

SANCTIFICATION I

by Ron Harvey

INTRODUCTION

I. What do we mean when we set out to discuss sanctification.

Let's look at a few Scriptures to get a feel for this concept. And pay attention to the idea of progressing in the Christian life.

II Peter 3:18

*But **grow in grace**, and in the **knowledge** of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*

Phil. 1:9

*That your **love** may abound yet more and more.*

II Thess. 1:3

*Your **faith** groweth exceedingly*

Ephesians 4:15

But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ.

So we have the concept then of growth which is clearly a necessary part of the Christian experience.

Example: Now we all have some sense of the idea of physical growth. A baby is born and he is a complete and entire human being with all the necessary parts. Unless he is born with some deformities, he has all the necessary components which make him a human being. And yet, over the years he grows physically. His hands get bigger. His feet get bigger. He gets taller. His entire body grows proportionately. It is a very natural thing. If we don't see a child for several years, we are not amazed that he has grown bigger. We would be amazed if there was no growth.

Example: Likewise, we are not amazed if a person grows mentally over the years. In fact, we expect mental growth. If a person had a mental age of 3 when he was 18, then something would be seriously wrong. Mental growth is a natural process.

And spiritual growth is much the same. It is to be expected. It is the normal experience of every Christian. We are given full capacity upon our regeneration. We are a new creation with all the “spiritual parts” if you will. But when we are born spiritually, we are babes in Christ. And it is necessary to grow. And so, we grow spiritually. We grow in grace. We grow in knowledge. We grow in faith. We grow in all the spiritual graces. We grow in humility. We grow in patience. We grow in wisdom. In all of these spiritual areas we grow. And obviously, growth implies a gradual and perhaps lengthy process. And the theological term we apply to this process is sanctification.

II. The importance of spiritual growth.

Obviously, failing to grow physically would soon make a person unable to function properly as a normal human being. And failing to grow spiritually would make a person unable to function as a normal Christian.

You have to understand, that when we are first regenerated, we are among the ungodly. Even when we are converted and God justifies us, Romans 4:5 says God justifies the ungodly. And we are made alive and we are a new creation, but our ungodly nature remains and our ungodly habits are hard to break. And there is a whole new way of living that is set before us. And we have to grow. And so, whatever the Bible says about growing is important and worthy of our attention.

III. The mysterious nature of spiritual growth.

A. Our spiritual birth was mysterious.

The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.

B. Our spiritual development is mysterious.

1. We barely understand natural and physical things.
2. We do not understand spiritual things.

The things of God knoweth no man save to whom the Spirit is pleased to reveal them.

I Cor. 2:11, 12

IV. No one can possibly make any progress in the Christian life unless he is first a Christian.

This is quite an obvious saying. And yet, it is a profound concept. You cannot grow a Christian out of an unbelieving heart.

Example: When we plant a seed in the ground and expect to grow a watermelon, we must be sure that we plant a watermelon seed. If I plant a tulip bulb instead, I will be quite surprised at harvest time.

So, you can easily see, if you want Christian growth, there must first be a Christian seed. An unbeliever will never grow into a Christian and will never grow Christian fruit.

Another way to put it might be: Spiritual growth, presupposes spiritual life. This seems quite obvious, but in our day and time, where there are so many spiritual counterfeits and when so many are deceived about spiritual things, maybe it is not so obvious to all.

Many people think they are a Christian when in fact they are not.

Example: There was a TV show recently where they sent a reporter out on the street and asked people if they thought they would go to heaven when they died. Invariably, they would answer yes. But when they were asked why, they gave all kinds of answers. Some said, “Because I’m a pretty good person.” Some said, “Because I go to church.” Others said, “Because I have made my confessions to the priest.” Some simply said, “I don’t know.”

Many, many people think they are a Christian. And in the last day Jesus will say, “Depart from me, I never knew you.”

A.W. Pink, in his little book, *Spiritual Growth*, says there are three kinds of “Christians.”

First there are **preacher-made Christians**.

Some people think they are a Christian because they were baptized in infancy. They grow up thinking they are in God’s family because they are in the church by the sprinkling of a little water. And they are no more regenerate than a piece of dead wood. And yet, a preacher has sprinkled them in and given them a false assurance. And Jesus may say unto them, “Depart from me, I never knew you.”

Some people think they are a Christian because they were induced by some high-pressure preacher to make a profession. Listen to what A.W. Pink says.

This high pressure business is in different forms and in varying degrees, from appeals to the emotions to mass hypnotism whereby crowds are induced to “come forward.” Under it countless thousands whose consciences were never searched and who had no sense of their lost condition before God were persuaded to “do the manly thing,” “enlist under the banner of Christ,” “unite with God’s people in their crusade against the devil.” Such converts are like mushrooms: they spring up in a night and survive but a short time, having no root.

A.W. Pink, *Spiritual Growth*, pg. 14

And so, many are merely preacher-made Christians who have no root.

And then, there are **self-made Christians** who set up their own system for acceptance with God and who bring their works or their religious acts to the table as if to purchase their acceptance from God. Or they come with a mere intellectual nod to Christ without a bowing of the heart. Or they come with any number of misconceptions, but with no real submission to Christ and no root in them.

But then, there are **God-made Christians**. And these are the only true Christians.

Jesus said, “No man can come unto me except the Father which has sent me draw him.” (John 6:44)

“No man can come.”

Even though this statement was made by Jesus himself, the vast majority of professed Christendom has rejected this idea. And the whole of the matter is that man likes to think that salvation is within man’s control. But Jesus said, “No man can come . . .” The fact of the matter is that fallen man is wholly at the disposal of God and this is thoroughly unpalatable to the unhumiliated heart.

God-made Christians are a miracle of God’s grace. We are “his workmanship.” (Eph.2:10)

So the question is, “What distinguishes a real Christian from everyone else in the world?”
And,

A. The great distinguishing mark of a Christian is regeneration.

Our very spiritual life is brought into existence by a supernatural operation of God’s Spirit upon our soul. And we are born again, not of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:13)

B. Now one of the characteristics of a regenerate Christian is that he has received the Holy Spirit from Christ. (Romans 8:9)

But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.

So, you see that there are only two types of people: those who have the Spirit of God in them and those who do not. And this Holy Spirit is the principle identifying mark of all Christians. And this Holy Spirit is that living dynamic in us that produces in us spiritual desires and spiritual exercises.

And, where a person has the Holy Spirit as an indwelling helper, there is a natural receptiveness to the things of God.

Example: Have you ever noticed how a newborn baby clings instinctively to his mother?

In the same way, a newborn Christian, turns instinctively to the One who gave him life. And there is a receptiveness in a regenerate soul. The authority of God is felt in the conscience and there is a new sense of right and wrong. There is an enlightened understanding that perceives the holiness of God. And there are stirrings in the soul where there were none before.

There are two things produced by the Holy Spirit in the heart of the regenerate man.

1. The regenerate man begins to have a sickening consciousness of sin and a sense of his own sinfulness which he never had before.
2. And he begins to faintly perceive the grace of God and that the righteousness of Christ is his by imputation.

But this isn't true of the unregenerate man.

But, the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him, neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

I Cor. 2:14)

So, who is a candidate for spiritual growth? Only someone who has been made alive. Only someone who has the Holy Spirit in him.

WHAT SANCTIFICATION IS NOT

- I. Progress in the Christian life (whatever that is) does not signify advancing in God's favor.

This would be a return to that old human tendency of trying to gain acceptance with God by works. It is a wrongheaded concept before we are regenerated and it is a wrongheaded concept after we are regenerated.

We will never, never, never earn God's favor by growing into a better Christian. (See Romans 4:4, 5)

- A. God's favor toward us **originated** in his election of us and had nothing whatsoever to do with anything in us.

Who hath saved us and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.

II Tim. 1:9

- B. Remember, if after God has saved us, we are anything, it is because God has worked it in us. Are you a wonderful, care-giving person? Then it is because God has made you so. Are you the world's greatest deacon? Then God has worked it in you. Do you have a great desire and inclination to be a minister of the Word of God? Then God has given that to you.

Look at Isaiah 26:12

Lord thou wilt ordain peace for us: for thou also hast wrought all our works in us.
Isaiah 26:12

Now, if God has wrought all our works in us, then where is the boasting? And if he has done it in us, then why do we suppose that our works merit any acceptance from him?

- C. Any grace for holy living that is bestowed on us in this life, is nothing more or less than the sovereign execution of his good pleasure.

Do you have faith? Then, God has given it.

Do you have more faith? Then, God has given it.

Do you have patience and humility? Then, God has given it.

He gives grace to us all. But he gives more grace to some and less grace to others. And it is all according to his good pleasure.

So, the first principle of sanctification is that spiritual growth does not merit acceptance with God. It is a further expression of his grace to us.

We are accepted only on the basis of the perfect Righteousness of Jesus. You can't get any more perfect than that. When God looks at us at the final judgment, He will see perfect righteousness. He will see the Righteousness of his own Son, which we have by simple faith alone. We will never be able to add to that. No matter how many good works we perform, we will never add to the perfect Righteousness of Jesus. Any addition to perfection would result in imperfection. And, no matter how much we grow spiritually, we will never add one iota to the perfect Righteousness of Jesus which we have already due to the imputation of that Righteousness to our account. God has already given us perfect Righteousness. We will never be any more righteous in his eyes.

So, we should not look at spiritual growth as something we do to gain acceptance with God. The Bible says, "We are accepted in the Beloved."

Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved.

Ephesians 1:5, 6

Even after we have been saved, we need always to be careful that we don't return to a system of works whereby we are trying to earn favor with God. This only leads to a glorification of the flesh, self glorification and ultimately a weak and beggarly Christian life. It actually can turn into spiritual regression rather than spiritual growth. (See Gal.3:1-3; 4:9)

It seems to me that the moment you stumble back into works then you are falling backward. The moment you fall back into a mental attitude of trying to prove to God and to others how wonderful you are, then you are missing the whole point of the Christian life which is not to prove how wonderful you are, but to prove how wonderful He is.

And this can only be done by acknowledging grace in every part of the salvation process. I don't care whether you are talking about election or regeneration or conversion or justification or sanctification, it is all by the grace of God. And we have nothing in which to glory. It is all a work of God in us. It is all by his grace. It is all by his power. It is all by his sovereign pleasure and according to his sovereign purposes.