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HOW DOES SANCTIFICATION WORK? (Part 1)

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SYNOPSIS

Part one of “How Does Sanctification Work?” considers how God changes people. When we look closely at what actually changes people—examples both from Scripture and from personal experience—we see the diverse ways that the Word and Spirit minister to our human struggles. Both Scripture and personal testimony teach us that there is no single formula that produces change. Even so, it is easy to assume that how God has worked in your life is how He must work in the lives of all His people. Hearing stories of multiple people’s lives helps us to avoid forming generalizations based on our personal experience because stories make you realize that not everyone is like you. There are common denominators, but if we are going to draw conclusions about how God works in us, then the underlying patterns of His sanctifying work must be of the sort that adapt well and flexibly to a multiplicity of cases. We must do justice to both the variety and the commonality of God’s work to change us.

When the risen Jesus gave final instructions to His disciples, He commissioned them to make more disciples (Matt. 28:18–20). In other words, they were to serve the processes of *sanctification*: the birth and growth of new people with a new way of life. Perhaps describing His ministry goal as sanctification sounds surprising. We often hear Jesus’ words as a call for personal evangelism, church planting, and world missions, with conversion as the desired result. But conversion is the birth that leads to a lifetime of growing up into Jesus’ image. Sanctification is discipleship into His way of life.

What is His way of life? Jesus is the man of faith who lives within the Psalms, depending on the mercies of the Father. He is the man of wisdom who lives out the Proverbs, fearing the Lord. He is the man of righteousness who simply loves God and neighbors. He is the man of redeeming mercies who embodies Exodus 34:6–7 and Numbers 6:24–26. And Jesus called His followers to do everything that helps others to follow Him.

My first story captures events so homely as to be almost unremarkable. But, like antibiotics healing bronchitis, something seemingly mundane appears almost miraculous when you think about it.

GOD MEETS US WITH HIS PROMISES

This morning my wife Nan and I were mildly overwhelmed by the pressures of life. The family had succumbed to various illnesses over Christmas. A week later, both of us still felt half- sick. On top of this, we are concerned for an elderly loved one. Nan faces projects arising from a kitchen renovation, and I face snowdrifts of grading and writing projects. The net effect? We were both beset with stress, distraction, ambient anxiety, incipient irritability, and complaint.

We needed sanctifying this morning—as we do every morning. And God met us with gifts of his Word and Spirit. How? We happened to be reading a passage from Deuteronomy:

The LORD found Jacob in a desert land.
In the howling waste of the wilderness,
 he encircled him, he cared for him,
 he kept him as the apple of his eye.
Like an eagle that stirs up its nest,
that flutters over its young,
 spreading out its wings,
 catching them,
 bearing them on its pinions,
the LORD alone guided him. (Deut. 32:10–12)¹

What happened? The Lord wrote these words on our hearts, as He promises to do (Jer. 31:33). He clarified our minds, reawakened our faith, and animated our obedience.

Nan put her response this way: “When you feel like a castaway who needs to be found and rescued, to be treated as ‘the apple of his eye’ means the world to me.” She perked up. Her prayers and plans for the day came to life.

My response was similar. That image of being encircled with protective care, like an eagle fluttering over its nest, resonated. The Lord encircles, hovers over, and carries His beloved people—I am one of His. I went into my day with a clearer sense of purpose, a more focused mind, and more attentiveness to others.

Progressive Sanctification

That day, in a small way, God changed how we lived. It was a textbook example of one of the innumerable ways God speaks and works. The actual unfolding of progressive sanctification is no theoretical topic. One interesting characteristic is that all Christians already have at least some firsthand experience. Every Christian can say: “*This* was key in helping *me* when I struggled with *that* in *those* circumstances.” The stories are so varied!²

Many Patterns

But firsthand experience also presents a danger. It is easy to extrapolate your own experience into a general rule: “*This must be the key for everyone.*” Both Scripture and personal testimony teach us that there is no single formula for the kinds of problems that call for sanctification. There is no single formula for the kinds of change that sanctification produces. There is no single formula for the truths and other factors that produce change. Multiple stories help because they make you realize that not everyone is like you. Are there common denominators? Yes. But to become a general rule, the underlying patterns must be of the sort that adapt well and flexibly to a multiplicity of cases. I will seek to do justice to both the variety and the commonality.

This article does not arise in a vacuum. The backdrop is a popular view that teaches that Christian growth is essentially and continually a matter of digging more deeply into how God forgives and accepts us: *You are sanctified by remembering and believing afresh that you are justified by what Jesus did on the cross for you.* Is that true? I think the Bible’s answer to this pastoral and practical question is straightforward: sometimes yes, often no. Scripture portrays sanctification like a range of colors and shades. There are reds, yellows, and blues—with 16.8 million shades in between. So any monochromatic view of sanctification is like saying, “You are sanctified by the color red.” For some Christians, some of the time, amid some life struggles, to remember the color red—justification by Christ’s death—proves pivotal. For other Christians, at other times, facing other specific struggles, other colors prove pivotal.³

WHAT IS THE MOTIVATION FOR SANCTIFICATION?

How do we explain the dynamics of sanctification? That has been controversial through all Christian history. The controversy is usually framed in exegetical and theological terms (buttressed with historical examples). But I’ve noticed that most discussions do not reckon adequately with how *practical theology* operates—both in the Bible (which is practical theology in action) and in people’s stories. How do people actually change? How does ministry actually effect change?

When the debate is framed in formal theological terms, all Christians agree in broad strokes. Three things precede any process of progressive transformation:

- God must reconcile our fatally broken relationship with Him.
- Jesus Christ must accomplish His redeeming work for us.
- The Holy Spirit must bring spiritually dead people to life.⁴

Yes, and Amen. No one disagrees, because such generalizations are the rudiments of Christian faith.⁵ But the burning question remains: *how* are disciples made? This cannot be answered in broad strokes of theological formulation. It is a practical theology question, a ministry question, a life-lived question. Could the sole key to sanctification be to revisit continually how our broken relationship with God was reconciled by the work of Jesus? A vast Bible, centuries of pastoral experience, and innumerable

testimonies bear joint witness that there is a lot more to it. When practical and pastoral implications are deduced from a sweeping theological generalization, and then buttressed with a single-stranded personal testimony, important things are swept under the table.

The Balancing Scale of Ministry and Theology

How then can we think about progressive sanctification in a way that generates ministry traction? Here is my core premise: ministry “unbalances” truth for the sake of relevance; theology “rebalances” truth for the sake of comprehensiveness.⁶

The first half of that premise might sound odd, but this is what it means. *The task in any ministry moment is to choose, emphasize, and “unbalance” truth for the sake of relevant application to particular persons and situations.* You can’t say everything all at once—and you shouldn’t try. Say one relevant thing at a time. When Jesus talks with people, He is astonishingly concrete, direct, and specific. By saying one thing—not everything—He is always challenging, always rearranging our life, always nourishing to those who are listening.

Practical ministry focuses on one truth out of many for the sake of relevance. But the second half of the core premise is equally important. *The task of theological reflection is to abstract, generalize, and “rebalance” truth for the sake of comprehensiveness.* Balance—whether topical (systematic theology) or narrational (biblical theology)—protects us from exaggerating, ignoring, or overgeneralizing. Part of why “sanctification by revisiting justification” cannot be the entire truth is because every Christian doctrine and every part of the story also matters. In order actually to minister to people, you need wise selectivity, while bearing in mind the fullest possible repertoire of options from which to choose. You do not build a house with only one tool in your toolbox when God gives us a truckload of tools. But you do use your tools one at a time, the right tool for the right job.

The story with which I opened this essay was “unbalanced.” On that particular day, Nan and I stumbled into God’s presence with low expectations. The Lord surprised us with evocative promises and ignited faith’s imagination. We obeyed in practical ways because our imaginations caught fire. That morning we were sanctified by overarching *promises* that prompted actions.

But is that how it always works?

GOD MEETS US WITH HIS COMMANDS

I am now writing three days later. These past three days have been marked by an entirely different dynamic. Each morning I’ve been sanctified by intentionally taking specific *commands* to heart. This has been my daily companion in the Holy Spirit’s discipling work: “The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5).

As I have consciously reflected on God’s will for me expressed in 1 Timothy 1:5, I have marched into the day on a rising tide of gladness and purpose.

Paul charges me to consider others because I am awake to God. Sanctification means pointedly, freely, genuinely loving other people. Lord, help me to stop, to care, to notice, to listen, to express candid appreciation, to share my life. And He helps.

When we ask anything according to His will, He hears us and we will be sanctified.

BE CAREFUL HOW YOU GENERALIZE ABOUT SANCTIFICATION

In the past week, on one day Nan and I were surprised by gifts of sheer promise. The Spirit's sanctifying word came as a pungently evocative Old Testament metaphor, as an indicative, as a gift of grace feeding faith. The obedience that followed arose spontaneously, uncalled for within the passage itself.

Then on other days the Spirit's sanctifying word came as I intentionally pondered a command. I fed on imperatives. This apostolic word called me to the energetic obedience of faith and the energetic obedience of love—premiered on, dependent on, and seeking the grace, mercy, and peace of God and Christ.

The work of Christ on the cross—so foundational theologically—was entirely *implicit* throughout this week, neither mentioned in these Scriptures, nor consciously pondered. It was not absent—the foundation of a house is always foundational. When there are cracks in the foundation, when the house is sagging, you work directly on the foundation. But other times you simply live in a well-furnished house.

My stories provide several core samples of the pastoral application of Scripture unto sanctification. But what if I attempted to draw *theological* conclusions from my experience? In the first case, I might conclude and teach, "All we need are the wide-ranging promises of God. Simply believe in God's initiating and intervening care. The struggle in the Christian life is to remember that God watches over those he loves." But if I formed my theology from the second case, I might conclude and teach, "God's grace lays the foundation once for all. Now we must focus all our efforts on loving God and neighbor. We need to think hard, plan well, and make every effort to discipline ourselves in practical obedience." In either case, I would have extrapolated a plausible but faulty generalization from an experience that had been personally significant. Each formulation (almost) seems to fit. But inexorably, the first generalization drifts toward pietism.⁷ And inexorably, the second generalization drifts toward moralism.⁸ And neither of these generalizations addresses someone who needs to know how Christ reproves a high-handed evildoer; or a person in anguish, who needs to know that God is a safe place; or those who are weary, and need to trust that one day this struggle with sin and sorrow will end and all things will be made new.

SOMETIMES WE ARE DIRECTLY SANCTIFIED BY REMEMBERING OUR JUSTIFICATION

This article has been interacting with a message about sanctification that intends good and has good in it. Here are some of the catchphrases that claim to describe the essential dynamic of sanctification: "Meditate on your justification"; "Remember the gospel"; "Contemplate the cross"; "Preach the gospel to yourself"; "Realize you are accepted by

Christ's performance for you." Each of these exhortations can be applied in a way that is very helpful on some days and in some situations. But when timely "unbalancing" becomes repetitively and assertively unbalanced, such phrases become misleading both pastorally and personally. Other helpful, needful things get drowned out. Standing on their own, these statements lead to the following generalizations:

- Sanctification essentially involves remembering, believing, and resting on justification. Rehearsal of Jesus' substitutionary death is the key dynamic driving our sanctification.
- Self-salvation through our efforts is the sin of sins. The attempt at self-justification-through-performance is the deepest, most persistent, and most significant problem hindering and necessitating sanctification.
- The effort of the Christian life is the hard work of remembering that we are justified and accepted by what Christ has done. Sanctification is not about our behavior, but about clinging to Christ's mercy.

These generalizations are simply not true. The Bible explicitly shows and tells something different. People's stories show and tell something different. As selective, pastoral applications in certain cases and situations, each of these statements contains something true and helpful. But stated as theological generalizations about the universal dynamics of the Christian life, each is overstated and reductionistic. Overstatement always underdelivers in the long run. Reductionism promises too much with too little. When theory trumps reality, reality bites back.

Flexibility of Scripture's Work in Us

But when your theory and practice comport with reality, reality gets reshaped. You grow as wise and flexible as the Scriptures, which have a knack for adapting to the messy complexities and idiosyncrasies of reality. Scripture is willing to speak boldly one unbalanced bit of relevant truth into the appropriate situation, and then willing to speak in an entirely different way in the next paragraph or in a different situation. If we restate the previous overstatements more modestly, as one possible pastoral directive among many potentially helpful pastoral words, the grain of truth in them clearly emerges.

- *Sometimes* you are sanctified by remembering that God justifies you on the basis of Christ's righteousness, atoning sacrifice, and resurrection.
- Basing your relationship with God on your performance is *one common problem* that both calls for sanctification and hinders sanctification.
- *Sometimes* it is a struggle to remember that you are justified by Christ's work—and it is worth getting that foundation clear.

Do you see how different this list is from the previous one? Plain, simple, accurate understatement has a way of delivering more than you expect in the long run.

GOD MEETS US WITH WHAT WE NEED

Let me again take a personal moment to describe some of the backdrop for the two incidents described earlier. As I reflect back over decades, I have never been particularly changed by consciously trying to remind myself of justification or adoption. Those doctrines have not been in the spotlight of sanctification moments. But I know *many* Christians—including my Nan—for whom the process of learning and relearning these truths has had, and continues to have, a crucial, life-rearranging significance. This is how it should be. We serve a King who makes no two snowflakes alike, and His thoughts regarding each individual are more numerous than snowflakes in a blizzard. It would be most odd if He said the exact same thing to change every one of us. It would contradict who He is and who we are.

Why has conscious revisiting of justification and adoption played a relatively minor role in my Christian life? It is no doubt significant that I was dramatically converted in my mid-twenties as a godless, anti-Christian adult. One effect has been that God's merciful love has been a core operating assumption from the inception of my Christian life. For reasons intrinsic to my particular story, I have never doubted that I am saved from outside myself. I have simply *known* that God freely chooses to call us from the kingdom of death into the kingdom of life. All of the foundational saving realities have been more a tacit given than an explicit acquisition.

Not everyone is like me.

It is perhaps not surprising that I have not struggled with trying to prove myself to Him by my efforts, diligence, and achievements. The conscious drama, effort, and struggle of my sanctification have most often turned on other issues. Here are two crucibles of my sanctification.

First, I identify with the indifference, laziness, and self-centeredness of the current "whatever" generation, having been well nurtured in the 1960s version of those sins. I have had to learn to value caring for others and working to accomplish goals. I have never needed deliverance from obsessive striving after relationships and achievement. Instead, the Holy Spirit set out to teach me to *value* relationships and achievement.

Second, I identify with the discouragement and anxiety of people who suffer, who experience life's fragility and threats. As a young adult, several encounters with death and dying played a profound role in my eventual conversion to Christian faith. And from middle age on, God has used chronic health problems to teach me to learn to trust God when I am weak. Christ's sympathetic entry into our experience of weakness—yet another aspect of His suffering and death operating simultaneously with the work of atonement (Heb. 4:14–5:9)—has played a significant role in my sanctification. No surprise, Paul's story in 2 Corinthians 12 and a passel of Psalms have repeatedly contributed to my growth in grace.

But I can also understand how it is that people whose characteristic flesh defaults to achievement, performance, and control are prone either to self-righteousness or depression. For them, the struggle to grasp the significance of justification by Jesus'

performance may frequently come front and center. I hope they can understand those of us whose characteristic flesh defaults to other forms of fallenness, and for whom other truths of Scripture have greater impact.

Harmony of Human Experience

Here's the takeaway. I dare not extrapolate my exact experience of God's mercies to everyone else. Similarly, those who have had their Christian life revolutionized by awakening to the significance of justification by faith dare not extrapolate that to everyone else. One pattern of Christ's working (even a pattern common to many people) should not overshadow all the other patterns. A rightly "unbalanced" message is fresh, refreshing, joyous, full of song, life transforming. But eventually, if it is oversold, it becomes a one-string harp, played by one finger, sounding one note. It drones. Scripture and the Holy Spirit play a forty-seven-string concert harp, using all ten fingers, and sounding all the notes of human experience. Wise ministry, like growth in wisdom, means learning to play on all the strings, not harping on one note.

I am certain that those who teach "sanctification by revisiting justification" have heard that message as a new and joyous song that sanctifies them. May Jesus Christ be praised! But let's not forget to learn all the other sweet and joyous songs. And let's learn the darker notes of lamentation and the blues. Let's learn the call to action in work songs and marching music. And let's learn everything else that comports with and nourishes life in Christ.

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NOTES

- 1 ESV here and throughout, with some revision made by the author.
- 2 I have been greatly helped by reading thoughtful reflections from several thousand students who have detailed the truths and the people that most influenced their growth in grace.
- 3 This particular teaching is my immediate case study, but my larger intention is to address any and all forms of reductionism.
- 4 Of course, Christians significantly differ over how the details work! How do we rightly and helpfully express the categories, priorities, ordering, emphases, wording, and definitions? I have my views, but for the purposes of this article, it is enough to assert the areas of broad agreement.
- 5 Similarly, everyone also agrees—in broad strokes—that three kinds of things will culminate the process of transformation. Jesus Christ finishes His work by returning as King; our relationship with God becomes face-to-face; our human nature is perfected in love. What God began, He finishes. Progressive sanctification is about how we live in between God's laying the cornerstone and setting the capstone.
- 6 I am indebted to Rev. James Petty for this way of putting it.
- 7 By this I mean the tendency to focus exclusively on faith and to view obedience as an automatic

consequence of faith.

- 8 By this I mean the tendency to focus exclusively on willed obedience and to assume faith.