

Sanctification

The aim of this article

Striving for sanctification is an important part of Christian life which makes a relationship with the holy God possible. In this article we want to answer the following vital questions: What does living a holy life mean? Can we expect of ourselves and of others to live a holy life? Can we gain freedom from sins? What does the Bible tell us about this?

...but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."
(1 Peter 1:15-16)

In the New Testament, Paul sometimes addresses the Christians as "Holy and beloved" (i.e. *Colossians 3:12*). To our ears however, the words "holy" or "saints" sound unusual, old-fashioned, distant from everyday life, unreachable and tailored only to very special people.

Is this true or does the Bible rather say that a holy life is inseparable from our relationship with God?

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (*Romans 12:1-2*)

Our life ought to be a holy sacrifice which is pleasing to God. This means that we ought to love God with our whole heart, with all our strength and mind and in this way not to be conformed to the world. The word "holy" means that something or someone is dedicated to God. God created us in his image, so the desire to live a holy life is not something foreign; rather it arises out of God's very being as well as our own.

The passages mentioned above emphasize the absolute holiness of God and the necessity which arises from allowing our WHOLE life to be assessed and purified by God. They also emphasize the necessity of giving up every sin. The attitude of wanting to be holy as God is holy is the hallmark of a Christian.

Many people who profess to believe do not really strive for this aim. However, belief in salvation and forgiveness enables Christians to take up the fight against sin with hope.

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (*2 Timothy 3:16-17*)

The Holy Scripture shows us the way of righteousness, especially in the words and lives of the prophets, and of Jesus and his disciples. It teaches us what sin is and how we can overcome it.

The Fight Against Sin As a Prerequisite for a Holy Life

Man was made in the image of God. When man sinned, his being became distorted along with his relationship with God and fellow man. Sin separates people from God and leads them to a life of egotism

and isolation.

That is why Jesus describes in such radical pictures, how strongly we should abhor and reject sin.

And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell. (*Mark 9:43,47*)

This is not an empty threat made by Jesus in order to instil fear. Jesus describes the spiritual reality. Sin changes people, deceives them, hardens them and takes away their longing for God and for what is good; sin separates people from God. Therefore Paul writes in *Colossians 3:5*:

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

Sin begins in our attitudes and thoughts. They are the roots of our actions.

But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (*Matthew 5:28*)

You have heard that it was said to those of old, "You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgement." But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgement; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, "You fool!" will be liable to the hell of fire. (*Matthew 5:21-22*)

So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin. (*James 4:17*)

Sins of omission or neglect are often not assessed by people as strongly as they are in scripture. Time and time again we come across people who see sins such as not serving our brothers and sisters in faith or not reading the Bible as insignificant. These sins very clearly show a lack of relationship with God.

There is no excuse for sin.

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. (*1 Corinthians 10:13*)

In the Old Testament victory over sin was commanded and seen as something possible.

The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it." (*Genesis 4:6-7*)

God's love and mercy is very great towards every person who struggles to distance themselves from sin and entrust their life to him. The wrath of God is great however upon those who do not call their sins by name (*Matthew 3:7-8*) and excuse themselves with their own weakness, because:

Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it

cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear. (*Isaiah 59:1-2*)

We know that God loves every person and accepts everyone who wants to come to him, irrespective of how strongly he is loaded down with sin. We know God's faithfulness in that he never rejects anyone who wants to turn to him. We should be aware though, that sin separates us from him. No one should be indifferent about this or play with sin.

Forgiveness of sins is a great gift. It is important to be conscious of the value of this. We cannot treat it like a cheap bargain. Jesus gave his life in order to save us from our sins. That is why we should live as those who are saved from sin, and not as those who cling to sin.

...knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. (*1 Peter 1:18-19*)

What Can Help Us Become Free of Sin?

In *Psalms 32:3-5* and *Proverbs 28:13* it is written that confession of sins is an important part of finding forgiveness and freedom.

Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy. (*Proverbs 28:13*)

It is important and good to confess our sins to God, but it is a sign of true regret to bring them to the light before people. Living in the truth also means walking in the truth before our brothers and sisters.

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (*1 John 1:7-9*)

Leaving behind everything that tied us to the world and laying our sins open is not only important on the day of conversion. As Christians we should confess our sins and pray for one another so that we can be spiritually healed, as James writes in his letter in chapter 5:16. When we lay our sins open in front of our fellow believers we can receive support and help from them in our sanctification through their prayers and through encouragements and admonitions. By regretting our sins, God can restore what we destroyed in our relationship with him through sin and we can experience his forgiveness. It is not the task of specially trained ministers or counsellors to bear the responsibility of the confessions of the congregation—ministers who are then sworn to secrecy. No base for such practice can be found in the Bible. On the contrary, there should be a wish for deep trust in all fellow believers—for standing before others as I truly am before God and being a testimony of God's acting in the Church.

When we grasp God's holiness, greatness and the love he has for us, we are moved to draw near to him and praise him through our love and service. Love knows no boundaries; it would never say, "Now I have done enough." Sanctification, therefore, means being constantly open to be questioned, corrected and changed by God. Then he can make us more and more able to do what is good in every situation.

Jesus washed his disciple's feet as an example of how we should serve one another (*John 13:2-17*). He

humbled himself before people who were themselves imprisoned in sin and by doing so demonstrated his love. We should learn from him to be lowly before one another—to bear one another in love and thereby to become able to grow in sanctification ourselves and help others do the same. Serving one another cannot be separated from caring for the salvation of others—taking care that they grow in faith and mature and that no sin hinders them from being close to God.

God made each Christian able to support others so that the whole body can be built into a holy temple (*Ephesians 2:21*). He lays the responsibility for the whole Church on each member. That is why it says:

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. (*Hebrews 12:14*)

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