



Union with Christ

Sample

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Unit 4. Sanctification

“Christ was given to us by God's generosity, to be grasped and possessed by us in faith. By partaking of him, we principally receive a double grace: namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ's Spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life.”⁴¹

As we have seen, our union with Christ is a foundational element of gospel truth. Everything else flows out from this. If we omit or somehow relegate this truth, we will misunderstand so many other aspects of the truth that is in Christ. As we shall see as we make our way through this module, all of our blessings (for example, election, adoption, justification, sanctification, glorification) are the fruit of our union with Christ.

Why sanctification?

We have already referenced and engaged with (at least briefly) the so-called *ordo salutis*. There is a clear and necessary logical progression to whatever order is proposed, so it may seem strange to address the issue of sanctification before election and justification, both of which take precedence. It may also seem odd to devote a whole unit to sanctification when other vital truths are not given an equal amount of focus.

One of the reasons behind these decisions is simply that sanctification acts as a kind of springboard. It is a pressing and very personal issue for every one of us who is a Christian. We want to please Christ. We struggle with the fact of sin in our hearts and lives, and also with the very notion of sin. In moments of reflection, I know that sin is foolish, insane and utterly reprehensible. But I also know that in moments of temptation sin becomes utterly plausible. Somehow, that which was so vile becomes attractive, and sometimes irresistible to us. This is the conflicted existence with which we are all familiar. We can enjoy intimate and real fellowship with God, where our hearts are genuinely stirred and our affections warmed. But then, we get into the office and temptation strikes. All of that resolve and repulsion disappears, and sin becomes attractive.

In his comments on 2 Timothy 3:16, Calvin wrote this, “The right use of Scripture must always tend to what is profitable.”⁴² Likewise, the right use of doctrine (which is all hewn from God's Word) must always tend to what is profitable, because its purpose is to do us good. No truth is theoretical or academic; it is all practical and applied to “equip us for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:17). So if we can see how this profound doctrine of union with Christ defines sanctification, we will be in a better position to understand the other blessings that are ours in Christ. And this will put us in a much better position to recognise the implications of the truth in our everyday struggle against sin.

⁴¹ Calvin, J., *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Westminster, 1960), 3.11.1.

⁴² Calvin, J., *Commentaries, Volume XLIII*, Second Timothy chapter 3, verse 16

Exercise

What do you think is a Biblical definition of sanctification? Find a few references to back up your definition.

What is sanctification?

We will first define two elements of sanctification: what is often known as progressive, and definitive. Then we will look at Paul's understanding of sanctification in Romans 6, and the practical impact of this great gospel truth in our daily lives.

“Progressive” sanctification

This is what most of us have in mind when we think about sanctification. Progressive sanctification is a term describing how a Christian grows in likeness to Jesus. It is about our desires, thoughts, ambitions and actions changing as we become more like Christ. We hate sin more; we love godliness more.

That is the general view of sanctification. John Murray describes this aspect of sanctification as:

...the process by which a believer is gradually transformed and conformed more and more into the image of Christ, until at death the disembodied spirit is made perfect in holiness and at the resurrection his body likewise will be conformed to the likeness of the body of Christ's glory. It is Biblical to apply the term 'sanctification' to this process of transformation and conformation.⁴³

The word “progressive,” however, is not favoured by everyone. David Peterson says: “Instead of speaking in terms of progressive sanctification, the New Testament more regularly employs the language of renewal, transformation and growth, to describe what God is doing with us here and now”.⁴⁴

Peterson points out the danger of viewing this element of sanctification as work that we do rather than God's gift. Holiness is both a gift and a calling; it has nothing to do with our efforts. So Peterson takes issue with the idea "that there is a graded form of progress that can lead to ever increasing measures of holiness."⁴⁵ This is because it creates unrealistic expectations, which can lead to guilt and despair for those who do not see such 'progress'

⁴³ Murray, J; “*Definitive Sanctification*”, *Calvin Theological Journal* 2:1 (April 1967), accessed via <http://banneroftruth.org/uk/resources/articles/2011/definitive-and-progressive-sanctification/> on 16th November 2012

⁴⁴ Peterson, D., *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness* (Apollos, IVP, 1995, reprinted 2000), 136

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 70

in their lives. Instead, 'pursue' is a helpful word to use in thinking about this process of growth and change. Those who have been won by Christ will want to pursue Christ, thus becoming more and more like him in character. "Those who have been sanctified through Christ will pursue the values and characteristics of the One to whom they belong."⁴⁶

This transformative aspect of sanctification is important and valid. It is the work of God to make us ever more like his Son.

Definitive sanctification

Definitive sanctification says that we are set apart by God, for God. It is a sovereign and decisive act of God. This understanding of sanctification is most prevalent in the New Testament. At the point of conversion, believers are definitively, once-for-all sanctified or set apart for God. David Peterson explains it this way: "In the New Testament, sanctification primarily refers to God's way of taking possession of us in Christ, setting us apart to belong to him and to fulfil his purpose for us."⁴⁷ Sanctification is past tense before it is progressive.

We are thus compelled to take account of the fact that the language of sanctification is used with reference to some decisive action that occurs at the inception of the Christian life and one that characterises the people of God in their identity as called effectually by God's grace. It would be, therefore, a deflection from biblical patterns of language and conception to think of sanctification exclusively in terms of a progressive work.⁴⁸

In the Old Testament we see that the sanctification of items and individuals was extremely common. There were strict standards for the construction of the tabernacle (Exodus 25-40). The majority of the book of Leviticus is about the importance of everything and everyone being 'set apart' for God's service. Everything to do with the tabernacle and temple was holy; for example, garments (Exodus 28:2), anointing oil (Exodus 30:25), linen tunic (Leviticus 16:4), people (Leviticus 23:2), water (Numbers 5:17), and utensils (1 Kings 8:4). Vital to the building of both edifices was the 'sanctification' of craftsmen - trained and talented workers set apart for God to build a suitable venue for the Lord to meet with his people. When the tasks were completed, both edifices radiated God's glory as he took up his residence among his people. The theologian Klaus Bockmuehl defines sanctification in the Old Testament as "the act or process by which people or things are cleansed and dedicated to God, ritually and morally."⁴⁹

This is the foundation for the doctrine of sanctification in the New Testament: We are set apart by God, for God. Our progressive, or transformative, sanctification is only possible because definitive sanctification has happened.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 76

⁴⁷ Ibid., 27

⁴⁸ Murray, J., "Definitive and Progressive Sanctification", *Banner of Truth* (April 15, 2011) accessed via <http://banneroftruth.org/uk/resources/articles/2011/definitive-and-progressive-sanctification/> on 9th January 2014

⁴⁹ Bockmuehl, K., 'Sanctification', in Ferguson, S. B., & Wright, D. F., [ed.], *New Dictionary of Theology*, Leicester/Downers Grove: IVP, 1988, 613

Sanctification is a state in which believers find themselves because of the work of Christ and the operation of his Spirit in their lives. They are called to remain in that state “by living in correspondence to their given holiness.” It is also a state to which they must strive, which they must “pursue”, or “complete”. In sum, sanctification in the New Testament is seen as “a one-time event and as a process, the believers being and becoming holy and acting correspondingly.”⁵⁰

We cannot progressively make ourselves more acceptable to God so that he decides we are then ‘fit for use’. It is only because he has definitively, irreversibly and graciously taken us to himself, for himself, making us his own, that we will be for his glory. Our sanctification, in terms of becoming more like Christ, is God making us ‘fit for purpose’. But the first element of that is for us to be ‘in Christ.’ From that starting point we will grow to become like Christ.⁵¹

Exercise

Read Romans chapter 6, taking time to get your head into the text. Identify the indicatives (the things he says which they are to do as believers). Look closely at verse 11, which is the key verse in this section?

Romans 6

The purpose of this module is to look at the doctrine of union with Christ in the way that helps us to live to please the Lord and enhances the reputation of Christ in the world. Our sanctification has a deep missional reverberation. A detailed consideration on how Paul unpacks the truth about sanctification in chapter 6 will help towards that goal. There is no other chapter in the Bible as vital to our godliness as Romans 6. Understanding it is essential to our discipleship as Christians.

Dead to sin...

The chapter is in response to the question raised in verse 1: “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” Paul's response, “By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” is full of what we might call ‘gospel incredulity’. The very idea is outrageous and incomprehensible to the apostle.

The phrase ‘died to sin’ is a reference to the power and tyrannical rule of sin. As believers, we are now no longer ‘in Adam’ but ‘in Christ’. We have been taken out of sin’s sphere.

⁵⁰ Peterson, D., *Possessed by God, A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness*, Apollos, IVP, 1995, reprinted 2000, 14

⁵¹ For more on this, Murray's, J., article “*Definitive Progressive Sanctification*” is worthwhile and can be found here: <http://banneroftruth.org/uk/resources/articles/2011/definitive-and-progressive-sanctification/>

We are no longer under its rule nor subject to its authority. So it is not, in the first instance, a reference to our experience. There is a thrilling objectivity to it. It is a statement of fact, irrespective of our emotional awareness. It is this fact that makes the question posed by Paul one of incredulity. How can sin be normative for those of us who have died to it? How can we who belong to that category of people who are 'in Christ' live as though we are functionally 'in Adam'? It is so absurd as to be unthinkable.

In Romans 6:3-5, Paul unambiguously unites believers with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Not only did Christ die, was buried, and rose from the dead, but all who enjoy this intimate relationship with him, by the Spirit, also died, were buried, and rose again to a new life. Paul uses their baptism as his reference point.

Baptism is a piece of gospel drama. It tells the story of redemption. It rehearses not only what happened to Christ in time and space, but also what has happened to every believer. Baptism is God's provision for how we respond to the gospel, and it is an enactment of Spirit baptism in our conversion. In baptism, we are to remember not only objective historical facts, but the great existential reality: we have been rescued. The Spirit is so intimately involved in taking all that Christ did, applying it to us and bringing us into Christ that it is a real and dynamic relationship. Salvation is not simply a disconnected gift that is given to us. Salvation is something that Christ achieves and in him we achieve it – that is how remarkable and intimate it is.

That is the work of the Spirit. We are partakers of all of these triumphal achievements. Satan does not want us to believe that. He wants us to feel isolated and sorry for ourselves – to wallow in our self-pity so temptation becomes more attractive to us. Yet our union with Christ as his people is so intimate that we are partakers with him in all of his triumphal achievements in his death, burial and resurrection.

So, the call of progressive or transformative sanctification is to live as the people of God. When Satan tempts, we are to remind him not only of his past (that he was defeated at the cross); we are to remind him also of our past at the cross. We have moved out of Satan's authority. All he can do is insinuate, try and beguile – but in actuality, he is powerless. We stand in Christ because of our union with Christ.

But the focus in these verses is not on our response so much as it is on God's activity in Christ. Our response only has meaning and significance because of what happened to Christ, and God's saving activity in choosing us to be 'in Christ'. Because of these things, through the work of the Holy Spirit, we have become actual participants in the drama of redemption.

You can see the full force of that by the phrase "baptised into Christ Jesus" (cf. Galatians

3:27). Believers are baptised into him, buried with him and united to him in resurrection (cf. v.4). This is unrestrained and uninhibited 'union with Christ' language! Look at how frequently Paul uses the preposition 'with': buried with him (v.4); united with him in a death like his (v.5); united with him in a resurrection like his (v.5); our old self was crucified with him (v.6); we died with Christ (v.8); we will also live with him (v.8).

To make sure we grasp this point, we need to reiterate it just once more. The focus of these verses is not the right of baptism, but the reality to which water baptism points: namely Christ and his work. With him and his work we are intimately and inseparably connected. It is from this reality that Paul makes his assumptions concerning the kind of lives we live as Christians. Our union with Christ in the great redemptive act is the basis of our sanctification. In Christ we have been decisively set apart, and it is in Christ we grow to become progressively more like him.

Reflection

How might the reality of this intimate and inseparable connection with Christ and his work affect your everyday life? How might it affect specific temptation or struggles which you face?

As we consider this topic of sanctification, working hard to ensure that it is not merely a theory or an intellectual understanding, it is vital for us to grasp the relationship between God's decisive work done for us and our necessary, inevitable response.

In Romans 6:6, Paul writes about the 'old self' being crucified with Christ. That has happened. That old, rebellious humanity – of which each of us was once a card-carrying, fully participating member – is now dead to us.⁵² As we said earlier in the unit, it is no longer the sphere in which we operate. This is why we are no longer enslaved to sin; it is for the simple reason that "For the one who has died has been set free from sin" (v.7).

The logic seems compelling, not least because of the word 'for' that starts the sentence. But because the word translated 'freed' (v.7) is the word that is often translated 'justified'. In what sense is the believer who has died with Christ freed from sin? Is Paul talking about our being "acquitted from the penalty of sin", or "liberated from the domination of sin"? It seems that Paul answers this in verse 18: "and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves to righteousness." It is sin's domination that is in view here. This fits perfectly with what Paul has already said in verses 1-2. Paul is saying that we have been set free from sin's power. On top of escaping our deserved punishment for sin, we are no longer dominated by sin.

Paul then proceeds to explain his case further by explicit reference to a believer's union

⁵² Paul is not talking about each of us having two natures that are in some way in conflict with each other; the 'old self' and the 'new self'. The old self is the 'in Adam' self which no longer exists.

with Christ (cf. v.8), which leads us to verse 11. This is a critical verse in the whole argument: “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

The word translated ‘so’ or ‘in the same way’ connects us to what has gone before. Because of our union with Christ we have died to sin (v.10), and we have risen so that we might walk in newness of life (v.4). By dying to sin, Christ defeated sin and death. His resurrection was the seal and fruit of that victory, and the necessary promise of future life for believers. His death was a victory. There is a view of the crucifixion that sees it as a point of defeat. That is profoundly wrong. When Jesus cried out, “It is finished!” it was a cry of victory. The resurrection did not take Satan by surprise; he was already conquered at Calvary. Look at what Calvin writes in his commentary on Colossians 2:16, which occurs in a passage that is very close in thought to this chapter:

For although in the cross there is nothing but curse, it was, nevertheless, swallowed up by the power of God in such a way, that it has put on, as it were, a new nature. For there is no tribunal so magnificent, no throne so stately, no show of triumph so distinguished, no chariot so elevated as is the gibbet on which Christ has subdued death and the devil, the prince of death; nay more, has utterly trodden them under his feet.⁵³

That is how effective and decisive the cross is in the purposes of God. Through expounding our union with Christ, Paul locates us firmly in that ‘cosmic event’ to show how effective and decisive it is for us.

There is an African American spiritual which asks the question, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” Our answer to that has to be yes. And not only that, but we were there being crucified with him; when he was being crucified, so were we. When he was rising from the dead, we were rising with him. Each Christian must assert that his death was our death; his resurrection was our resurrection. We should read accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection in a new light. We allow the devil to distract us from that truth, to persuade us that we are still ‘in Adam’ and therefore he still has authority over us. But nothing could be further from the truth.

So Paul says that we are to “consider ourselves dead to sin.” This command is not a case of mind over matter or of positive thinking. A common understanding of positive thinking is that if we think the right thoughts often enough, they will begin to shape our behaviour. If, for example, you tend to be late, repeatedly tell yourself that you are someone who likes to be on time. You will eventually begin to live up to your positive thinking. So the theory goes. Or, slightly differently, you can visualise success in a particular area and thus be helped to actually achieve it. But all of the positive thinking in the world will not change reality. A middle-aged man of average fitness can visualise winning a race against Usain Bolt as much as he wants, but that visualisation or positivity will not lead him to victory. However, if Bolt visualises winning, it might actually make a difference to his race – because the base reality is that he can run astonishingly fast. Visualisation might help, but only because it is based in reality.

⁵³ Calvin, J., Commentaries, Volume XLII, Colossians chapter 2, verse 16

In the words “consider yourselves,” Paul is calling us to positive thinking, which is based in reality. We are to understand and consider what is true of us. If we want to live as though we belong to a category of those who have died to sin, if we want to be who we are, we must think about ourselves in the light of reality. We must think about what is actually true of us. This is not what might be true of us, or what is true of us in some circumstances but not others. No, this is what is true of us in Christ. The reality for Christians is that, in Christ, we have died to sin. Because of who Christ is, what he has achieved, and what he experienced as our representative head, we are dead to sin.

...and alive to God

All of this does not mean that we cannot sin anymore. We know only too well that is not the case. But sin is no longer our master. We no longer live under the sphere of its authority. We are like secret agents in enemy territory – we are in the country, but not obeying its rule because the territory has no authority over us. As a Brit, for example, France has no authority over me to pay its taxes. If I receive a letter informing me that I had taxes due to France, I could rip it up because I am not under French authority. It is irrelevant to me. In Christ and Christ alone we are dead to sin and we are alive to God. That is our current condition.

So, Paul is saying, we are to recognise, appreciate, and live in the light of that reality. One of our biggest problems in sanctification is that we refuse to recognise who we are in Christ. We do not appreciate the radical, all-encompassing nature of our identity in Christ. We read about his death and resurrection as if it simply happened to him. It did happen to him of course, but not just to him. It happened to us.

This is why Paul develops his argument even further in verses 12-14: “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.”

Paul can issue those commands and present that lifestyle as a viable option for us only because of our union with Christ. Sin is not inevitable for us, and we are never in a situation where it is unavoidable. But we get to the point where we think that sin is irresistible, and that is a lie from Satan himself.

In 1 Corinthians 10:13, Paul writes “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” Whatever our circumstances, we are easily convinced that no one has been through what we are going through. No one has had that much money, or had a co-worker quite as attractive as that, or a child quite so difficult.

But that circumstance, whatever it is, is a temptation: Satan is using it to cause us to sin. That same circumstance is also a trial: God is using it to cause us to grow more like his

Son. Satan is saying, “You know you deserve it, go for it,” because he wants you to dishonour God. And the Spirit is saying, “You know who you are in Christ, you know you don’t have to do that. I’ve put you in this situation so that you might see who you are in Christ, and run to him.” When we are tempted, God’s intention is always that we become fit for purpose.

Conclusion

Sin is real and we should not trifle with it. As Paul so passionately points out in 6:2, we cannot say that sin does not matter. But we need not cower in fear. The strategy for dealing with sin is to be who we are – to live in the light of what Christ has accomplished. We need to realise with joy and thanks that this is true of us, and get serious about the business of godliness. We cannot simply be passive; we are to pursue godliness. Not only are we to stop looking at what we shouldn’t look at, but we are also to dwell upon what is good. Not only are we to stop using our mouths for gossip, but we are to use our mouths to build each other up and to speak the truths of the gospel. The more we meditate on our union with Christ, the more we will desire to live consistently with that. Keep being who you are becoming. Start living in anticipation of the glory that is ours in Christ. Do not just look back to your union with Christ in those historical events of the cross and resurrection, but look forward to eternal life in Christ.

Exercise

Think about how this is going to affect you in a few hours, later tonight or tomorrow morning. How will this truth help you overcome a particular struggle? How can you be helped by others to know this truth and resist temptation in the moment, and how can you help others do the same? Take a few minutes now to pray.