

The Sanctified Life

Reading:

⁴⁴ For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls on the ground. ⁴⁵ For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.” (Lev. 11:44-45)

¹² What shall I render to the LORD
for all his benefits to me?

¹³ I will lift up the cup of salvation
And call on the name of the LORD,

¹⁴ I will pay my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people. (Psalm 116:12-14)

The first reading brings to us not the imperative or command to be holy but a statement that we need to be or remain holy because of what God has done for us. However, it carries an imperative to consecrate ourselves. The second reading asks the question what our response ought to be as a result of what God has done for us.

It is of necessity that we have a study on ‘The Sanctified Life’, i.e. our response to what God has done for us. We cannot finish with the previous four studies and not say something regarding how the sanctified life is expressed. This study should be appropriately titled, ‘The Foundation for a Sanctified Life’. This is because I am aware of the diversity of thoughts in the literature on this subject. I will not be prescriptive but will work from the grounds which we have covered in the past few weeks.

As I said last week, there are cultural overtones when we come to the expression of what is holy. To this is added the way our secular understanding has conditioned us, like what is an Australian expression. In addressing the sanctified life, there are many areas that can be looked at. Some have turned to ethics. This has its own difficulty. Ethics has many layers of principles such as,

- The principle of autonomy
- The principle of beneficence
- The principle of justice
- The principle of nonmaleficence

Sometimes these principles contradict each other. For example, if one is harbouring Jews during the Second World War, how should one reply when questioned. Should one tell the truth or a lie? What principle should apply then. If one subscribes to the supreme ethical principle of the sanctity of life, then this would override the principle of telling the truth. So, there are difficulties in this approach.

However, over the years Christian thinking on these issues often tends to go along the path of philosophical ethics. It has slowly developed from the early church through the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment. Along the way, this discipline has too often been taken over by the principles of philosophical ethics. Most people would know what has been termed the Protestant work ethic. Weaving through the philosophical arguments can be confusing and we won’t go that way.

We need another platform to start with. We turn to theological (Christian) ethics or moral theology, but where is this platform located? Various loci have been proposed, most of which cluster around Christian doctrines, mainly Christology and rightly so. One is to follow the example of Jesus as He embodies the holiness of the Godhead. Some authors have done that. However, we still need to interpret the culture of the first century and apply that to our day. Furthermore, it then becomes an external constraint, an example to follow, rather than something that comes out of our union with Christ.

Very simply, the expression of the sanctified life must have its basis in the issues on which the doctrine of sanctification is based, namely, union with Christ, justification and sanctification by faith, and its relationship to the law. These are the issues we have discussed so far. The expression of the sanctified life must have its foundation on these doctrines.

We need to work our way from there rather than to adopt a set of imperatives which can very easily become a set of external constraints. As we have said the laws of God express the image of God and this will remain for eternity. However, it is now internalised in our hearts.

Rather than to approach this by philosophical consideration, I think it is wiser to see this through scripture. To start with the early church felt the need to spell out some requirements for the gentile believers after they have come to Christ at Caesarea (Acts 10).

²⁸ For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: ²⁹ that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell. (Acts 15:28-29)

What is raised here is the expression of the sanctified life for the gentile believers, and for us as well. This is an imperative for the gentile Christians, but if we look closely, the imperatives are based on the two greatest commandments taught to us by Christ. This is another way of expressing the two greatest commandments which we mentioned last week. The sanctified life is the separation to the Lord as expressed by not conforming to the secular culture. Two issues are raised in these verses and they are put in the negative. One is to be separated to the Lord as defined by the whole hearted worship of God and the avoidance of the culinary culture of the gentiles, as the Jews observe their strict food laws. The other is to be wholly united with one's spouse, i.e. faithful to the marriage covenant. This is not merely observing sexual morality, but it overarches to the heavenly marriage and consideration for the 'other'.

However, before we go further, I need to repeat that these expressions of ours do not add to our sanctification. We cannot do anymore to add to our sanctification because it is the work of God in us. It is because we have been sanctified that we seek to express what God has done in us. Justification is the external transaction on our behalf, but sanctification is what God has done for us internally and this demands a response from us. The way I want to approach this is to allow the fundamentals of our sanctification to direct us in the sanctified life. The issues to be discussed will still be wide but I will restrict myself to the following.

Covenant Relationship

Since sanctification is the work of the Triune God and the holiness of the Triune Godhead is expressed in the giving to and the receiving from one another, then this must be the fundamental expression of the sanctified life. In sanctification our union with Christ undergirds this approach.

Since sanctification is union with Christ, then we are talking of a relational holiness. That being so, then the expression of holiness in our lives must be the expression of the covenant relationship that we have with God and with one another because we have been united in the body of Christ. Here, we are not looking for an external principle on which we can work things out. Since we have been taken into the holy Triune communion this must be the foundation for living the sanctified life. Or should we say, this propels us into the sanctified life. Because of this union with the holy God, the drive is now internalised. The relationship now determines the actions. We see this in the work that Jesus did.

So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. (John 5:19)

It is not just the Son's ability or inability that matters here, but the will of the Father. It is living in submission to the Father as we are now brought into this relationship. The law, the perceptual image of God has been etched into our hearts, and this governs the relationship from within. It is from this relationship that we express ourselves.

Some have called this love and made this the locus for the expression of the sanctified life. It is not entirely wrong, but I think it is a loose expression. We need to define this further. What are the parameters of this love? What we need to say is covenant love as our Triune God exists in covenantal relationship expressed in love, in the giving to and receiving from one another. When we lose this covenant relationship it will push us into legalism.

Today, many relationships are utilitarian and legalistic (contractual), and that way of thinking has infiltrated into the marriage relationship. What should have been a relationship that prefigures the divine union in this world, it has been

reduced to contractual obligations with prenuptials becoming a common arrangement. God has come to us as the covenant God, initiating this relationship in love to restore us. This covenantal relationship includes forgiveness, the type of forgiveness that precedes repentance, because that is the forgiveness that God shows to us. ‘While we were still sinners, Christ died for us’ (Rom. 5:8). We have seen last week that the response to sanctification is repentance because of indwelling sin. As we are simultaneously righteous and sinner, forgiveness and repentance are integral to the maintenance of any relationship. The covenant relationship embraces that, without which, the relationship is unholy.

In our reading from Leviticus, it made a call for us to consecrate ourselves. In other words, we need to make an effort towards our state of holiness. It is not wrong to make that effort as we must, but the effort is not directed to be holy, but to express what is holy in us. There is a process of transformation as we grow in Christ or in maturity in Christ. The psalmist asks the same question too and he includes a response.

¹²What shall I render to the LORD
for all his benefits to me?

¹³I will lift up the cup of salvation
And call on the name of the LORD,

¹⁴I will pay my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people. (Psalm 116:12-14)

The psalmist knows within him that there needs to be a response to all that the Lord has given to him. What is in question is not the need for a response but the nature of that response. ‘I will lift up the cup of salvation’ is his response. This has been interpreted as the drink offering of wine Israel makes as a sacrifice (Num. 28). Calvin refutes this interpretation as there is nothing that is adequate from us to make that rendering or repaying. It should be taken to read ‘I will take in my hands the cup of salvation’. In other words, the appropriate response to all that God has done for us is to accept it with gratitude, and therefore repentance has to be the first response because God has come to us with the offer of forgiveness. This is further made known ‘in the presence of all his people’. In other words, it is also a communal response.

In an earlier part of this psalm, the writer said,

Return, O my soul, to your rest;
for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you. (Ps. 116:7)

This implies that we have gone wayward in following our own ways, making our own determinations. We need to rest in all that God has done, ‘for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you’. It is living in the Sabbath rest that God has provided for us.

Mortification and Vivification

There is a good section on this in G Bingham’s, *The Doctrine of Sanctification* on ‘What we can do in living in holiness’. I refer you to that. However, I want to emphasise two issues raised there and that is mortification and vivification. We don’t use those terms normally today. They sum up two important processes that take place in our sanctification.

⁸Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—
¹⁰that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share (*koinonia*) his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,
¹¹that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Phil. 3:8-11)

The issues raised in our previous studies on sanctification are summarised here by Paul – ‘in Him’, ‘righteousness ... not from the law, but ... through faith in Christ’ (9). Union with Christ or to be found in Him includes the dying and the resurrection, i.e. mortification and vivification.

Mortification is the dying of the old self, and that happened when Christ died in our stead. Vivification is the new life that we have in Christ, and again that happened with the resurrection of Christ. Both processes have been done for us. However, these two terms have often been misunderstood. Calvin explains what the terms mean in his section on mortification and vivification.

It means, rather, the desire to live in a holy and devoted manner, a desire arising from rebirth; as if it were said that man dies to himself that he may begin to live to God. (Institutes, III.3.iii)

What needs to be expressed is mortification and vivification, in Christ I might add. So, when Paul wrote, 'Put to death therefore what is earthly in you' (Col. 3:5), he is not referring to our death in Christ, for he has written in the previous verses, 'For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God' (Col. 3:3). A person who has died in Christ does not put to death the old life. It has already been done. Paul is here asking us to put away what should not be present in our new sanctified life. This is because sin is still present and we are liable to offend as we have said last week. We need to be aware of this.

This is not as easy as it sounds from Paul's admonition. We have grown accustomed to our culture and it is not easy to see what is wrong with it. It is easy to see what is wrong with other cultures, but not our own. I have just noticed a recent article in *Themelios*, titled 'Respectable Sins in Christian Ministry', and it refers to all of us. It mentions our worries, territorial attitude, gossip and slander, grumbling and overworking. In our culture, we may see overworking as a virtue, but it can also reflect a lack of dependence on our creator God. To overcome this cultural captivity is not easy and we continually need the Triune God to invigorate us in this task. Thus, the sanctified life cannot be fossilised in some form of a cultural mandate but as we have been made alive in Christ, we need to be living by (in) the continuing transformation by the Spirit. This is the vivification that needs to be expressed. This comes about by the continuing nourishment by the Spirit, 'sustain us by Your faith and by Your power' as Calvin wrote in the song.

Hindrances to growth – the world, the flesh and the devil

We are also aware that there are hindrances to Christian growth - the world, the flesh and the devil. We have imported secular thinking into the church. We need to make the effort to weed that out. Even though we have been brought into Christ by the work of the Spirit, and the Spirit continues His work in our lives, yet the growth in the lives of Christians do not progress at the same pace. We need to address this. Why is it that growth or progress seems to be slow in some and not in others?

For a start, we cannot attribute the slowness in growth to the Spirit. The Spirit has been poured out onto all flesh (Acts 2:17) and through the death of Christ on the cross, the wall of hostility that has been set up by sinful humanity has been broken down (Eph. 2:14). That being the case, the slowness in growth is a human factor. In saying this, I do not infer that growth in Christ is due to the effort we make on our part. Far from it, growth in Christ is the grace of God upon our lives, and again that is not to say that God gives more grace to some and less to others.

We need to make a case for human resistance. However, before we discuss that, we need to refute several common misconceptions. Sin has commonly been blamed for the slowness in growth. While it is true that though we have been saved and have been incorporated into Christ, yet sin remains in us. As Luther has said, 'Once a sinner, always a sinner'. We live in this flesh of sin and yet we have been sanctified by the Holy Spirit. We live in the now and the not yet. That is the challenge to us and we need to deal with the issue of sin. Many have often regarded sin as an external factor caused by the devil. While the devil is still active, yet as we are in Christ, we have victory over the devil through the victory that is Christ's. So, why is it that so many of us have fallen victim to sin?

There is firstly a misconception regarding sin. Many have regarded sin as the things we do, like stealing, killing and giving false witness. Of course, they are, but we need to know why these things are done and what causes these deeds. Sin is not simply caused by the devil. Sin resides within us. The sin of Adam is not because he ate of the fruit, but he disobeyed the voice of God. The governing focus from which Adam acted was not his relationship with the creator God, but from within himself. What I mean is that Adam acted outside of his relationship with God, i.e. he was not following and obeying the commands of God. He acted according to his own judgment. That is the sin of Adam. Of course, when we act according to our own judgement, a series of actions will follow and those actions simply will not align with God's. That is sin. Though scripture pointed out the actions that are sinful, yet scripture has also made clear that the realignment needs to take place from within.

That is why the prophets of old saw that there cannot be any return to God by reforming the ways people behaved, except by the renewal of the heart (Jeremiah and Ezekiel). Moses saw that long ago when he said that God will

circumcise their hearts (Deut. 30:6) so that they will obey God. What these prophets were saying is that restoration can only come about by the work of God and not simply by the external reformation brought about by humanity learning to present themselves with a new façade.

Having said all that, I do not mean that we can simply set the autopilot to growth. As physical growth is an internal process, so is spiritual growth. As we need nourishment to physical growth, so we need nourishment to spiritual growth. These spiritual nourishments are the means of grace, a term given to us by the saints of old. These are the word and the sacraments. They are our nourishment for growth. They are also the marks of the church, the community that God has given to us for our growth. Yet so many today have not seen things this way.

Just as Adam acted from his own judgment, so today many Christians have acted from their own judgment. Instead of seeing the church as the place where they can receive the nourishment from the word, they see the church as a place where they can receive a boost for the week ahead. They think they know what they need. They acted from their own judgment.

Our attitudes and life styles are also reflections of whether we have acted from a focus in God or from our own judgment. We must not be judgmental here as changes take place at different paces. The church (community of God's people) is the place where we give support and encouragement to others in their journey to maturity. Paul shows to us the way ahead.

¹²Not 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. ¹³Brothers, 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, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. ¹⁶Only let us hold true to what we have attained. (Phil. 3:12-15)

So, what does it mean for us to be holy? It is setting apart for God, to be in relationship with Him and no other. We have been made holy by the Holy Spirit of God who takes us into the Christ. Therefore, sanctification is relational, a relationship effected by the grace of God through Christ and the Holy Spirit and it is not effected by any effort on our part. What we have done in that process is the humble acceptance of this gift from God. Having said all that I am not denying that there is a progression in the Christian life. There obviously is. The Holy Spirit continues His work in us. What I am trying to say is that we do not confuse the situation with our terminology.

Summary to the series

To finish this series of studies on sanctification, I think it is appropriate to make a short summary of the series. Holiness is relational and tied to the persons of the Godhead. Holiness is a property of God and it is not given to any other. We are holy in so far as we are united with the divine. Thus, holiness is not something that we can possess as if it can belong to us. The story of Moses before the burning bush anchors this understanding.

As in the parable of the vine and the branches, holiness is life in the divine, connected with Him. Thus, one is either in Him or not in Him, holy or not holy. The term 'progressive sanctification' is best avoided, though we cannot deny that we grow in maturity. Just as justification is by faith, so also is sanctification by faith. That being so there cannot be any attempt by us to achieve sanctification by works.

However, justification by faith is forensic and it puts us in the right standing with God and after accepting this by faith, there is no contribution on our part. We are then taken into the holy Triune Godhead and inevitably are sanctified. We come into this union by faith and live in this union. It is from this relationship that we live out the sanctified life.

It is appropriate to close this series of studies with a word from Peterson's, *Possessed by God*.

As the gospel is proclaimed and faith is elicited, people are brought together into a sanctified relationship with God through Jesus Christ. As the word of God is applied to everyday life and relationships, believers are built up and sustained in holiness, until they are brought to share in the inheritance that God has in store for them. (Peterson, *Possessed by God*, 57)