

(A Good Foundation) 7. Sanctification

by Zac Poonen

Sanctification is the process of being transformed into the likeness of Christ, with increasing light and the fruit of the Spirit manifesting in our lives.

Scripture: John 8:11, Romans 6:14, Romans 8:29, 1 Corinthians 10:13, 1 Corinthians 15:34, Ephesians 1:18, Hebrews 4:16, Hebrews 12:1, 1 Peter 4:1, 1 John 2:1

Topics: "Justification", "Sanctification"

Description

Zac Poonen preaches on the twofold message of the gospel as seen in Jesus' words to the woman caught in sin: 'I do not condemn you' and 'Do not sin any more'. Justification marks the beginning of the Christian journey, while sanctification is the ongoing process of being set apart from sin, the world, and our own selfish desires. God's ultimate purpose for believers is to be transformed into the likeness of Jesus, running the Christian race with our eyes fixed on Him as our example.

Transcript

The twofold message of the gospel is summed up in the words of Jesus to the woman caught in sin:

(i) I do not condemn you; and (ii) Do not sin any more. (John 8:11).

Justification is the starting line of the Christian race and sanctification is the track on which the race is run. The word 'sanctify' means to be set apart. And so sanctification is the process of being set apart increasingly from sin, the world and our own self-life.

The whole purpose of our coming to Christ is in order that we might be sanctified - just as the whole purpose of an athlete coming to the starting line of a race is to take part in the race. It's pointless an athlete joining others at the starting line if he doesn't intend taking part in the race itself!

God's Purpose for Us

Most of us came to Christ at first with some selfish motive - to get some benefit for ourselves - perhaps healing, or deliverance from hellfire. But God still received us, in spite of that selfish motive. The father of the prodigal son loved him so much, that he welcomed him back, even though the son had come home only to fill his stomach. That's how good God is!

But it would be really sad if we continued in the Christian life, only because we wanted to go to heaven. As we understand more of God's purpose for our lives, we should long to fulfil that totally. Paul's prayer for the Christians at Ephesus was that they would have the eyes of their heart opened to see 'the hope of His calling' (Ephesians 1:18).

Romans 8:29, 30 tells us what the hope of His calling is.

Whom God foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.

God's purpose is that we might be transformed into the likeness of Jesus. That is what sanctification is all about - to become like Jesus increasingly. This is the Christian race that we are exhorted to run, fixing our eyes on Jesus Who has run the same race ahead of us (Hebrews 12:1, 2).

Finishing with Sin

The first step in this race is to stop sinning consciously. Under the Law, there was no exhortation to stop sinning. But under the new covenant, all the apostles are agreed that the twofold message of the gospel is exactly as Jesus put it: freedom from condemnation and ceasing from sin.

Paul says, "Stop sinning" (1 Corinthians 15:34). John says, "I am writing these things to you that you may not sin" (1 John 2:1). Peter also exhorts us to 'cease from sin' (1 Peter 4:1).

After explaining justification by faith in Romans 5, Paul asks this question, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may increase?" (Romans 6:1). And again (with greater force this time), "What then? Shall we sin even once?" (Romans 6:15 - Literal). The answer in both cases is a resounding 'No'. We should seek not to sin even once, any more.

Does that sound like a heavy, burdensome message? It can be burdensome only to those who want to keep on sinning! But it's a joyful message of liberation to those who are sick and tired of sin's captivity. Any prisoner would be delighted if he heard a message that he could be free. That wouldn't sound burdensome to him, would it?

Jesus was anointed to proclaim "release to the captives (of sin) and to set free those who are trodden down (by Satan)" (Luke 4:18).

The glorious new-covenant promise is:

Sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law (the old covenant), but under grace (the new covenant established by Jesus) (Romans 6:14).

The first step to victory is to believe that such a life is possible for you.

Temptation and Sin

There is a difference between being tempted and sinning. The Bible says, "Each one is tempted when he is enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin" (James 1:14, 15). Sin is not born in our heart, until the desire of our flesh has been allowed to conceive. When Satan or the flesh flash a suggestion into our mind, we are tempted. If our mind agrees with that temptation, then a conception takes place and sin is born.

To be tempted doesn't make us evil. Even Jesus Himself was tempted. But He never sinned even once in any way, and so He was totally pure.

The Scripture says that Jesus was "made like His brethren in all things" and "tempted in ALL THINGS as we are" (Hebrews 2:17; 4:15). He was tempted exactly like us, yet He never sinned.

That may not sound very wonderful to some of us, because we may feel that Jesus, being God, could naturally overcome sin easily. But remember, He had "emptied Himself" of the prerogatives of equality with God, when He came to earth (Philippians 2:6, 7). Although He was God, yet while He lived on earth as a man, He had access only to the same power of the Holy Spirit that He offers us today. That's why we are told to run the race, "fixing our eyes on Jesus." In our "striving against sin" today, we can look at His example and be encouraged (Hebrews 12:2-4). That's because He overcame each temptation that we face, as a Man too. Thus He has become a Forerunner and an Example for us to follow (Hebrews 6:20).

This is "the secret of godliness....- Christ came in the fleshand was declared righteous in the spirit" (1 Timothy 3:16). Although He had our flesh, He kept His spirit pure throughout His life.

This is what gives us hope that we too can overcome as He overcame. For He has "inaugurated a new and living way through the flesh" for us, in which we can follow Him (Hebrews 10:20). This is the way of sanctification.

The Old Man and the New Man

We have already seen how the old man was like an unfaithful servant who allowed the thieves to enter the home. That old man however has been crucified, put off and buried. There is a new man now within us, who says, "Behold I have come to do Thy will, O God" (Hebrews 10:7).

Yet we know that it's possible for a disciple of Jesus to sin. But there is a difference between a disciple sinning and an unbeliever sinning, just as there is a difference between a cat falling into dirty water and a pig choosing to jump into the dirty water! The cat hates the dirty water, but may fall into it accidentally. The pig, however, loves it. It's all a question of nature. The disciple of Jesus has a new nature that loves purity and hates sin.

The old man wants to sin. The new man never wants to sin. But if the new man is not strong enough, he may not be able to keep the door of his heart shut against the desires of the flesh. That's not because he wants those desires. No. But because he is not strong enough to resist them. This may be, because he has not fed himself sufficiently on the Word of God, or because he has not strengthened himself through prayer.

So, there's a difference between committing sin and falling into sin. It's important to know this difference; for we can then avoid a lot of unnecessary feelings of condemnation in our heart.

The Bible says that "the one who practises sin (that is, one who keeps on committing sin deliberately) is of the devil" (1 John 3:8). On the other hand, he writes to believers saying, "If anyone sins (that is, if one falls into sin accidentally), we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He is the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 2:1, 2).

Conscious and Unconscious Sin

There is also a difference between falling into sin and having sin. To have sin is to have unconscious sin in our personality - sin that we ourselves are unaware of, even though others who are more mature than us may be able to notice it in us. But such unconscious sin need never make us feel guilty. For God's Word says, "sin is not imputed when there is no law" (Romans 5:13). (This also means that God does not impute sin to us when there is no awareness of sin in our conscious mind).

We shall have unconscious sin in us, until our dying day - to a lesser and lesser degree, however, if we walk in the light. The Bible says, "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves," (1 John 1:8). One who says that he has no sin is actually claiming that he has already become perfect like Christ. But God's Word says that we shall "be like Him," only when He returns - not before that (1 John 3:2). Those who claim to be totally sanctified and perfect already are therefore only deceiving themselves.

Unconscious sin however needs to be cleansed; and "the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all (unconscious) sin" too, as long as we walk in the light of God (1 John 1:7). So we can stand boldly now, in the presence of an infinitely Holy God, without any fear.

Such is the power of the blood of Christ to justify us. Hallelujah!

Mercy and Grace

We are told to come boldly "to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). Mercy and grace are not the same. Mercy refers to the forgiveness of our sins. That relates to our past. But we also need grace - for our time of need, in the future.

Our time of need is when we are tempted, when we are about to fall - just like Peter, when he was about to sink in the sea of Galilee (Matthew 14:30). That's when we should cry out for grace; and just as Jesus stretched out His hand immediately to hold Peter, we'll find that we get grace too, so that we stand and don't fall.

There are wonderful promises in God's Word that assure us that God will keep us from falling. Just look at some of these:

First of all, God promises that He will never allow us to be tempted by any temptation that is too strong for us to overcome:

God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it (1 Corinthians 10:13).

God's Word also says:

He is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless (Jude 24).

With these and many other wonderful promises given us in God's Word, there is no need for us to sin any more. Our life can henceforth be lived to do the will of God alone (as it says in 1 Peter 4:2).

Progressive Sanctification

Jesus told His apostles to teach others to obey all that He had commanded (Matthew 28:20). One who loves the Lord will first of all seek with all his heart to find out what those commandments are; and then he

will seek to obey them (John 14:21).

Under the Law, God gave man commandments, but not the power to obey them. Why then did God give the Law? Only in order that man might discover that he's unable to come up to God's standards, and thus see his need of a Saviour and a Helper. "The Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ" (Galatians 3:24).

But now God has made a new covenant with man. And He has given us, not only commandments, but also an Example in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus demonstrated by His earthly life that it is possible for us to obey all of God's commandments.

God has also promised under the new covenant to put His Laws into our minds and to write them upon our hearts (Hebrews 8:10). He does this through the Holy Spirit dwelling in us. The Holy Spirit is our Helper Who not only shows us what the will of God is, but also gives us a desire to do that will and grace to obey all of it too.

God is the One Who is going to sanctify us entirely (1 Thessalonians 5:23). We can't do it on our own. We have to depend on Him - for He is the One Who works in us giving us both the desire as well as the ability to do His will. But we have to "work out our salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12, 13). We have to work out what God works in, for He hasn't turned us into robots!

God cleanses us from the guilt of sin. But we are commanded to "cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Corinthians 7:1). We have to do this, as and when we get light on any defilement within us.

It is thus, as we "by the Spirit, put to death the deeds of the body" (Romans 8:13) that the fruit of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control - will become more and more manifest in us. This is what it means to be transformed into the likeness of Christ.

Thus our path will become one of increasing light (Proverbs 4:18). This is the glorious way of sanctification that God has made for us.

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