

Peter's Epistles #13

Sanctification

(also available on-line at Ichthys.com)
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Review: In our discussion of the parable of the sower (Matt.13:1-9; Mk.4:1-9; Lk.8.4-8), we studied three categories of "bad soil". These, as we saw, were three categories of people whose attitude towards God's plan for their lives was so negative that their spiritual growth was stunted. The three essential types of "faith-problems" treated in this well-known parable are:

(1) *Lack of faith:* Christ and His message are rejected outright by the hard-packed heart which will not allow God's Word to enter at all.

(2) *Loss of faith:* When the cost becomes too great, Christ and His message are abandoned by the rocky heart which will not allow God's Word to penetrate deeply enough to take root.

(3) *Limitation of faith:* As the troubles and temptations of this world begin to take priority, Christ and His message are increasingly ignored by the thorny heart which will not allow God's Word to grow and produce.

The "seed" sown in our hearts is God's Word (Lk.8:11), and our attentiveness, allegiance, response, and obedience to that Word is what produces the growth of our "plant of faith". Such faith flourishes only in "good soil", that is, only in the hearts of believers who are committed to following God's plan for their lives (1Pet.1:7).

God's Master Plan: God loves us so much, that He sacrificed His precious Son for us, so that by believing in His Son, we might not die and be condemned for all eternity, but might instead live forever with Him (Jn.3:16). To take advantage of God's gracious offer of salvation, we must follow His will, which, in its most essential framework, is composed of three phases:

- (1) We must first and foremost put our faith in His Son, thus becoming believers in Jesus Christ.
- (2) Once we do believe, it is God's plan for us that we follow Christ during our lives on this earth.
- (3) When this life is over, God has already prepared a wondrous eternity for us.

For those of us who are already believers in Christ, part one (Salvation) has already been accomplished, and part three (Eternity) is yet to come in God's good time. The issue before us now is how best to follow our Lord while we yet live here on this earth, how best to focus our attention and our energy on part two of God's master plan for all believers.

Sanctification, the Objective of God's Plan: In each of the three parts of God's plan, God's objective for us is to become "holy" as He is holy (1Pet.1:16; Lev.11:44-45). The process by which we "become holy" in each phase of the plan of God is called sanctification (Jn.17:17; 17:19). "To sanctify" (Greek *hagiazō*: ἁγιάζω) means "to hallow", that is, to remove something (in this case, *us*) from the realm of the secular and transfer it into the realm of the divine. Sanctification is God's way of transforming us into people who are fit to live with Him and His Son forever. In each part of His plan, God cleanses us. In part one (salvation), He clears our name so that we are no longer under heavenly indictment (Col.2:14). In part three (eternity), He gives us a new body (2Cor.5:1-10) so that we shall be liberated from the sin nature that indwells our present body (Rom.7:17). In part two (time), God gives us the opportunity and responsibility of transforming ourselves (by His power and grace) into people who reflect His glory and mercy (Rom.12:2; 2Cor.3:18; Eph.4:22-24).

1. Sanctification in Christ: When we believed in Jesus Christ, we were "sanctified" (1Cor.6:11). This means, we might say, that in God's book our names were transferred out of the "profane" category and into the "holy" category. From the point in time when we became Christians, God no longer viewed us as sinful objects of His wrath (Rom.1:18), but as objects of His love (Rom.8:39). God has now officially pronounced us "holy". Nor does this act of sanctification in any way compromise His divine character: Jesus Christ has paid the entire price for our sanctification by his death for us on the cross. Notice also that this privileged position we enjoy does not come as a result of any effort on our part. The sort of people we were before we were saved has no effect on our present "holy" status, because we obtain this initial, "positional" sanctification solely on the basis of what Jesus Christ has done. We share His holy "position". By identifying ourselves with Christ, by accepting His work on our behalf, we receive this benefit of being "made holy" in God's eyes through no work or merit on our part.

2. Sanctification in Eternity: This last phase of sanctification is likewise entirely the work of God. After we leave this life, we enter into a wondrous eternity of "no more grief, tears, or toil" (Rev.21:4). At the resurrection, our present bodies will be transformed into new, eternal, incorruptible bodies, and thus become truly holy in fact as well as in name (Phil.3:21). We shall thenceforth be incapable of any sin or act of disobedience which might tarnish our holiness and alienate us from God (Rev.21:27; 1Cor.15:35-57). So both *initially* at salvation and *ultimately* at resurrection this transformation to a new, holy status (sanctification) is instantaneous and requires no effort on our part, since it is entirely the work of God.

3. Sanctification in Time: We have been made "holy" (by a judicial pronouncement of God based upon the work of Christ), we shall be made "holy" (by receiving a sinless body at the resurrection), and it is therefore God's further will that we *now* become "holy" here in this life

(Rom.6:19-22; Eph.5:26; 1Thes.4:3; Heb.12:14; 1Pet.1:15-16; 1Jn.3:3; Rev.22:11). When we became Christians, we did not immediately turn into perfect people. We brought our sinful nature with all of its foibles into our new life in Christ (Rom.7:17). Our challenge now as Christians is to change. We remain here on earth after being saved in order to glorify God by completing this transformation, a metamorphosis so astonishing that the world cannot help but see God's glory reflected in us (2Cor.3:18; Phil.2:15). We are here to "perfect the holiness" which God began in us at salvation and will complete in eternity:

Therefore, my beloved, possessing such promises as these, let us cleanse ourselves from every pollution of body and spirit, perfecting our sanctification in the fear of God.
2nd Corinthians 7:1

Sanctifying Our Hearts: What then does it mean to "be holy", and how do we, as sinful human beings, "become sanctified"? We need to start by recognizing what holiness is not. For example, appearing to others to be holy on the outside does not constitute true holiness. Jesus compared the Pharisees to "whitewashed tombs", because they looked clean and holy on the outside, but inside were really foul and corrupt (Matt.23:27; cf. 2Tim3:5). Simply changing the way we dress, the things we say, the way we behave around other people will not suffice to sanctify us in God's eyes (cf. Col.2:23). After all, appearances can be quite deceiving. A "con man" of even average ability can enter many a church and within a few weeks appear to be the most spiritual sheep in the flock, when in reality he has only come to fleece the rest. The apostle Paul warned us about those who may seem to be spiritual leaders, but are actually servants of Satan. It is no wonder, he said, that such men pretend to be "servants of righteousness", since even the devil masquerades as an "angel of light" (2Cor.11:13-15).

So although experiential sanctification ("holiness" achieved by the believer in time) will definitely change a person's behavior, the effecting of superficial, cosmetic changes in behavior (even if one's motivation is pure) is not what produces holiness - that is to flip the sanctification process on its head! True sanctification occurs only from the inside out. It is only by producing a genuine change in the thoughts and intents of our hearts (not by effecting an appearance of holiness for the benefit of others) that true sanctification is achieved (2Cor.4:16; Rom.6:4-11, 12:2). "As one thinks within himself, so he is in fact" (Prov.23:7). The battleground of the Christian life is to be found in the heart of individual believers (2Cor.10:4-5). Only by purifying the thinking of our hearts will the "old-us" be replaced by a "new-us" (Eph.4:22-24). This "new person" is "put on" by "renewing our minds with the true knowledge" of God (Col.3:10-11), that is, by the process of spiritual growth.

The Means of Sanctification: The only path to holiness in this life is spiritual growth. The true, inner change we seek can only be accomplished by combining our faith with the Word of God (2Pet.3:18). Just as it is true that as Christians, we are "in" the world, but not "of" it (Jn.17:14-16), so we must abide by God's means of sanctification rather than the world's. Our Lord left no doubt of the true way to holiness in His prayer for our sanctification on the night before He was crucified: "Make them holy by means of Your truth. Your Word is truth" (Jn.17:17-19). We cannot become truly holy without the truth contained in God's Word

(Eph.5:26-27). We cannot truly benefit from that truth unless we believe it and unless we live by it (Heb.4:2). In the parable of the sower, the only place where the "plant of faith" was able to grow was in the fertile soil of a heart willing to respond to God's Word. God has given us His Word. The means of sanctification through spiritual growth are available to us all if we are but willing to listen to and to live His Word.

The Process of Spiritual Growth: Stated in its most basic form, spiritual growth can be broken down into a four step process. To grow, we must ...

1. listen to God's Word.
2. believe it.
3. live it.
4. help others do likewise.

While simple in theory, the growth process can prove difficult, for it is not an automatic one. Growth requires the cooperation of our volition. Our free will must be involved in the process. Even when our intentions are good, that is often not enough to fulfill the four steps consistently and conscientiously. Our inherent human weaknesses (Matt.26:41), the distractions of the world (1Jn.2:15-17; Lk.8:14), and the active opposition of Satan (Eph.6:11-12; Job 1:6-11) can all be expected to hinder any positive action on our part. Nevertheless, we are assured by scripture that when we do strive to move forward in God's plan for us, God aids us in every way, from the "willing" to the "doing" of it (Phil.2:13).

The Necessity for Spiritual Growth: There is no real alternative to spiritual growth. It is nearly impossible to stand still in the Christian life, and it is certainly dangerous to try. The writer of Hebrews warns us of this when he speaks of the dangers of "drifting past our so great salvation" (2:1-4). In this life we either grow or "go to seed". Only by actively pursuing sanctification here in time can we be sure to preserve our "plant of faith" (Col.1:22-23 [not NIV]; Heb.12:14). Only the Word of God "implanted" in our souls can keep them safe (Jas.1:21). Therefore ...

- We must stay alert here in the devil's world (Matt.24:42; 1Thes.5:6).
- We must build on our salvation (Phil.2:12; 2Pet.1:10).
- We must push forward with spiritual growth (Heb.10:39).

The Spiritual Growth Theme: The only way to accomplish God's plan of sanctification is through spiritual growth. Spiritual growth, the inner transformation of the Christian accomplished by learning and living God's Word, is expressed in a variety of ways in the Bible, but the appeal is always to our free will. We have to be willing to *change*, and willing to do it God's way. The Bible uses a wide range of analogies to help explain and teach the concept of spiritual growth, comparing the spiritual growth process to, among other things:

- a. *A GROWING PERSON*: "Like newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the Word, that by it you may grow in regard to your salvation." (1Pet.2:2)
- b. *A GROWING PLANT*: "I planted you, Apollos watered you, but God made you grow." (1Cor.3:6)
- c. *RUNNING A RACE*: "Don't you know that all who run in the stadium compete, but only one wins the prize. Run to win! Every one who competes in the games exercises self-discipline in everything; they do it to win a perishable prize, but we do it to win an imperishable one." (1Cor.9:24-25)
- d. *PUTTING ON ARMOR FOR BATTLE*: "Put on the full armor of God, so that you might be able to stand firm against the tricks of the devil." (Eph.6:11)
- e. *BUILDING A STRUCTURE*: "Now I commend you to God, and to His Word of grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified." (Acts 20:32)
- f. *PERFECTING OUR WALK*: "That you might walk worthy of the Lord to please Him in all things, bearing fruit in every good work, and growing by means of the full knowledge of God." (Col.1:10)
- g. *INCREASING OUR STABILITY*: "That you might stabilize your hearts, blameless in sanctification before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His holy ones." (1Thes.3:13)
- h. *BECOMING PERFECT OR MATURE*: "Let us then move on from the elementary teachings about Christ and press on to maturity." (Heb.6:1)
- i. *GAINING STRENGTH*: "Finally, be strengthened in the Lord, and in the power of His might." (Eph.6:10)
- j. *BECOMING MORE SPIRITUAL*: "And don't get drunk with wine (which is dissipating), but instead keep on being *ful*-filled (i.e., making progress in spiritual growth) by means of the Holy Spirit (i.e., the means to edification in contrast to dissipation)." (Eph.5:18)
- k. *MOVING CLOSER TO GOD*: "Get closer to God, and He will get closer to you." (Jas.4:8)
- l. *UNDERGOING A SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION*: "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by changing completely the way you think, so that you might know what God's will for you is, namely what is good, well-pleasing, and complete in His eyes." (Rom.12:2)

These and other passages stress different aspects of the growth process using a variety of metaphors. One factor they all have in common, however, is that all the above analogies emphasize that we as believers must *change* by means of the power of God manifest in His Word. As Christians alive in the devil's world, our "full-time job" is spiritual growth, spiritual transformation, the sanctification of everything in our lives.

The four essential steps to spiritual growth again are (1) listening to and learning God's Word, (2) believing it, (3) living it, and (4) helping others do likewise. To grow, we need to seek out the truth of the Bible, let it into our hearts fully, put it into practice in our lives, and pitch in, according to whatever talents God has given us, to assist Christ's Church in this essential process.

I. Listening: As we begin to study the mechanics of growth, we should remember the importance of the task. Growth is the only way to protect, preserve and build up our faith, the only way to become fully productive and effective servants of God, and the only way to secure an abundant eternal reward. How important it is, then, for us to seek out the essential food for that growth, the truth contained in God's Word!

The Kitchen: God's "kitchen" is the Bible, fully stocked with all the basic spiritual foodstuffs necessary for growth. All the truth we need to grow to maturity is to be found within its covers. The difficulty comes in extracting that truth in usable form. We can, of course, gain much encouragement by reading our Bibles for ourselves, and - make no mistake - every Christian is responsible for seeking out God's Word in this its purest form. Like prayer, personal reading and concentration on the scriptures is an absolutely essential part of spiritual growth. One should not make the mistake, however, of assuming that such Bible study is all-sufficient. Reading your Bible is crucial to growth, but it is not a substitute for teaching. To continue our analogy, imagine going to the kitchen in need of bread and finding only flour! In a similar way, the Bible contains a massive store of truth, but much is given in "flour" form, not "pre-packaged" and ready for immediate consumption. The Holy Spirit has endowed certain members of the body of Christ with teaching gifts for the purpose of the extraction of truth from the scriptures in "solid food" form (spiritual cooking, if you will; cf. Eph.4:11-16). To maximize spiritual growth, as well as to defend against erroneous and dangerous doctrinal conclusions, such teachers, gifted by the Spirit, are indispensable, provided that they are properly prepared and trained (in Greek, Hebrew, theology, ancient and Church history, etc.), and are genuinely following our Lord Jesus Christ. This last set of provisions is a critical one, of course, and it presents the believer with quite a dilemma. For it would not be far wrong to say that at this present moment the vast majority of individuals who style themselves Christians have placed themselves under the teaching authority of individuals or groups who are improperly prepared, improperly motivated, or just flat-out teaching lies. But the true believer in Jesus Christ, if that person genuinely desires a closer relationship with God through proper spiritual growth, will persevere in *seeking* the truth, and will, by God's grace, find a true teacher who knows his way "around the kitchen".

The difficulty in understanding everything about the Bible on first reading should make the need for qualified teachers obvious. The New Testament epistles, to take one example, were addressed to believers who had already received extensive teaching directly from the apostles (2Tim.2:2; Acts 20:7-12). The reason that these epistles are often difficult to understand is that they were written to people quite familiar with the principals reiterated in them. Without the benefit of that apostolic teaching, coming as we do from another time, another culture, and speaking a different language, it is no simple task to understand all the doctrines which these letters teach. There are, so to speak, a tremendous number of "blanks" that need to be filled in first. We have to reconstruct the setting (cultural, linguistic, and doctrinal) to which the letter was delivered. Furthermore, we cannot look at any book of the Bible in isolation. As God's inspired message to us (2Pet.1:20-21), each book of the Bible is an integral, organic part of the whole, and its teachings can only be correctly understood when studied in conjunction with the rest of scripture *in its entirety* (no small task for any one person, even given a lifetime).

As believers hungry for spiritual food, thumbing aimlessly through God's "kitchen" in search of a snack, we would be right to feel daunted at the task of understanding the Bible and its teachings if we had to do "all that cooking" ourselves. God, of course, has seen to this problem. In the Church of Jesus Christ there is a perfect division of labor. At salvation, the Holy Spirit gives all who believe in Christ a specific spiritual mission and the "gift" to accomplish it (1Cor.12:4-11). Along with all the other functions necessary to build up the Church, God has provided "cooks" as well:

And He made some of us apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers to train His saints for ministry, to build up the body of Christ (e., the Church) that we all might achieve a complete, united faith and full knowledge of the Son of God, becoming complete, attaining Christ's full measure of maturity.
Ephesians 4:11-13

The Cook: In 1st Corinthians 12:12-31, Paul compares the Church to a human body. He explains that just as all parts of the body are vital for its life and health, so also the Church of Christ has need of every "member", because these "members" supply its vital ministries. In the "body" of Christ, all "members" must act together as a team for the Church to function properly, with each one supplying the ministry which God has assigned (1Cor.12:11). One important function of the Body of Christ is to assist individual believers with the process of spiritual growth. Part of that process includes "cooking up" spiritual food into a "digestible" form from the raw material of truth contained in God's Word. Since, with the completion of the Bible, the early Church offices of apostle and prophet are no longer functional, the responsibility for preparing "spiritual meals" now falls primarily upon the pastor-teacher (Eph.4:11). When "shopping" for their necessary spiritual food, therefore, believers need to take this into account and seek out ministries of the Word which are truly ordained by God.

This is by no means to say that individual Christians are not responsible to read and study their Bibles on their own. Indeed they must (otherwise they are completely vulnerable to error; cf.

Acts 17:11). But just as it is in many critical arenas of secular life (such as health, law, and finance), so also in this most important area of spiritual life the "do-it-yourself" approach can never be more than a supplement, and should never be thought of as a substitute for the system of ministry which God has ordained (1Tim.5:17; Heb.13:17). Where the teaching of God's Word is involved, accepting the help of others seems to come hard to many (cf. Matt.13:54-56; Jn.6:60). Yet listening to the teaching of the Word is not only a prerequisite for spiritual growth, it is also necessary to avoid "spiritual slippage" of the kind experienced by the Jerusalem congregation addressed by the writer of Hebrews. This anonymous author takes as his theme the correction of a group of believers who had stopped assembling to listen to the teaching of the Word (Heb.10:25). As a result of their lackadaisical approach to spiritual nutrition, they had become "dull of hearing" and found themselves in need once again of instruction in very elementary Christian principles though, as the author tells them, "after all this time you ought to have become teachers yourselves" (Heb.5:11-6:2). Moreover, their neglect of spiritual food had placed them in the gravest danger by undermining their faith in God (Heb.10:35-39). Spiritual growth, indeed, even spiritual security, requires that we have the humility to accept the help of others in obtaining this most necessary "food" (Ps.25:9; Acts 18:24-26).

Selecting a Cook: Christians in America today have perhaps the widest range of choices of any believers in history. Denominations, churches, para-church organizations, and independent ministries (all of which call themselves "Christian") abound in this country. So many options can sometimes make the process of finding good Bible teaching a complicated one. Furthermore, the fact that there are very many "wolves" out there among the "sheep" means that the process is also not without its dangers (Matt.7:15-20). Given the numerous scriptural caveats to beware of false teaching (Matt.24:24; Rom.16:17-18; Heb.13:9; 2Pet.2:1-22; Jude 4-13), a bit of frank advice seems appropriate here:

- *First of all*, seek a church or ministry where the teaching of the Word of God is the central issue, for it is only in conjunction with the Word that your faith will grow (Rom.10:17). There are many organizations that are quite good at fulfilling your need for Christian fellowship, for instance, but are weak in the provision of that very spiritual food we all require to grow strong in the faith.
- *Secondly*, try to stick with one group that meets these needs. It takes time to acclimatize to any new organization or system of teaching and it is, for all practical purposes, impossible to grow with an eclectic approach to Bible study. We need a certain amount of consistency in the teaching we receive. Too much self-inflicted doctrinal controversy is spiritually unhealthy (2Tim.2:14). So when you find something you know to be good, stick with it and give it a full and fair hearing.
- *Thirdly*, don't become involved with groups which your own native common sense tells you are suspect. Three typical patterns worthy of avoidance in the contemporary pseudo-Christian milieu come to mind:

a. Groups that emphasize other writings over the Bible: There is great appeal to the idea of some "secret knowledge" contained in extra-biblical writings or doctrines (this attraction goes back to the Gnostic heresies of the early Church), but whether these be additional "authoritative" books ("The Book of Mormon"), books appended to the true canon of scripture (The "Apocrypha"), or the writings or teachings of any teacher or commentator when these have begun to assume a weight of authority commensurate to or surpassing the scriptures they purport to interpret, these should be avoided along with the groups that disseminate them. The Bible must be our one true standard of faith (2Tim.3:16).

b. Groups that emphasize a charismatic leader over the Bible: We all have an innate desire to follow the "special" leader who knows all. But as Christians, we are to focus upon and to emulate Jesus Christ, and not make idols of mortal men (1Cor.3:21; Gal.4:17).

c. Groups that emphasize religious experience over the Bible: We would all love to see the power of God miraculously exhibited right here and now. Did not the contemporaries of our Lord keep harping at Him for "signs"? How much "fun" it would be to see performed (or even perform ourselves) miracles of the sort that the Bible reports. In this period of human history, however, God has chosen to emphasize His completed Word - the Holy Bible. When we consider that Jesus Christ is the living Word, it makes perfect sense that at this present time, now that the Bible is complete and readily available, God has directed our attention to the living words of the Word of God rather than miraculous activities (no matter how exciting we may imagine such activities to be). The key point, of course, is that, for the moment at least, God is apparently not presently granting the ability to perform miracles as He did to our Lord and to the apostles. Miracles of this sort served the purpose of establishing the authority of these pioneers of our faith. The really astounding miracle that *God* is performing nowadays is *our* transformation by the new birth from sinful people appointed to destruction to sons of the living God through Jesus Christ. Being born again - now *that* is a miracle! Although like the wind, our new birth can't be seen, its power is positively atomic (Jn.3:8). It is not therefore to signs or prophecies or visions or miracles or speaking in tongues or the like that we are to attend as we await the glorious return of our Lord, but to Him through His Word. Scripture tells us that we are far better off for this since God's Word is more sure than anything we may see and experience with our eyes (2Pet.1:16-21). Obsessing about tongues, healing and other "charismatic" preoccupations is, at best, a distraction from the process of spiritual growth (Matt.16:4). It is also incredibly dangerous. When we seek to *force* such personal religious experiences to happen, we weaken our own conscience, and the behavior which seemed wrong to us in the first place, begins to appear normal and acceptable (Eph.4:17-18). The net effect of this process is to *isolate* us from friends, family and normal Christian circles (a common characteristic of all cult activity), thus making us even more vulnerable to the exploitation and manipulation common in all cults.

Summary: finding the system of spiritual sustenance right for you as an individual may seem a daunting prospect at times. But we must never forget that if God has indeed ordained such a system of spiritual growth, God will also provide us with the messengers, teachers, and

organizations capable of fulfilling all our needs for spiritual growth, provided that we truly do desire to grow and are willing to search out the necessary help to do so. A loving Father who provides even for the birds of the sky and the lilies of the field will surely also meet all our needs in Jesus Christ our Lord (Matt.6:25-34; Jas.1:5).

Next: The remaining phases of spiritual growth (*believing, living, and helping*).