearer when the reality of our Christianity will be tested, and it will be seen whether we have built on the rock or on the sand. (Ryle, Holiness, pg 81)

Another way this question could be asked is, "am I changing?" Am I changing for better or worse? Is there any hope that I can change? How do I change? **Do I WANT to change ?**

The dictionary defines "change" in its verb form as

- a. To cause to be different: *change the spelling of a word.*
- b. To give a completely different form or appearance to; transform: *changed the yard into a garden.*

Another meaning of change is

- a. To lay aside, abandon, or leave for another; switch: *change methods; change sides.*
- b. To transfer from (one conveyance) to another: *change planes.* It means to become different or undergo alteration: *He changed as he matured;* to undergo transformation or transition: *The music changed to a slow waltz;* to go from one phase to another, as the moon or the seasons.

In its noun form it means the act, process, or result of altering or modifying; the replacing of one thing for another; substitution; A transformation or transition from one state, condition, or phase to another.

Now these elements of change are often most recognized in the Scriptures in passages discussing repentance and sanctification. Sanctification is the word used to describe the Bible's teaching about how we are "sanctified" or made holy. The dictionary defines sanctification as "To set apart for sacred use; consecrate; to make holy; purify."

From before time, as we know it, began, God chose to save some people from their sins in order that they might become conformed to the image of His Son. Rom 8:29-30 states that for those whom God foreknew, "He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son . . . and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified." We, who have been called by God with that effectual calling wherefore we have been chosen and redeemed by God, are securely predestined by God to be His child and to be conformed to the image of His Son. God is making for Himself a people recreated into the likeness of His own Son who will dwell and reign with Him in heaven throughout all eternity. The process of going from being declared righteous before God (justification) to our future, ultimate, glorification, is called progressive sanctification. Sanctification is that process whereby God changes a person to become more like Christ in his attitudes, ambitions, and actions. There is no failure or partial fulfillment in the sovereign operation of God's salvation plan. Without exception, God will complete the salvation of every sinner who is converted to Christ. Therefore, every true believer inevitably moves toward perfection in righteousness, which means that every true believer is entered into the process of sanctification. (MacArthur NT Commentary: Romans 1-8).

A person's likeness to Christ is not something that happens all at once.

"To say that sanctification is a *natural* consequence of regeneration is not to say that it is an *automatic* consequence. The truly regenerate Christian can still behave badly and thoughtlessly, sin grievously, fail in personal relationships and get into marriage problems. This is evident in the New Testament and in the lives of our fellow Christians, yes, and we know it in our own lives also. Hence the detailed moral instructions which are given in the epistles - about controlling the tongue, about the duty of working hard to earn our living, about being honest, just, hospitable, forgiving and kind, about sexual purity, and about the reciprocal duties between husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants. But were these not Christian people, regenerate people, to whom the apostles addressed these admonitions? Yes, they were! But the apostles did not take the holiness of the regenerate for granted; they worked for it by detailed instruction, by exhortation, example and prayer" (Stott, *Authentic Christianity*, pg 205-206)

It is extremely important for the Christian to have a proper understanding of sanctification. Sanctification, in its place and proportion, is quite as important as justification. Why? Because worldly people sometimes complain with reason that so-called "religious" people are not so friendly and unselfish and good-natured as other people who have absolutely nothing to do with the things of God. We can believe and talk all we want about sound doctrine, but all of our belief and talk is useless if it isn't accompanied by a holy life. So, we must walk the talk. If we don't walk the talk, then our espousing of sound doctrine is worse than useless. It actually causes much harm. It is this kind of hypocritical behavior that is despised by perceptive men of the world and brings religion into contempt. Therefore, it is of great importance that we learn what it means to "show all good faith that they (we) may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect" (Titus 2:10)

Someone has said that sanctification is the "Christianizing of the Christian." If we can learn to understand the basics for sanctification, i.e., biblical change, we can experience growth in our life no matter what challenges confront us at the moment. (Berg, *Changed Into His Image*, pg 1-2)

- Excerpts from J.C. Ryle, *Holiness*, chapter on Sanctification -

What does the Bible mean when it speaks of a sanctified man?

Sanctification is that inward spiritual work which the Lord Jesus Christ works in us by the Holy Ghost, when He calls us to be a true believer. He not only washes us from our sins in His own blood, but He also separates us from our natural love of sin and the world. He puts a new principle in our heart and makes us practically godly in life. The instrument by which the Spirit effects this work in us is generally the Word of God, though He sometimes uses afflictions and providential visitations 'without the Word' (1

Peter 3:1). The subject of this work of Christ by His Spirit is called in Scripture a 'sanctified' man.

If any of us supposes that Jesus Christ only lived and died and rose again in order to provide justification and forgiveness of our sins, we have much to learn. Christ has undertaken everything that our souls require: not only to deliver us from the guilt of our sins by His atoning death, but from the dominion of our sins, by placing in our hearts the Holy Spirit; not only to justify us, but also to sanctify us. He is, thus, not only our 'righteousness', but also our 'sanctification' (1 Cor. 1:30).

John 17:19

19 "And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth.

Eph 5:25-26

5 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her;

26 that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,

Titus 2:14

14 who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.

1 Peter 2:24

24 and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.

Col 1:22

22 yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach--

These Scriptures teach that Christ undertakes the sanctification, no less than the justification, of His believing people. Sanctification, then, is the invariable result of that vital union with Christ which true faith gives to a Christian. The union with Christ, which produces no effect on heart and life, is a mere formal union, which is worthless before God. Where there is no sanctification of life, there is no real faith in Christ. True faith works by love. It constrains a man to live to the Lord from a deep sense of gratitude for redemption.

Sanctification is the outcome and inseparable consequence of regeneration. We who are born again and made a new creature receive a new nature and a new principle and we are empowered to always live a new life. Where there is no sanctification, there is no regeneration and where there is no holy life there is no new birth. Sanctification is the only certain evidence of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which is essential to salvation. Rom 8:9 says "If any man does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His." The

Spirit never lies dormant and idle within our soul. He always makes His presence known by the fruit He causes to be borne in our heart, character, and life.

Sanctification is the only sure mark we have of God's election. If there is one thing clearly and plainly laid down about election, it is that elect men and women may be known and distinguished by holy lives. (See 1 Peter 1:2; 2 Thess 2:13; Rom 8:29; Eph 1:4; 1 Thess 1:3,4). Sanctification is a thing that will always be seen. Sanctification is a thing for which every believer is responsible. Every man on earth is accountable to God. Believers are eminently and peculiarly responsible and under a special obligation to live holy lives. We are not as others, dead and blind and unrenewed; we are alive unto God, and have light and knowledge, and a new principle within us. God, who has given us grace and a new heart and a new nature, has deprived us of all excuses if we do not live for His praise. The Word of God always addresses its precepts to believers as accountable and responsible beings. If Christ gives us renewing grace and calls us by His Spirit, we may be sure that He expects us to use our grace and not to go to sleep. It is forgetfulness of this which causes us to 'grieve the Holy Spirit', and makes us useless and uncomfortable Christians.

When trying to understand sanctification a question often arises: "What should I look to God for and what am I responsible for myself?" Many are confused at this point. But, in the pursuit of holiness, we must not be confused on the issue of what God has done for us and what we must do ourselves.

There are two extreme views of sanctification that John MacArthur calls *quietism* and *pietism* in his book, Our Sufficiency in Christ. Quietism asserts that the Christian is to be passive (quiet) in the process of spiritual growth and let God do everything. According to this teaching, the Christian must not exert any energy or effort in the process whatsoever, for our efforts only hinder the working of God's power. Quietists believe Christians must simply surrender fully to the Holy Spirit (also called "yielding," "dying to self," "crucifying oneself," or "mortifying the flesh") and let Christ literally replace us ("it is no longer I who lives, but Christ lives in me" - Gal 2:20). In its extreme variety, quietism is a spiritual passivism in which God becomes wholly responsible for the believer's behavior, and the believer feels he must never exert personal effort to pursue righteous living. Quietists have popularized the phrases, "Let go and let God," and "I can't; He can." (MacArthur, Our Sufficiency in Christ, pg 193-208)

Quietism is the view often espoused by followers of the "deeper life" or "higher life" movement. J.C. Ryle (1816-1900), who was one of the greatest of Victorian evangelicals, serving for thirty-nine years in country parishes and for twenty years as the bishop of Liverpool, England, wrote a set of twenty papers, actually sermons, in 1877 that were bundled together and published under the title, *Holiness*. Ryle wrote these sermons as a reaction to the teaching in his day that was gaining popularity, and in fact has persisted to our day as the "higher life," "deeper life," or "victorious life" movement. He felt that this teaching was not biblical, and was dangerously neglectful of the biblical admonitions to self-discipline and spiritual warfare (which means battling to

say 'no' when world, flesh and devil urge you to say 'yes', and to say 'yes' when weariness, deadness and unbelief prompt you to say 'no'). Ryle stated,

Is it wise to speak of faith as the one thing needful, and the only thing required, as many seem to do nowadays, in handling the doctrine of sanctification. Is it wise to proclaim that the holiness of converted people is by faith only and not at all by personal exertion? That faith in Christ is the root of all holiness; that the first steps towards a holy life is to believe on Christ; that until we believe we have not a jot of holiness; that union with Christ by faith is the secret of both beginning to be holy and continuing to be holy; that the life that we live in the flesh we must live by the faith of the Son of God; that faith purifies the heart - all these are truths which no well-instructed Christian will ever think of denying. But surely the Scriptures teach us that in following holiness the true Christian needs personal exertion and work as well as faith. The very same apostle who says in one place, "The life that I live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God," says in another place, "I fight," "I run," "I keep under my body," and in other places, "Let us cleanse ourselves," "Let us labor," "Let us lay aside every weight." (Gal 2:20; 1 Cor 9:26, 27; 2 Cor 7:1; Heb 4:11; 12:1). Scriptures nowhere teach us that faith sanctifies us in the same sense and in the same manner that faith justifies us. *Justifying* faith is a grace that "worketh not," but simply trusts, rests, and leans on Christ (Rom 4:5). *Sanctifying* faith is a grace of which the very life is action: it "works by love," and, like a mainspring, moves the whole inward man (Gal 5:6). It is thoroughly scriptural and right to say, "faith alone justifies." But it is not equally scriptural and right to say, "faith alone sanctifies."

Is it wise to make so little, as some appear to do, comparatively, of the many practical exhortations to holiness in daily life that are to be found in the Sermon on the Mount and in the latter part of most of Paul's Epistles? The details and particular ingredients of which holiness is composed in daily life ought to be fully set forth and pressed on believers by all who profess to handle the subject. True holiness does not consist merely of believing and feeling, but of doing and bearing. When people talk of having found "a higher life," while their families and friends see no improvement and no increased sanctity in their daily tempers and behavior, immense harm is done to the cause of Christ. True holiness does not consist merely of inward sensations and impressions, but it is something of the image of Christ that can be seen and observed by others in our private life and habits and character and doings.

Is it wise to teach believers that they ought not to think so much of fighting and struggling against sin, but should rather "yield themselves to God", and be passive in the hands of Christ? The expression "yield yourselves" is only found in the sixth chapter of Romans, and there, the expression is found five times within verses 13-19. But the word does not bear the sense of placing ourselves passively in the hands of another. The sense is rather that of actively presenting ourselves for use, employment, service, etc. There are many passages in the Epistles where believers are plainly taught to use active personal exertion and to

do energetically what Christ would have them do, rather than to sit still and "yield" themselves up as passive agents. Scriptures speak of the conflict, the warfare, the fight, the soldier's life, which are characteristic of the true Christian. Men persist in confounding two things that differ - that is, justification and sanctification. In justification the word to be addressed to man is "Believe," only believe. In sanctification the word must be "Watch, pray, and fight." (Ryle, Holiness, Introduction)

Having experienced failure and frustration with our sin problem, we are delighted to be told that God has already done it all and that we only need to rest in Christ's finished work. After struggling with our sins to the point of despair, this new idea is almost like hearing the Gospel for the first time. But after a while, if we are truly honest with ourselves, we discover we are still experiencing defeat at the hand of our sinful natures. We still struggle with pride, jealousy, materialism, impatience, and lust. We still eat too much, waste our time, criticize each other, shade the truth just a little, and indulge in a dozen other sins, all the time hating ourselves for doing them. Then we wonder what is wrong with us and we begin to despair. We fail to reckon with our tendency to cling to our old sinful ways. (Bridges, Pursuit of Holiness, pg 53-54)

The opposite of quietism is pietism, which teaches that believers must work hard and practice extreme self-discipline to achieve personal piety. Pietism stresses aggressive Bible study, self-discipline, holy living through diligent obedience, and pursuit of Christian duty. Extreme pietism doesn't stop there but often adopts legalistic standards governing one's clothing, lifestyle, and so on. (MacArthur, Our Sufficiency in Christ, pg 193-208)

Most quietists and pietists would agree that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ alone. Their disagreement is in the area of sanctification. As we have seen, quietists downplay or totally disregard the believer's effort, and thereby risk promoting spiritual irresponsibility and apathy. Pietists can tend to overemphasize human effort and thereby inflame people's pride or lapse into legalism. (ibid)

Now, Christians are to live by faith, and the source of power for holy living is only the indwelling Christ, but Scripture also does call believers to diligent effort.

Heb 6:11-12

11 And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end,

12 that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Peter called for active faith.

2 Peter 1:5-7

5 Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge;

*6 and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness;
7 and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love.*

Paul pointed out the paradox of our sanctification in Philippians. He wrote,

Phil 2:12-13

12 So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling;

13 for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

In verse 12 Paul sounds like a pietist: "work out your salvation with fear and trembling." In verse 13 he sounds like a quietist: "God is at work in you." We are working in verse 12; God is working in verse 13. There is a balance here that is difficult to understand. Paul is commanding us to work out our own salvation if God Himself is at work in us both to will and to work for His ultimate purposes. Paul doesn't attempt to explain the tension between these two statements. He simply affirms the truth of both of them. (MacArthur, *Our Sufficiency in Christ*, pg 193-208)

The biblical teaching about salvation contains a similar paradox. The gospel demands that we turn from sin and embrace Christ as Lord and Savior, or be eternally damned. It demands an act of the human will in which the sinner repents and places faith in the Person and work of Christ. Yet Scripture says salvation is all God's work (Eph 2:8-9), and that He has chosen people for salvation before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4-5). The same tension exists in Scripture's teaching about the perseverance of the saints. Ultimate salvation is guaranteed and secured by God, but not without the persevering faith of the Christian. (ibid)

1 Cor 15:10 and Gal 2:20 are two others verses in which Paul presents a view of sanctification that is neither quietistic nor pietistic, but a perfect balance of both. Sanctification is a symbiosis between God, who is at work in the believer, and the believer himself, who must always strive for holiness. We must never speak of sanctification without acknowledging both sides.

Next week, we will look at Philippians 2:12-13 in more depth to discover what it means to work out our salvation.