

THE MERCIES OF GOD: Sanctification, Pt 3

“Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.” ~ *John 17:17*

Introduction

Getting the *gospel* right is of utmost importance. So important is it that the Apostle Paul, writing to the Galatian churches, pronounced a curse on any who would deviate from the standard: “As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!” (Gal 1:9).

But getting the *Christian life* right is also no trivial matter. Paul emphasized this to the same Galatian audience when he wrote,

You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed *as* crucified? This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? (Gal 3:1-3)

Paul had become aware of a false teaching that was threatening the Galatian believers and their spiritual growth. This teaching insisted that Paul’s instruction on the Christian life was inadequate, and that elements from the Mosaic Law had to be incorporated into the Christian’s understanding of spiritual growth. Paul did not hold back his displeasure over this teaching. He could not simply rest in the fact that these Galatians had already been converted. Their sanctification mattered deeply. He recognized the threats and their consequences, and in response wrote the most impassioned of all his letters.

Today’s Christian, too, must realize that error is not only a threat to the presentation of the gospel. An abundance of errors threaten the Christian’s understanding of his spiritual growth. While some of these errors are formal in nature, others are more subtle. It is easy for believers to think that *sincerity* or *intensity* in the pursuit of holiness is all that matters, while the actual *means* they use in the pursuit, or the *authorities* they listen to for instruction, do not matter. When it comes to holiness, too often Christians detach practice from doctrine.

In light of the ease with which one can fall into error, it is important to survey some of the most common dangers and draw necessary principles to keep the believer steady on the right path of sanctification.

A. Key Terms and Definitions

While a considerable number of views could be cited, four terms or concepts representing errant understandings of sanctification are chosen: (1) entire sanctification; (2) Higher Life Theology; (3) carnal Christian; and (4) Free Grace Theology.

1. **“Entire Sanctification.”** Not to be confused with *perfective sanctification* (which occurs when the believer is finally and ultimately sanctified at death), the concept of *entire sanctification* is used by proponents to refer to an instantaneous act by which God eradicates the presence of willful sin in the life of the believer and elevates him into a stage of **spiritual perfection in this life**. It is often called a **“second work of grace”** since this act of entire sanctification has many similarities—according to proponents—to conversion, the “first work of grace.” This new stage of perfection supposedly is evidenced by the believer’s new ability to fulfill entirely Jesus’ command to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind” and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:37-39). In other words, whereas the Christian is able to fulfill this command only imperfectly after conversion, he is able to fulfill without any impurity whatsoever after the event of entire sanctification takes place.

Key idea:
A “second work of grace” in the believer’s life in which God eliminates the presence of known sin and ushers in the experience of relative perfection.

This view of sanctification is often called **Wesleyan Perfectionism** because it was popularized by the English evangelist John Wesley (1703-1791), and advocated by his followers in various forms ever since (Methodists, Church of the Nazarene, Salvation Army; etc.). According to Wesley, entire sanctification is

nothing higher and nothing lower than this: the pure love of God and man—the loving God with all our heart and soul and our neighbor as ourselves. It is love governing the heart and life, running through our tempers, words, and actions. . . . Pure love reigning alone in the heart and life . . . is the whole of scriptural perfection. It implies deliverance from all sin. (*A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*)

In more recent times, Wesleyan theologian Melvin Dieter described entire sanctification as follows:

a personal, definitive work of God’s sanctifying grace by which the war within oneself might cease and the heart be fully released from rebellion into wholehearted love for God and others . . . It is a “total death to sin and an entire renewal in the image of God.” (“The Wesleyan Perspective,” *Five Views on Sanctification*, 17).

Proponents of entire sanctification argue that since the Bible demands perfection of believers, it must be attainable in this life, even before death. For example, Matthew 5:48 states, “You are to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Other prooftexts used are 1 John 3:9 (“No one who is born of God practices sin”); 1 John 5:18 (“no one born of God sins”); and 1 Thessalonians 5:23 (“Now may the God of peace sanctify you entirely”). But the problems with this view and its handling of Scripture are significant:

- (1) **It redefines *sin* as “a voluntary transgression of a known law.”** Proponents acknowledge that the believer who experiences entire sanctification can still commit sin unwillingly, or can still willingly do things (or not do things) that he did not know were prohibited (or commanded) by God.
- (2) **It redefines *perfection* as a relative or imperfect perfection.** The perfection that entire sanctification achieves is not like the perfection described in Matthew 5:48 (“as your heavenly Father is perfect”), and neither is it the kind of perfection that comes to the believer according to 1 Thessalonians 5:23 (“at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ”).

In other words, this view of sanctification is based on a relative or subjective understanding of sin and perfection, not on the Bible’s teaching. But what about 1 John 3:9 and 5:18? As is the case with all errant understandings of sanctification, these and other texts are interpreted inaccurately and out of context. The Apostle John’s assertion that “no one born of God practices sin” must be read in light of his previous remarks in the same letter:

If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. . . . My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous (1 John 1:8-2:1)

Understood properly, 1 John 3:9 and 5:18 refer to the fact that a truly regenerate person does not remain *enslaved* to sin—to a lifestyle that *practices* sin without remorse and ongoing repentance and confession. In reality, the Bible never describes the heroes of faith with language synonymous with perfection. To the contrary, it openly describes their failures, confessions, and striving for greater holiness (e.g., Phil 3:12-14). Moreover, Wesley and his followers all acknowledge that even if entire sanctification does take place, the believer is not so perfect as to avoid falling back into sin at some point later on, requiring yet another “work of grace” to return him to a new state of perfection. Such a paradigm for life can in no way be called “perfect,” or biblical.

2. **“Higher Life Theology.”** This designation refers to an understanding of sanctification which was popularized by conferences held in the late 1800s and early 1900s in the town of Keswick, England (which is why this view is sometimes called **Keswick Theology**). Speakers at these conferences advocated a view of Christian perfectionism similar to that of John Wesley, but with some significant alterations. The essence of their teaching was captured by their motto, **“Let go and let God.”** (1) “Let go” – emphasized the believer’s need to *stop striving* after holiness and to *abandon* his efforts to live the Christian life. Instead, he must put himself on the altar, be still, and surrender his life to God. He must learn passivity. (2) “Let God” – emphasized the believer’s need to get out of God’s way, and instead give Him permission to do His work of sanctification which can bring the believer instant victory over sin in all areas

Key idea:
A “crisis moment” in the believer’s life when he surrenders control of his life to God, and God counteracts his sinful flesh and elevates him to a level of spiritual perfection.

of life. Consequently, proponents of this theology describe *progressive sanctification* (with the disciplines of mortification and vivification) as a *counterfeit* form of Christian living. The believer must be passive.

Like Wesleyan Perfectionism, Higher Life Theology believes that perfection—the absence of any *known* sin—can be achieved at some point in the believer’s life after his conversion and before his death. But to affirm this idea it also must redefine *sin* and *perfection* in relative terms. Unlike Wesleyan Perfectionism, Higher Life Theology does not teach that God instantaneously eradicates sinful flesh as a “second work of grace.” Rather, Higher Life Theology teaches that though the process of surrender and consecration, the believer gets off the throne and allows God to be seated on it. The sinful self remains, but it is now subdued or counteracted by God.

According to Higher Life Theology, the Christian life looks similar to Wesleyan Perfectionism. A key moment is needed to propel the believer to this new level of spirituality and service. This moment is called a “**crisis moment**” and is viewed similar to the one that characterized the moment of conversion. Consequently, to experience this instantaneous spiritual rebirth, believers should seek *crisis moments* when they can be elevated to sinless perfection—moments such as walking the aisle during an altar call, or responding to the request to “rededicate” or “recommit” one’s life to Christ. Usually these moments are intensely subjective and emotional, and since lapses from perfection back into disobedience happen, the believer must regularly pursue these crisis moments as the way to return to perfection once again.

3. “**Carnal Christian.**” By rejecting the doctrine of *progressive sanctification*, adherents to “entire sanctification” (Wesleyan Perfectionism) and Higher Life Theology must create a new category to describe the Christian life prior to this moment of perfection. The category created is that of the *carnal Christian*—a Christian who is saved and forgiven, but who lives and acts just like an unbeliever—who is not in any sense *sanctified* or *being sanctified*. This then leads proponents to see humanity in three categories: (1) **the unsaved (the “natural man”)**; (2) **the saved but unsanctified (the “carnal Christian”)**; and (3) **the saved and sanctified (the “spiritual Christian”)**.

Proof for this designation is claimed from 1 Corinthians 3:1-3, where Paul describes the Corinthian believers as “men of flesh,” “infants in Christ,” and “fleshly.” Indeed, the Corinthian believers were immature. But it is important to note that Paul still called them “saints” (1 Cor 1:2), and still described them as “sanctified” in the definitive sense (1:2; 6:11). These believers were fleshly or carnal in their actions, but not in their essence. Ultimately, this designation is one that is not derived from Scripture, but is imposed on Scripture because of the necessity of unbiblical theological assumptions.

4. “**Free Grace Theology.**” By definition, *grace* is always *free*. It can never be earned. But this movement claims the title “free grace” to highlight its vehement opposition to two doctrines: (1) **it rejects the teaching that repentance is a necessary ingredient of conversion;** and (2) **it rejects the teaching that progressive sanctification is a necessary consequence of justification.**

Proponents of this view believe that to be saved one must only acknowledge that Jesus is a Savior. There is no need to acknowledge that He also is Lord. Whereas *faith* was defined as including *notitia* (intellectual awareness), *assensus* (intellectual agreement), and *fiducia* (full-fledged trust), proponents argue that what is needed is only *assensus*, and perhaps even just *notitia*. The need for *fiducia* faith is rejected completely. One source described “saving faith” as follows:

Faith in Christ is intellectual assent. Stripped of its pejorative connotation, ‘intellectual assent’ is a good definition of what faith is. For example, do you believe that George Washington was the first President of the United States? If you do, then you know what faith is from a Biblical perspective. There is no commitment, no decision of the will, no turning from sins, and no works that are part of faith in Christ. If you are convinced or persuaded that what He promised is true, then you believe in Him. Faith is passive. It is simply taking Jesus at His word. (Grace Evangelical Society website)

Consequently, proponents of this view argue that sanctification is *optional* for the Christian. It is even possible that the moral life of the “believer” may never change at all from the lifestyle he lived prior to his supposed conversion. No kind of transformation need be expected. In fact, it is even possible for such a “believer” to later renounce his assent to the gospel and even blaspheme Christ. Adherents to this view believe that new life in Christ does not preserve the “believer” from this outcome, and that this magnifies the glory of God in salvation.

B. Solemn Warnings

Errant understandings of sanctification and the Christian life—no matter how sincere—will hinder one’s growth in Christlikeness. In light of the errant views noted about, the following warnings are given.

- 1. You will distort the Christian life if you disconnect sanctification from justification.** Indeed, these two doctrines must be distinguished; they are not synonymous. But they must be linked. Sanctification is not optional. It flows out of the reality introduced by justification.
- 2. You will distort the Christian life if you redefine sin and perfection.** Sin is any lack of conformity to the moral character and purposes of God. Moreover, perfection that is qualified or approximated, or that allows for future failure, is no perfection at all.
- 3. You will distort the Christian life if you distinguish Jesus’ role as Savior from His role as Lord.** While it is common to hear believers speak of “first accepting Christ as Savior and then accepting him as Lord” years later, this finds no substantiation in Scripture. One cannot believe in part of Christ and not all of Him. Romans 10:9.
- 4. You will distort the Christian life if you create two categories of Christians.** By doing this, you will negate the need for sanctification for the “carnal” Christian, and you will introduce the need to seek a second conversion experience.
- 5. You will distort the Christian life if you create multiple tiers of Christianity.** Spiritual life is like the growth of a body. There are no silver bullets that can bypass the time and work required. Promises of special keys or secret steps only lead to frustration, discouragement, and disillusionment.
- 6. You will distort the Christian life if you proclaim a gospel of mere decision and no repentance.** Jesus preached repentance (Matt 4:17); Peter preached repentance (Acts 3:19); and Paul preached repentance (Acts 17:30). Repentance is no less a gift of grace than faith (compare Eph 2:8-9 with Acts 11:18 and 2 Cor 7:10).
- 7. You will distort the Christian life if you reject the path of lifelong battle with sin and wait for God to do the work.** There are two errant extremes related to the doctrine of sanctification: one will either reject the “root of faith” (reliance upon God as the author) or the “root of diligence” (emphasis on the effort of the believer).
- 8. You will distort the Christian life if you elevate experience over doctrine.** Errant understandings of sanctification and the Christian life arise when experience and the testimonies of Christians are used as the standard for describing what the Christian life really is or how it must look. Heresy often arises from zealous Christians not interested in biblical doctrine. However, sanctification occurs in the context of *truth* (John 17:17).

For Further Reflection

Scripture Memory: John 17:17

Recommended Reading:

- John MacArthur, *The Gospel according to Jesus; The Gospel according to the Apostles*
- Andrew Naselli, *No Quick Fix*
- Wayne Grudem, *“Free Grace” Theology: Five Ways it Diminishes the Gospel*

Homework:

- Did any of these errant views of sanctification ever characterize you or someone you know?
- Review the “solemn warnings” above. Consider why each of these warnings is important, and write out a fuller explanation describing what can happen when each one of these warnings is not heeded.
- Why are believers so prone to develop unbiblical understandings of sanctification?
- If you had to draw a chart to reflect your growth in Christlikeness, what would it look like? Does it reflect the biblical teaching (see especially last week’s lesson on *progressive* sanctification)?

This Week’s Audio: gracechurch.org/motw

Next Meeting: April 8 – Indwelling