

Of Sanctification (Part 1)

1 Pt 1:13-25; WCF 13.1

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 20 October 2019, 16:30

(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)¹

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

I will forever remember one great thing God did in the Reformed Church of Avondale.

You see, in the first ten days after our immigration from South Africa into New Zealand, we stayed with a couple who was then as old as I am now – in their mid-sixties.

With great concern and heavy hearts, they soon told us about their one daughter who had rejected the church and Christ, and had already for ten years been living a very self-centred, self-confident and self-reliant life.

So, with a very sombre face, her father then told me: “Pieter, my daughter may never come to the Lord!” “You see, how do I know whether she is even one of God’s elect?” “Yet, although she’s been away from the church (and as far as we can gauge, also from God), I keep on praying that the Lord will work a miracle in her heart and that she will return!”

Wow, that shook me! You see, I had never thought of that – i.e. that the child of a heartfelt follower of Jesus Christ, might perhaps not be a chosen one of God!

So, that night I prayed for these parents and their adult daughter! In fact, for quite a few years, I found myself on and off praying for this young woman’s return to God, to the church and her parents!

Then, guess what?

One Sunday morning after church at coffee time, five years after our stay with her parents, her father came to me and said, “Pieter, did you see who was in church this morning?” “It’s our daughter!” “Pieter, she’s come back to the Lord!” “In fact, her own words were, ‘The Lord has found me!’”

My brother & sister, this father’s face was shining! For fifteen years, his daughter had been away from God, and now she’s back!

Said this father, “Pieter, only the Lord could have worked this change in her heart!”

And, surely, that is absolutely true!

You see, what happened in that young woman’s heart is what the Apostle Paul (in Titus 3:5), called *regeneration/rebirth*,² and what Jesus described to Nicodemus as *being born again (being born from above)*.³

¹ In writing this sermon, I am greatly indebted to my two main sources whose guidance I appreciate: 1) Van Dixhoorn, Chad. 2014. *Confessing the Faith: a reader’s guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*. Carlisle, PA : The Banner of Truth Trust. 484p.

2) Sproul, R.C. 2006. *The truth we confess*. (In: Sproul, R.C. ed. *Truths we confess: a layman’s guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith – in three volumes*. Vol. 2: *Salvation and the Christian Life (Chapters 9-22 of the Confession)* Phillipsburg, NJ : P&R Publishing. 279p.).

Many words & phrases I have written, I have gladly borrowed with great thankfulness from this source.

² From the Greek word *paling-gennesis* (παλιγγενεσία), which comes from the words *palin* (again or re-) and *gennesis* (birth), in other words, “**experience of a complete change of life, rebirth** of a redeemed person” (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 752). Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

³ Cf. Jn 3:7 *gennaō anōthen* (γεννάω ἄνωθεν): an idiom, literally ‘to be born again’ (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 509). New York: United Bible Societies)

And now? What happens now that someone has been born again by God's Holy Spirit? Does God just leave such person on his/her own?

No! God now builds His born-again loved one up! Yes, He now sanctifies him/her and work in his/her own heart the desire to keep themselves sanctified in holy living!

Look, is that not why Paul told the Ephesian elders, "***Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.***"⁴

And that's what God also did e.g. with that young woman of the Reformed Church Avondale. He did not just work *new birth* in her heart. No, He also *built her up* through the craving for more knowledge of God – a craving which He satisfied by providentially steering her towards studies at the Reformed Theological College in Geelong! And so started a lifelong pathway of sanctification!

See? It is unthinkable that he/she who has been born again by God's Holy Spirit will now just become stagnant!

Indeed, just as unthinkable it is that Lazarus, after Christ had raised him back to life, would then not live a life of thankfulness and holiness, so is it unthinkable that he/she whose heart has been regenerated will now not experience a God-worked desire to live a holy life – a life of glorifying God by bearing the practical fruits of a new life!

And yes, it is so that our rebirth was none of our doing, for it was all God's gracious work! But our sanctification is often described as a *synergistic* work, i.e. God & us working (*ergo*) together (*syn-*) on our path of holy living. It is *us* desiring to live holy, but it is *God* working in us that very desire to live holy.

Look, is that not why Paul told the Christians in Philippi, "...***continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose***"⁵

Questions:

What instruments does God use to keep this sanctification process alive in God's born-again children?

And what are the blessings of sanctified living?

Well, here are three points to answer these questions...

- Instruments
- Blessing Number 1
- Blessing Number 2

Instruments (of Sanctification)

My brother & sister, what instruments does God use to keep this sanctification process alive in His born-again children?

Well, first & foremost, God uses His *Holy Spirit* to work in the born-again Christian to both *will* and *work* at his/her Christian life. It's Phil 2:13 again, "...***for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose***."

Paul told the Christians in Thessalonica, "...***God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit ...***" (2 Thess 2:13).⁶

⁴ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ac 20:32). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. (Emphasis mine).

⁵ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Php 2:12–13). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁶ ...εἴλατο ὑμᾶς ὁ θεὸς ἀπαρχὴν εἰς σωτηρίαν ἐν ἁγιασμῷ πνεύματος (For the word *hagiasmos* (ἁγιασμός), cf. "personal dedication to the interests of the deity, *holiness, consecration, sanctification*...." (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). [A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature](#) (3rd ed., p. 10). Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

So, what do we see?

We see that the Holy Spirit is not just the One who worked *new birth* in us, but also the One who *remains our Teacher!*

Yes, we continue to learn in the Holy Spirit's "school" – so to speak!

Guess what is the assigned textbook our Teacher uses in training us in holy living...!

It is the *Word of God!*

Do you remember our Lord Jesus' high-priestly prayer of Jn 17?

Well, this is what our Lord prayed (in Jn 17:16-17), "***Father, ... they are not of the world, even as I am not of it. ¹⁷ Sanctify them by the truth; Your word is truth!***"⁷

See? "...***Sanctify them by the truth; Your word is truth!***"

See the main instruments God uses to sanctify us?

They are His *Holy Spirit* and His *Word* – the same two instruments God used to work rebirth in our hearts!

Look, is that not why Paul told the Christians of Ephesus, "...***Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word***"?⁸

Everything in our Christian walk depends upon God's *Word* – yes, even the sacraments of baptism and Lord's Supper are Word-dependent, as God uses His *Word* to create in us an understanding of these sacraments and their usefulness!

My brother & sister (and dear young people & children), can you see why Christians who don't know their Bibles remain immature and childish!?

Can you see why churches that do not teach the truth of God's Word will never rise above a kindergarten-level of our faith?

It's on this note that the Apostle Paul once wrote to the church in Corinth (in 1 Cor 3:1-3), "***Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. ² I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. ³ You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?***"⁹

Well, sometimes we wonder why we do not grow, why our lives are not bearing the fruit of the Spirit – why we are not sanctified.

And is it a *mystery* why this is so?

I mean, it could not be the Holy Spirit's fault! After all, in the past (just as now) He *has* told us about the important role the Bible has in our growth in grace!

I *know* we live very busy-busy lives, but oh, that we will constantly hear the same words which St Augustine heard from over a garden fence – the voice of a child who was playing next-door, saying, "Pick up and read! Pick up and read!"¹⁰

⁷ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jn 17:16–17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁸ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Eph 5:25–26). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

⁹ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (1 Co 3:1–3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁰ Tolle Lege, Take and read...

"But when a deep consideration had from the secret bottom of my soul drawn together and heaped up all my misery in the sight of my heart; there arose a mighty storm, bringing a mighty shower of tears. Which that I might pour forth wholly, in its natural expressions, I rose from Alypius: solitude was suggested to me as fitter for the business of weeping; so I retired so far that even his presence could not be a burden to me. Thus was it

Then, Augustine picked up and read a piece from Rm 13, and the Holy Spirit changed his life forever!

Children (Young person), read your Bible! Read it often! Read it with humble heart, because, in the power of the Holy Spirit, the Bible is God's instrument to not only *bring* you to faith in Jesus, but to also *instruct you in your daily holy living* – i.e. to sanctify you!

Well, that was point 1: “Instruments” – the instruments God uses to keep the sanctification process alive in God's born-again children.

Here is point 2...

Blessing No 1

Beloved of our Lord Jesus Christ,

What is the first blessing of living a sanctified life?

Well, is it not that a daily Scripture-fed holy life **destroys sin's dominion (reign/rule) over us?**

You see, sin wants to make you its slave! Sin wants to always be your master!

Here's a picture...

Imagine you were a slave – the slave of a harsh and cruel master (e.g. like slaves often had in Bible times and in the 1700's and 1800's in the USA).

Imagine yourself slaving day-in and day-out in all sorts of weather and on little food and little privileges, and precious little to give to your wife and children (if you were privileged enough to be married with a family)! And there's no way out of your dreadful situation. In fact, the only way out is to die, because death will free you from your cruel master!

then with me, and he perceived something of it; for something I suppose I had spoken, wherein the tones of my voice appeared choked with weeping, and so had risen up.

He then remained where we were sitting, most extremely astonished. I cast myself down I know not how, under a certain fig-tree, giving full vent to my tears; and the floods of mine eyes gushed out an acceptable sacrifice to Thee. And, not indeed in these words, yet to this purpose, spake I much unto Thee: and Thou, O Lord, how long? how long, Lord, wilt Thou be angry, for ever? Remember not our former iniquities, for I felt that I was held by them. I sent up these sorrowful words: How long, how long, “tomorrow, and tomorrow?” Why not now? why not is there this hour an end to my uncleanness?

So was I speaking and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when, lo! I heard from a neighbouring house a voice, as of boy or girl, I know not, chanting, and oft repeating. ‘Take up and read; Take up and read.’ [‘Tolle, lege! Tolle, lege!’] Instantly, my countenance altered, I began to think most intently whether children were wont in any kind of play to sing such words: nor could I remember ever to have heard the like. So checking the torrent of my tears, I arose; interpreting it to be no other than a command from God to open the book, and read the first chapter I should find...

Eagerly then I returned to the place where Alypius was sitting; for there had I laid the volume of the Apostle when I arose thence. I seized, opened, and in silence read that section on which my eyes first fell: ‘Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, in concupiscence.’ [Romans 13:14-15] No further would I read; nor needed I: for instantly at the end of this sentence, by a light as it were of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away.”¹

1. Aurelius Augustine, The Confessions of St. Augustine, translated by Edward Pusey. Vol. VII, Part 1. The Harvard Classics. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14; Bartleby.com, 2001. www.bartleby.com/7/1/, Book Eight, Chapter 12, Paragraphs 27-28. (cf. e.g. <https://aureliusaugustinus.wordpress.com/2007/12/04/tolle-lege-take-and-read/>)

Indeed, although *scared of dying*, death was what many a slave *longed* for. That's why the slaves in the USA, some 200 years ago, often used to sing about the River Jordan, which often symbolised for them that cross-over line between this life and the next – that line which crossing-over would free them from their harsh masters!¹¹

Well, dying to our wicked master, sin – that's exactly the illustration Paul uses in Romans 6.

You see, in Rm 6:6 Paul says as much as that the Christian is someone who has died to his old master, sin! So, how could the Christian now possibly still remain a slave to sin? How could sin still reign (have dominion) over the Christian?

Question: When did the Christian (you & I) die to sin? When did we undergo this death that the Apostle Paul is talking of?

Well, you & I died this death when we were born again by the Holy Spirit! Yes, at that stage, it was as if we so identified with our Lord Jesus' suffering, that we died with Him on that cross! Our old, sinful, nature died!

But that's not all!

You see, just as Jesus then rose again from the dead, so did you & I rise to a new life! And just as our Lord's resurrected-and-glorified body can never die again, so should you and I never let sin reign over our mortal bodies!

And what will help us in this?

Well, our ongoing Holy-Spirit-worked sanctification!

You see, the person who stays in regular Holy-Spirit-enhanced Bible reading, is the one who will receive from God this blessing (I call it blessing number 1), to destroy the dominion of sin in his/her life. I'm not saying that Christians will *never* sin again in this life. No, together with Rm 6:12, I say that the Christian is the one who will do his/her best not to let sin reign¹² over his/her mortal body!¹³

So, he/she who is born again is the one who loves it that God's Word dwells richly in him/her so that he/she can see sin's dominion/rule destroyed!

Indeed, the person who has a heartfelt gratitude for what God, in Jesus Christ, has done for him/her, will battle against their old nature so as to not let sin rule over them!

¹¹ See e.g. "In Erskine Peters's definitive collection of spiritual lyrics, there are further variations in the use of the Jordan River as a symbol. At times, the Jordan serves as the symbolic border between this world and heaven, as in the song 'Roll, Jordan, Roll':

Roll, Jordan, roll
I want to go to heaven when I die
to hear Jordan roll

(<https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/places/related-articles/river-jordan-in-early-african-american-spirituals>).

¹² From Greek *basileuō* (**βασιλεύω**), a figurative extension of meaning of βασιλεύω 'to rule, to reign as a king, ...' to be in control in an absolute manner—'to reign, to control completely' (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 473). New York: United Bible Societies).

¹³ Rm 6:12 **Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.**

That's why Paul wrote to the Christians in Galatia (in Gal 5:24), "...*those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh¹⁴ with its passions and desires.*"¹⁵

My brother & sister (young person), is this putting to death of our sinful nature – is this easy?

No! It's a battle!

But he/she who has been born-again is the one who loves Christ, and is the one who will *want* to do this fighting against sin.

But it's because this remains a battle that Paul says (in Rm 8:13), "*For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.*"¹⁶

Well, that's blessing no.1 of a sanctified life: i.e. that, through the Spirit, you & I destroy the dominion of sin! That's the first half of the story.

Here's the second half of the story – which brings us to the last point...

Blessing No 2

My brother & sister, sanctification does not just give us the blessing of "the mortification of the flesh;" no, it also gives us the blessing of being "quickened" to a new life!

Indeed, we do not only need to subdue sin, but to also become more alive to God's righteous demands! As WCF 3.1 says, "*those called and regenerated are more and more enlivened and strengthened in all saving graces.*"

My brother & sister, Eph 3:16-19 is perhaps one of the most powerful summaries of a sanctified life. This is what it says, "*I pray that out of His glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being,¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love,¹⁸ may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ,¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."¹⁷*

See the quickening (strengthening & enlivening)?

My brother & sister, sanctification is about real & practical holy living.

The author of Hebrews says (in Heb 12:14), "*Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.*"¹⁸

Wow!

Is it so that, without *holiness*, no one will be saved?

Is it then *holiness* through which we are saved, and not *by grace through faith*?

¹⁴ In Greek, *sarx* (σάρξ) "...the psychological aspect of human nature which contrasts with the spiritual nature; in other words, that aspect of human nature which is characterized by or reflects typical human reasoning and desires in contrast with those aspects of human thought and behavior which relate to God and the spiritual life—"human nature, human aspects, natural, human" (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 321). New York: United Bible Societies).

¹⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ga 5:24). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

¹⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ro 8:13). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

¹⁷ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Eph 3:16–19). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan (Emphasis mine).

¹⁸ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Heb 12:14). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

No, it *is* by grace through faith that we're saved. But those who have truly been saved by grace through faith don't come without holiness, either! You see, holiness is included in the uniform with which the Christian is clothed!

Look is it now a wonder that Peter says in our NT passage (in 1 Pt 1:14-15), "***As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance,¹⁵ but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct,¹⁶ since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy"***"?¹⁹

Dear Wainui member, with rebirth there's an actual change in a person. *The moment a soul is regenerated, a changed life begins. The change is real, and it happens instantly. And perfection is the goal of sanctification. And, in this life, we will not reach that total perfection. But he/she who has been born again by the Holy Spirit has started that lifelong process of sanctification²⁰ – a sanctification which shows the fruit of rebirth!*

If you don't see any such fruit yet, then pray that God's Spirit will work that in your heart and life!

AMEN (2550 words excluding footnotes)

¹⁹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (1 Pe 1:14–16). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

²⁰ My adaptation from Sproul (ibid:79).