

Bible Study and Sanctification

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Introduction

Some consider sanctification an elusive goal. Circumstances surround all of us that make it difficult to do the right thing and live a Christian life in a sinful world. What would things be like if we did not have to contend with such difficulties? Hypothetical questions are rarely useful, but I believe this one is. Let us consider it briefly.

Some "Advantages" are Illusions

Three "advantages" that anyone wishing to live a holy life might desire at one time or another are living in heaven rather than here, having the nature of unfallen Adam, and knowing Christ personally as a man. Each is an illusion.

Living in heaven

What if, instead of having to contend with our sinful surroundings, we could just go to heaven and be free from it all? Would we really be free from it all? Not for a moment. Sin started in heaven. That is why Lucifer "that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan . . . was hurled to the earth" (Rev 12:9). If sinners were taken there they would bring with them all the same problems they have here and immortality would merely make their results more permanent. Just living in heaven would not help us. If it would, God could easily take us there.

Having the nature of unfallen Adam

Accepting the fact then that we must live our lives amid less than ideal surroundings, what if we could suddenly be freed from the weaknesses brought about by our sinful nature? If, for example, we could have the nature of unfallen Adam, then we could avoid sinning because our nature would not constantly make it necessary for us to sin. But there is a problem with such reasoning. The one person in all history who really did have the nature of unfallen Adam was Adam. And he, with his wife, was the first to fall. His nature did not require him to sin but it did not prevent him from sinning either. And if we had his unfallen nature we would sin too, just as he did, if sinning was something we wanted to do. Adam's nature was completely irrelevant to his success. Whatever we might say about ourselves, for him it was not a factor either way.

We could be the model of perfection and wickedness would take root in our hearts if we became preoccupied with the fact. That is exactly what happened to Lucifer.

"You were the model of perfection,
full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.
(13) You were in Eden,
the garden of God;
every precious stone adorned you:

ruby, topaz and emerald,
 chrysolite, onyx and jasper,
 sapphire, turquoise and beryl.
 Your settings and mountings were made of gold;
 on the day you were created they were prepared.
 (14) You were anointed as a guardian cherub,
 for so I ordained you.
 You were on the holy mount of God;
 you walked among the fiery stones.
 (15) You were blameless in your ways
 from the day you were created
 till wickedness was found in you.
 (Ezek 28:12-15)

Knowing Christ as a man

If we could only know Jesus personally--as a man--and talk with Him face to face, surely then we would have less desire to sin and that experience would help us in some way. Unfortunately, however, we cannot do that two thousand years after the cross, so here we are. But what shall we say about Judas? He knew Jesus well. More than this, he spent three years with Him virtually night and day and was an object of the Savior's special solicitude throughout that time. Knowing Jesus and interacting with Him on a human level day after day over an extended period of time did nothing for Judas. "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing" (John 6:63). Knowing Jesus on a merely interpersonal level would not help us.

Being in heaven, having the nature of unfallen Adam, enjoying the utmost perfection, spending time in the physical presence of Jesus--not one or all of these things would be of any value to us whatever. If we wanted to sin under these or any other circumstances, we would sin.

What We Need Most Lies Closest at Hand

There is no point in looking for crutches such as those described above. They would not help us and we do not need them (see Rom 10:6-10). When we open God's Word and study it for the purpose of knowing and doing what it commands, then we do truly gain an advantage that will help us win an abundant victory over the enemy.

The creative energy that called the worlds into existence is in the word of God. This word imparts power; it begets life. Every command is a promise; accepted by the will, received into the soul, it brings with it the life of the Infinite One. It transforms the nature and re-creates the soul in the image of God.¹

A right and a wrong way to study

But not just any kind of study will bring about this result. We can confront Jesus in His Word in the manner of the careless multitude and such study accomplishes nothing.

A sense of the power and wisdom of God, and of our inability to comprehend His greatness, should inspire us with humility, and we should open His word, as we would enter His presence, with holy awe. When we come to the Bible, reason must acknowledge an authority superior to itself, and heart and intellect must bow to the great I AM.²

It is not the mere reading of the word that will accomplish the result that is designed by Heaven, but the truth revealed in the word of God must find an entrance into the heart, if the good intended is obtained.³

"Who touched me?" Jesus asked. When they all denied it, Peter said, 'Master, the people are crowding and pressing against you.' But Jesus said, 'Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me'" (Luke 8:45-46). When we study the Scriptures in such a way as to touch the hem of Jesus' garment, then power will go out of Him to us also and we will not remain unchanged.

Intellectual results

Studying the Scriptures in a humble and intelligent manner, for the purpose of knowing what they command so as carry out its instructions, leaves its mark on the mind.

The truths of God's word are not mere sentiments, but the utterances of the Most High. He who makes these truths a part of his life becomes in every sense a new creature. He is not given new mental powers, but the darkness that through ignorance and sin has clouded the understanding is removed.⁴

Here is a study that quickens the mind into a vigorous and healthy life, and awakens it to the highest exercise. It is impossible to study the Bible with a humble, teachable spirit, without developing and strengthening the intellect.⁵

In searching out the various parts and studying their relationship, the highest faculties of the human mind are called into intense activity. No one can engage in such study without developing mental power. . . . No other study can impart such mental power as does the effort to grasp the stupendous truths of revelation. The mind thus brought in contact with the thoughts of the Infinite cannot but expand and strengthen.⁶

Spiritual results

If studying the Bible affects our minds in the above manner, and cannot avoid doing so if we approach that study in the right way, what effect does it have spiritually?

As we contemplate the great things of God's word, we look into a fountain that broadens and deepens beneath our gaze. Its breadth and depth pass our knowledge. As we gaze, the vision widens; stretched out before us we behold a boundless, shoreless sea.

Such study has vivifying power. The mind and heart acquire new strength, new life.

This experience is the highest evidence of the divine authorship of the Bible. We receive God's word as food for the soul, through the same evidence by which we receive bread as food for the body. Bread supplies the need of our nature; we know by experience that it produces blood and bone and brain. Apply the same test to the Bible; when its principles have actually become the elements of character, what has been the result? what changes have

been made in the life? "Old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." 2 Corinthians 5:17. In its power, men and women have broken the chains of sinful habit. They have renounced selfishness. The profane have become reverent, the drunken sober, the profligate pure. Souls that have borne the likeness of Satan have been transformed into the image of God. This change is itself the miracle of miracles. A change wrought by the word, it is one of the deepest mysteries of the word. We cannot understand it; we can only believe, as declared by the Scriptures, it is "Christ in you, the hope of glory." Colossians 1:27.⁷

It is true that we are victims of circumstance, that we labor under a disadvantage. But so did Jesus. There is nothing in what He received from Adam, or Mary, or anyone in between (see Matt 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-37), that placed Him in any special position to overcome the enemy. Such relationships were only a liability to Him. And yet having sinful ancestors did not prevent Jesus from trusting His Father any more than lacking them prevented Adam from sinning initially. The only advantage Jesus had in His life on earth was what He received from His Father by faith. We can claim the same help from the same Father by the same faith. As regards His own inherent deity, we do not have it but He did not use it, i.e., He did not use it to benefit Himself. So even the fact that Christ was God cannot be urged as a reason why we should fail where He succeeded.

Conclusion

Sanctification is the sure result of being with Jesus.⁸ We cannot have the realization of being loved and respected by one whom we also love and respect and come away from that experience unaffected by it. Indeed, there are only two ways that the above result can be avoided--first, if we do not love, and second, if we do not have the realization of being loved. In either of these cases there is no basis for mutuality. But when both factors are present, the effect is unavoidable.

Is sanctification also a part of the gospel? Are the effects of sanctification really a part of justification? These are barren, empty, useless questions. The fact is that we cannot go to Jesus in faith and come away from the experience unchanged. And doing this repeatedly over the course of a lifetime can change a man like Paul in Acts 8:1-3 into an entirely different kind of man like Paul in the book of Philemon.⁹ Christ is capable of changing people. Otherwise, He is not capable of changing people. But in this case what can we say about Paul?

No part of the process I have been describing is our own doing. Sanctification, correctly understood, is every bit as much by faith as is justification. It is the natural and inescapable result of entering Jesus' presence by faith. We go to Him for forgiveness and receive justification. We come away changed by knowing that the gift is undeserved and yet freely given. This is sanctification. Is the effect the same as its cause? No. They are distinct. But how can you make a round trip without both going and coming? They are also inseparable. So where is the argument over terminology?

In this context there is no way to conceive of sanctification being our own blood, sweat, and tears--a product of our own endeavor. There is no sanctification by works any more than there is justification by works. The two claims (that sanctification must occur if the conditions are met and that sanctification is entirely by faith) are corollaries of each other. They both reflect the underlying concept that Jesus changes those who come to Him and touch Him in faith.

A useful analogy is the impress made by a seal on wax or clay. No seal, no impress. The clay does not achieve the form desired for it by the Craftsman. "Achieving" is the wrong word. It receives the intended form--to the extent that it remains workable. Just here there is insight into the meaning of the term "seal of God."¹⁰ What remains for us to learn about sanctification is not how to explain it better but how to come in simple, childlike trust to the Savior.

Note: All Scripture quotations in this paper, except when noted otherwise, are from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright (c) 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society.

¹Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1952), p. 126.

²Idem, *Steps to Christ* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1977), p. 110.

³Idem, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 131.

⁴Idem, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1943), p. 452.

⁵Idem, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 432.

⁶Idem, *Education*, p. 124.

⁷Ibid, pp. 171-72.

⁸"Even John, the beloved disciple, the one who most fully reflected the likeness of the Saviour, did not naturally possess that loveliness of character. He was not only self-assertive and ambitious for honor, but impetuous, and resentful under injuries. But as the character of the Divine One was manifested to him, he saw his own deficiency and was humbled by the knowledge. The strength and patience, the power and tenderness, the majesty and meekness, that he beheld in the daily life of the Son of God, filled his soul with admiration and love. Day by day his heart was drawn out toward Christ, until he lost sight of self in love for his Master. His resentful, ambitious temper was yielded to the molding power of Christ. The regenerating influence of the Holy Spirit renewed his heart. The power of the love of Christ, wrought a transformation of character. This is the sure result of union with Jesus. When Christ abides in the heart, the whole nature is transformed. Christ's Spirit, His love, softens the heart, subdues the soul, and raises the thoughts and desires toward God and heaven" (idem, *Steps to Christ*, p. 73).

⁹See Hardy, "Two Brief Notes: I, Philemon," *Historicism* No. 12/Oct 87, pp. 57-62.

¹⁰"[I]t is not any seal or mark that can be seen, but a settling into the truth, both intellectually and spiritually, so they cannot be moved . . ." (Ellen White, manuscript 173, 1902, quoted in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 7 vols. [Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1955], 4:1161).