

Peter's Epistles #30

Sanctification in Time: Christian Defense in our Spiritual Warfare

1st Peter 1:14-16

(also available on-line at ichthys.com)
by Dr. Robert D. Luginbill

1st Peter 1:14-16

(14) As obedient children, not conforming to the previous lusts [you conformed to] in your [prior] ignorance [of the truth], (15) but since the One who called you is holy, so you yourselves be holy in your entire manner of life, (16) because it is written: "You shall be holy, because I am holy" (Lev.11:44).

1st Peter 1:14-16

As we have seen before, the words in the New Testament which deal with the concept of holiness are derived from the Greek root *hag* (cf. *Hagia Sophia*), and were translated into the Vulgate Bible with the Latin word group related to *sanctus*. Thus, the words "sanctified" and "holy" are synonymous adjectives, derived respectively from Latin and Germanic, but both representing the same scriptural idea. In other words, while in common usage "sanctification" and "holiness" may provoke different emotional responses or suggest to some different ideas, in fact they refer to precisely the same biblical concept, namely, that of "separation from sin and evil". We have also seen that sanctification, like salvation, is being implemented by God for the believer in three phases. Just as we are now "saved" in terms of our status in His eyes although not yet enjoying our rewards or resurrection, so also believers in Christ are now "sanctified" (or "holy") as God sees us, even though we have not yet been given perfect bodies incapable of sin. Between these two states of "positional sanctification" (and salvation) and "ultimate sanctification" (and salvation), we find ourselves walking through this world in the footsteps of our Master, seeking to do what He would have us to do (and to abstain from what He would have us avoid). This "experiential sanctification" is what Peter is addressing in verses 14-16 above. And just as here in the world we are "working out" our salvation (Phil.2:12) – through this fight of maintaining our faith which we are presently fighting (1Pet.1:5; 1:9) – so also, and in fact as a part of this very fight, we believers must strive to walk before our Lord in a sanctified and holy way.

(3) Now this is God's will, namely, your sanctification (i.e., separation from sin). [He desires you] to keep away from immorality, (4) and for each of you to know how to keep his [or her] own vessel (i.e., body) under control in sanctification and honorable conduct, (6) not [giving in] to the passions of lust as do the gentiles (i.e., unbelievers) who do not know God, (7) so that you may not transgress and thereby take advantage of your brother/sister [in Christ]. For the Lord is an Avenger of all these sins as I have warned and have born solemn witness to you before. For God did not call you to uncleanness but in sanctification.

In our previous lesson (Peter #29), we saw Peter emphasizing in the verses which precede our passage here the importance of maintaining a solid offensive posture in the spiritual warfare in which we are involved as soldiers of Jesus Christ. But why does Peter treat our spiritual offense – fought out primarily on the high-ground of our heart or inner person – before the call to sanctification and holy living given here at 1st Peter 1:14-16? That is certainly not what one expects in churches today, where inveighing against sin takes pride of place (when teaching is present at all), while spiritual growth and advance and the techniques related thereto are scarcely mentioned (if ever). The reason, of course, is that prior growth in the truth is essential for all subsequent good behavior: true holiness is based upon responding positively to the truth (rather than whitewashing the outside of the vessel out of terror and fear without any true inner change). Paul places things in their same correct order. In the passage quoted above, we see that knowing and doing "God's will" is the first principle of living a sanctified life (Heb.10:35-39; 1Pet.4:1-2; 1Jn.2:16-17). That is, one hopes obviously, not the stuff of spiritual immaturity. To truly know the will of God both in general and particularly for one's own life, spiritual maturity must first be attained. So while staying away from certain types of sin may be an obvious enough application of the biblical commands to "be holy" (and even here, doing so from proper motivation likewise requires growth), clearly, there is much more to the sanctification Peter is speaking of in our context than that. True sanctification, walking in a holy manner when things are difficult and it is not so easy to tell which way is the right way, requires a level of spiritual growth that is not to be acquired instantly:

Solid [spiritual] food is for the [spiritually] mature, those who by [diligent] practice have trained their [moral] perceptive faculties to [properly] *distinguish between good and evil*.
Hebrews 5:14

(9) And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in full-knowledge (*epignosis*: truth believed) and in all discernment, (10) so that you may be *able to evaluate the things that are good and appropriate* [for you to do] to be sincere and without offense in regard to the day of Christ (i.e., to gain a maximum reward at Christ's judgment seat), (11) full of the righteous production Jesus Christ [commends] to the glory and praise of God.
Philippians 1:9-11

(1) Therefore I entreat you by God's mercy, brothers, to dedicate your bodies as a living sacrifice, well-pleasing to God – [this is] your "priestly-service" spiritually performed. (2) Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by this renewal of your thinking, so that you *may discern what God's will for you is*, namely what it is good, well-pleasing, and correct [for you to do].
Romans 12:1-2 (cf. Rom.2:17-18)

(5) You who are slaves, obey your masters according to the flesh with fear and trembling with simplicity of heart just as you [should obey] the Lord, (6) not doing so with "eye-service" (i.e., only when they are watching you) as those who seek to please men, but as servants of Christ, *accomplishing God's will from your heart*, (7) serving with

good will as if to the Lord and not to men, (8) for you know that whatever good thing each one of you accomplishes, he will receive [a reward] for this from the Lord, whether he is slave or free.

Ephesians 6:5-8

Knowing the truth, **believing** the truth, is therefore essential to carry out the biblical commands for holiness:

Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.

John 17:17 NIV

Spiritual growth, therefore, is key to living a sanctified life the way the Lord wants us to do. That is not only because by studying scripture and listening to and believing the truth of solid and substantive teaching we will know what is right and what is wrong. In most instances, that will be obvious to even the most immature believers. Rather, through growing up spiritually we gain the ability to better fend off temptation and follow through on these commands, as well as how to properly motivate ourselves through our growing relationship with Jesus Christ. We will not only be less likely to be deceived and more likely to be prudent in our choices leading up to areas and times of particular temptation but we will also be developing proven spiritual character, a backbone stiffened by the truth of the Word of God which gives us greater ability to resist and growing wisdom in the methods of resistance in regard to anything which even looks like it might threaten our sanctified walk with Jesus Christ – the One whom we are day by day more desirous of pleasing.

Stay away from anything that [even] looks [like] evil.

1st Thessalonians 5:22

Eve, it will be remembered, faltered on account of being deceived. The more we know and the more we believe what we know of the truth of scripture, the less likely it will be that we will fall into temptation as a result of ignorance. Truth frees us from slavery to this sort of ignorance – not just of the nature of sin but of the nature of the adversary and his tactics which make temptation all the more dangerous. This freedom in turn gives us the ability through the Holy Spirit to resist more effectively, if we are but determined to stand fast in the truth we have committed to our hearts by faith.

(31) So Jesus said to the Jews who had put their faith in Him, "If you abide in My Word, you will be My students in truth. (32) Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

John 8:31-32

For when we grow spiritually we are not only learning what to avoid but we are also learning more about the One unto whom we are to cleave at all times, our dear Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. All of the wonderful things we learn and believe about Him and the Word He has given to us will over time change our entire way of thinking about this life and the world and our walk herein. Indeed, **only** the truth of the Word of God can change us in any real and meaningful way. Genuine spiritual change cannot be imposed from the outside in. We cannot become "holy"

merely by imposing on ourselves (or by allowing to be imposed on us) any set of rules and regulations. Rules were made to be broken – by the sin nature – and any such "code" no matter how carefully constructed will never be capable of more than artificial restraining those who are trying to live by it. Whitewashing the outside will not change what is going on in the inside. The motivation to "be holy" may be pure, but the ability to carry out that mandate to holiness cannot be achieved by fleshly efforts alone (Rom.7:7-25). Only by genuinely changing on the inside does the believer attain the ability to walk with Jesus Christ in a positive way which, by definition, eschews carnality, and thus to carry out the law of love (Rom.13:10).

All this is true not only in general terms but also in the mechanics of the Christian walk as well. The more we grow closer to the Lord, the more real He becomes to us, the more loving Him and pleasing Him becomes an integral part of our every step in this world (rather than mere lip-service), the more likely we are to be buttressed by this attitude and positive desire when the pressure and temptation is on. No one is perfect, and no believer will ever attain sinless perfection in this life (teaching to the contrary is a dangerous false doctrine: Rom.3:23; Jas.3:2; 1Jn.1:6-10), but we can, we should, and indeed we *must* get better day by day on the score of carrying out the mandate to "be holy, because I am holy" (1Pet.1:16). And the only proven way to do so is to keep growing spiritually day by day through hearing, learning, believing and applying *the Word of Truth*.

Sanctify them (i.e., lead them to holiness) *by the truth*; your word is truth.
John 17:17 NIV

Having now *sanctified* your hearts *by means of obeying the truth*, love one another resolutely so that your brotherly love may be without hypocrisy.
1st Peter 1:22

Thus true sanctification, true holiness, comes from believing the truth, and then acting on it in obedience. That is the true change scripture enjoins, change from the inside out – rather than merely whitewashing the outside or imposing some set of restrictions in order to force an artificial "holiness":

I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.
Psalm 119:11 NIV

As we saw last time in treating the techniques Christians are given to gain victory in spiritual warfare, effective spiritual defense (i.e., warding off temptation), is virtually impossible without effective spiritual offense (i.e., growing in Christ through attention to the teaching of the truth, believing that truth, and then putting it into practice in a consistent way in the power of the Holy Spirit). Indeed, growing spiritually and maintaining holiness are really collaborative and inseparable activities as offense helps defense and defense helps offense. As we learn and believe more of the truth, the deceptiveness of temptation (and the evil one who proffers it) is more easily seen for what it is, while our love for the Lord (which grows with our knowledge of Him, His sacrifice, His goodness, and the plan being carried out on our behalf) and our desire to please Him make effective resistance more likely. Similarly, the victory we begin to gain over sin empowers our spiritual confidence and limits the damage we would otherwise be doing to our

relationship with the Lord we love more than life.

As obedient children, not conforming to the previous lusts [you conformed to] ***in your [prior] ignorance [of the truth]*** . . .

1st Peter 1:14

Unlike Platonism, biblical Christianity teaches the truth that knowledge alone does not necessarily result in corrective behavior. But it is certainly true, as Peter says in our passage, that ignorance of the truth is responsible in large measure for giving in to temptation, lust, and sin (of all kinds). The more we recognize what sin is, the more likely we will be to attempt to avoid it. The more we find out about the discipline from God that will come our way for violating His commands, the more likely we will be to act out of prudence when such temptations come. The more we come to understand about the ineffably wonderful eternal rewards that are promised to those who fight this fight successfully, the more we are going to want to avoid absolutely anything that undermines our effectiveness as Christian warriors or slows us down in our race to the finish line (1Cor.9:24-27). And the more we come to know about our dear Lord and Savior, the closer we walk with Him, the more we appreciate what He did for us in bearing our sins and redeeming us from death with His blood, the more we will want to do everything to please Him and nothing to displease Him – one certainly hopes! Of course, we do actually have to learn these truths upon which these principles depend (and many more) in depth and detail, and we do actually have to believe them with all our hearts. When we do, sanctification in time, living and acting like true ambassadors of Christ, will begin to come more easily and we will begin to demonstrate more consistency in our holy walk with the Lord.

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

In this verse, the "promises" of life eternal and great reward on the day of resurrection are the motivation we are told to apply in our pursuit of sanctification. Moreover, the "fear of God" mentioned, while it certainly does not rule out a godly fear of His displeasure and divine discipline, in no way should be interpreted to include fear of damnation. We believers are absolutely secure in our salvation – as long as we are believers (the only "fear" in this regard being that of complete apostasy through absolute rejection of prior faith in Christ). Elsewhere the apostle Paul explains in more concrete terms what this godly fear we are to use to help us stay on track in making holiness a priority in our lives really entails:

(10) For we must all stand before Christ's tribunal, so that each of us may receive recompense for what he has accomplished through this body, whether it be good or worthless. (11) Therefore since we know ***the fear of the Lord***, while we attempt to persuade men God sees us entirely for what we [truly] are – and I trust that what we [truly] are is equally clear to your consciences.

2nd Corinthians 5:10-11

As born again believers safely "in Christ", our only proper "fear" in failing to walk in a holy manner is that of being reproved before the judgment seat of Christ for "worthless" conduct:

living in an unsanctified way is detrimental to and inconsistent with true spiritual growth, progress and production, just as spiritual growth is the necessary ingredient in and a powerful motivator for a truly sanctified walk with the Lord. Looking forward to the time when we will be rewarded for what we have done "by means of the body" (2Cor.5:10) is something advancing believers who are walking in a holy way should be doing at all times. On the other hand, if we are not advancing spiritually and maintaining a sanctified walk with the Lord, we know intuitively (through the Spirit) that reproof rather than reward is the end result of such failure to the extent that it represents how we have spent our time on this earth. One failure does not cause loss of reward any more than one success gains it; but any failure can compromise us in this fight, just as every victory contributes to eternal reward. As mentioned above, sanctification (defense) cannot really be separated from spiritual growth, progress and production (offense). On the one hand, if a believer has the former but not the latter, the lack of forward momentum will leave him/her more and more defenseless as time goes by from lack of truth, and more and more vulnerable because of that very lack of momentum. On the other hand, if a believer is vigorously pursuing spiritual growth through learning and believing the truth, a sloppy approach toward sin will undermine that good effort, compromise his/her witness, complicate his/her progress through having to deal with ever-increasing divine discipline, and make the passing of difficult testing virtually impossible until that kink has been ironed out. Only by a sanctified defense against sin combined with a joyous embracing of the truth of the Word of God and its application to all the trials of this life (helping others to do so too when opportunity offers) will any believer fulfill the mission Christ has given to us, and enter into the great rewards He has for all who listen to His words and pay them proper heed.

"If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it."

Genesis 4:7 NIV

Our Lord told Cain this while Cain was unsaved, while he had absolutely no regard for the Lord (as his subsequent conduct in murdering his brother Abel makes clear). What this means for our purposes here is that we have it from the Lord Himself that even unbelievers are capable of "mastering" the temptation to sin (even if Cain failed to do so). It is a matter of choice. And of course we see this principle from the positive side all the time in the lives of unbelievers who are good, law-abiding citizens of fine moral character. In fact, it is somewhat easier for unbelievers to be ethical and moral and to refrain from sinful behavior inasmuch as they are not special targets of the devil as believers most certainly are. What this principle does tell us, even though Cain himself failed to respond correctly, is that we *can* in fact resist sin and temptation, even when it may seem extremely difficult to do so. If an unbeliever who has no regard for the truth – and no help from the Holy Spirit – is capable of living in a sanctified way (and scripture as well as experience amply demonstrates that it is possible), then surely we who have the Spirit residing in us to help us can do so as well. For that reason, whenever it is a case of some special temptation or addiction or chronic sinful behavior, believers need to be honest with themselves, step up, and face the problem head on. We have to recognize and accept the fact that we are indeed in command of our own free will, and that, with the Spirit's help, we not only absolutely can but we absolutely must say "no!" to sin, temptation, addiction and whatever other behavior is contrary to the Word of God and the Will of God:

(16) But I tell you, walk in the Spirit and you will not carry out what the flesh lusts for. (17) For what the flesh lusts for is contrary to the Spirit's will, and the Spirit is opposed to what the flesh lusts for. Since these are diametrically opposed to each other in this way, what you are doing is not what you yourself choose. (18) But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. (19) The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; (20) idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; (21) drunkenness, orgies – *and whatever is similar to all these things*. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. (22) But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, uprightness, faith, (23) humility, self-control. Against such things, there is no Law. (24) Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its weaknesses and its lusts. (25) If we live because of the Spirit, let us also walk by means of the Spirit.

Galatians 5:16-25

Accomplishing the above – learning how to walk in a truly holy and sanctified way – is not an overnight thing or an effortless process. It will take engaging in the fight day by day and step by step. Human beings that we are, we will have failures, we will have relapses, but with the Spirit's help we will continue to make progress in fulfilling this command to "be holy as I am holy", even if absolute perfection eludes us. We must therefore continue to "pursue sanctification" (Heb.12:14), even when it is difficult, even when we stumble, fail and sin (Rom.3:23; Jas.3:2; 1Jn.1:9), in emulation of our Lord striving to be holy "in our whole manner of life" (1Pet.1:15:b).

As obedient children: We have left Peter's opening description of ourselves as believers to the last. As Christians, we are no longer to "conform to the previous lusts in [prior] ignorance [of the truth]", but pursue sanctification instead. Now that we are born again, whatever the texture of our prior lives, whatever our previous sinful behavior, whatever aspect of our lifestyle as unbelievers was worldly and unworthy of our Lord, this needs now to be put aside. It is now time to embrace that transformation from living as unbelievers live to living as believers *should* live. That is the essence of "holiness" as Peter describes it here by way of drawing this contrast. What does it mean to be holy? We certainly understand what the opposite is, namely, "conforming to lusts" of whatever sort that was our pattern before we believed. Holiness thus first and foremost is a turning away from world and towards the Lord – something that can only truly be accomplished through the positive action of attention to His truth even as it requires a deliberate effort "not to conform" to sinful desires as the world expects and considers the norm.

(15) Do not be a lover of this world, nor of what is in this world. If anyone is a lover of this world, a [genuine] love for the Father is not in him. (16) For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. (17) The world and its lust are passing away, but whoever does God's will is [going] to stay [alive with God] forever.

1st John 2:15-17

In making this plea in the Spirit, Peter calls us "obedient children", and in so doing provides both the motivation and the encouragement to take up the challenge of living a holy life for Jesus Christ: encouragement, because as children, sons of the living God, part of the Body of Christ,

we have salvation which is as sure and secure as our faith in Jesus Christ; motivation, because while obedience is not automatic, recognizing that holiness is something the Lord who died for our sins wants from us now certainly ought to get our attention and help us begin to make whatever changes may be necessary in our approach so as to fulfill the commands for living in holiness found in this passage. Peter does not threaten us with loss of salvation if we fail to live as we should (indeed, salvation is based upon faith in Christ, not our record when it comes to sin). Peter does not threaten us with serious divine discipline if we fail to live in a holy way (although we certainly ought to understand that there are serious repercussions for believers who fail to heed the command "not to conform" to the lusts and sinful desires of this world). Rather, Peter reminds us that God is holy, and that we belong to Him as His children. If we would be children with whom the Father is pleased, then how we should behave and receive this passage is abundantly clear. To draw the analogy Peter invites, we know that children who are not obedient to their human fathers have a rough time of things, and unnecessarily so through their own misconduct. They do not cease to be sons and daughters because of that misconduct, but they do come in for punishment, and such behavior is certainly not the way to happiness, with good-feeling and fellowship only being restored once the appropriate discipline is suffered and the offending behavior corrected. Better to be an obedient child rather than a disobedient one, and since no one is perfect, better to limit offenses as much as possible and to confine them to the least serious indiscretions. But even if a big mistake is made through self-willed behavior, we know that we are still sons and daughters even so, and even if we make our lives miserable and sour our relationship with our parents for a time because of what we put them through with our failure to follow their legitimate authority.

In the same way, Peter helps us here to appreciate our status as born again children of God, even as he encourages us in very emphatic terms to take the mandate to holy living with the utmost seriousness. Appreciating our status as belonging to God the Father and Jesus Christ our Lord is the basis and the beginning of fulfilling the holiness mandate: we are to "be holy" not out of terror, but out of respect and reverence and love for the One who gave His Son on our behalf, and the One who redeemed us from all of our sins with His very own blood – His spiritual death on the cross in expiating every single one of our sins. The world will not come to an end if we make a mistake, err, sin. But if we really do love Jesus Christ more than our lives (as we claim we do), disappointing Him and failing to do what He wants us to do ought to be a more powerful motivation for us even than the divine discipline we are likely to receive for failing the obedience test. The closer we grow to Him in our spiritual advance day by day, the more His opinion of us will mean to us, and the more responsive we will be – and be able to be – as we begin to see the invisible One more clearly through the eyes of faith, faith grounded on the bedrock of the truths of the Word of God. The more we learn and believe about Jesus Christ and His truth, the more able we become to live a truly sanctified life, not merely instituting superficial and apparent changes on the outside, but genuinely changing on the inside, and manifesting that sanctification in the world to the glory and honor of the Lord who bought us and who called us to be holy even as He is Holy, Jesus Christ our dear Savior. It is Him to whom we want to respond; it is upon Him that our conduct and behavior reflect.

"Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.' "

Leviticus 19:2 NIV