

“Core Christianity”
“Growing and Maturing: How Perfect Should We Try To Be?”

We're continuing this series on core beliefs of the Christian faith. Several weeks ago I talked about conversion – being born again, or having a spiritual rebirth. Now when someone is *born*, it's expected that this new baby will *grow and mature*. This is also true in the *spiritual realm* when we are born anew.

What do Christians say about growing and maturing in Christ? What should that look like? What should be the goal we are striving for? ***One of the ways the Bible describes this is that we should strive for holiness.*** 1 Peter 1:14-16 says this: "Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'"

We are to be ‘holy’. But what does a holy person look like? What do you think of when you hear the word “holy”? A priest or pastor in robe or clerical collar? Somebody very religious, maybe a bit starchy (a person who does not smile a lot)? Maybe some mystic, holed up in the desert or a convent, who offers wise thoughts on life and religion? I'm not sure that the idea of striving to be a holy person is very appealing to a lot of people!

Yet, Peter writes that we are to be holy. The Book of Hebrews also talks about the importance of striving to live a holy life. In fact, it says without holiness, we are not going to see God! "Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14).

The Bible uses another word to express an idea similar to holiness: the word “sanctification”. 1 Thessalonians 4:3 tells us: “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified.” Sanctified? Sanctification? What in the world does that mean? When’s the last time you had a conversation with a neighbor or coworker about sanctification?

Sanctification and holiness are sister ideas in the Bible. Both carry the concept of being “separate”, “different”, or “set apart” for God’s use and service. For instance, in the Old Testament, different vessels would be *sanctified* for use in the temple. They were regarded as “holy” objects: curtains, tables, lamps, bowls, altar, etc. It's kind of like viewing this offering plate as being “sanctified” or set apart for God’s use. I would hope we wouldn't think of taking this offering plate home and using it to serve popcorn, or as a tray to hold nails or screws!

In the same way, people are holy or sanctified when they are set apart for God and dedicated to His use and service. *One of the core beliefs of the Christian faith is that after our conversion to Christ, we should begin a process of growth into sanctification and holiness – where we strive to be different from the world, fully dedicated to God and set apart for His use and service.*

Let’s think more about holiness and sanctification and what they mean. Here are some things that holiness is not: ***Holiness is not perfectionism.*** It's not that scenario where everyone has to be perfect, and everything has to be perfect. Do you know any people who are perfectionists?

Heaven help us if we're married to one, or have a parent who's a perfectionist! You can never please them! Holiness has nothing to do with a neurotic perfectionism that drives people nuts! Now Jesus said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). But the word in Greek, the original language of the New Testament, doesn't mean without fault or error; it means complete, mature.

Holiness is not being a prude! It does not mean being straight-laced, moralistic – a dour person who never smiles, never loosens up and has fun or a good belly laugh. Jesus was the holiest person who ever lived, but He wasn't a sourpuss or a killjoy!

Being holy or sanctified is not the same as being religious. One can be very religious and "churchy", but not be very holy. Holiness has little to do with religious rituals and a lot to do with what's in one's heart and how we live outside the church walls.

Well, what is holiness? What should we be striving for if we're going to be holy? We get some answers to these questions if we look again at 1 Peter 1:14-16. ***Holiness involves a cleansing from evil. It has moral content.*** Verse 14 says, "Do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance." Verse 15 says, "Be holy yourselves *in all your conduct.*" If you're a liar, if your mind is always in the gutter, if we cheat on our wife or husband, if we hurt people with gossip or constant criticism, if we take advantage of people - we're not very holy! To be holy and dedicated to God means to turn away from sin.

This truth is expressed in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one wrong or exploit a brother or a sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have told you beforehand and solemnly warn you. For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness." There's a similar idea expressed in 2 Corinthians 7:1: "Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God."

We are growing in holiness the more we put away evil thoughts, desires, and behaviors.

But holiness and being sanctified has a positive side to it. It has to do with our being more like God, more like Jesus. Again, look at 1 Peter 1. "As he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves..." (1 Peter 1:15). "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (verse 16 is quoted from Leviticus, chapter 11). Notice, we are to be holy *as God is holy, as Jesus is holy!* Holiness is becoming more like Jesus. And what was the greatest character trait of Jesus? It was *love*. ***Holiness is all about being a more loving human being!! Loving God – loving others.*** Remember, Jesus said all of the commandments can be summed up in two: Love God, and love your neighbor as yourselves. This is what the purpose of life is all about!

So, let's try to pull this all together. ***Once we are converted and begin a new life in Christ we are to grow in holiness and sanctification: being more like Christ, and set apart for God's service.***

What are you striving for in life? What's your life goal? To have money or material things? To be successful in a career? To relax and enjoy your retirement? These can be OK, to a certain extent. But God didn't put us here just to accumulate material things, or to make the main focus of life our hobbies and pleasures. *God created us for Himself – to know Him and to honor Him by living a pure life, to dedicate our lives to Him and the things that are important to Him.*

When we talk about “holiness” or “sanctification”, our United Methodist tradition has some unique and important insights into this. John Wesley, and the early Methodists, had a tremendous zeal and enthusiasm to strive to be sanctified, to go on to what Wesley called “Christian perfection”. There was a dry sort of comedian by the name of Mort Sahl, who once quipped: “I wish I had a cause, because I've got a lot of enthusiasm.” Well, the early Methodists had a lot of enthusiasm, but they also had a cause: their cause was going on to Christian perfection!

By Christian perfection, John Wesley didn't mean to be completely free of fault or error. He realized that we all make mistakes and errors of judgment; we all as humans at times act in ignorance. Rather, the perfection Wesley said Christians are to aim for is *perfection in love*: loving God and neighbor with an earnestness and singleness of heart, wanting to do God's will and please Him in everything we do, and desiring to have purity of heart and motive. Wesley once said, “The perfection I teach is perfect love.”

In the United Methodist Discipline, the guide book of our denomination, there are statements from both the former Methodist and EUB churches about sanctification and Christian perfection. From the Methodist *Articles of Religion*: “Sanctification is that renewal of our fallen nature by the Holy Ghost, received through faith in Jesus Christ, whose blood of atonement cleanseth from all sin; whereby we are not only delivered from the guilt of sin, but are washed from its pollution, saved from its power, and are enabled, through grace, to love God with all our hearts and to walk in his holy commandments blameless.” There is a longer and more detailed statement from the EUB *Confession of Faith* that is very similar to the Methodist one.

This talk about sanctification and Christian perfection may seem a bit boring, like a dose of dry theology. But I think it's a word for Christian believers today! ***It reminds us that there is a power that can get to the root of sin and set us free!*** Forgiveness is not enough! It's great that God forgives us – but if we are forgiven, then keep committing the same sins over and over again, what good is that? God wants to root the evil out of us!

What are the sins and shortcomings that you struggle with the most? Maybe it's a bad temper. Or a negative, critical attitude. Perhaps it's lust – sexual lust, or coveting what other people have. Maybe it's an inability to forgive people. All of us have certain weaknesses that seem to be ingrained in our personality and nature. By “sanctification” and “holiness” we're saying there is a divine power that can lift us out of these sins and liberate us from them! We can grow and change! There are some verses in Romans, chapter 6, that speak to this. The Apostle Paul says believers have died to the old life dominated by sin, and through Jesus experienced a new life – a rebirth! Check out these words: “We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the

body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin...therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace...for just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification...but now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life" (verses 6, 12-14, 19, 22). Notice "sanctification" is mentioned in verses 19 & 22. There *is* a power to get at the root of sin, to heal and restore our fallen human nature, so that we may be consecrated to God and useful to Him!

If you are a Christian, are you and I further along spiritually than when we were first saved? How passionate are we to do what pleases God, to obey God in every aspect of life? How much are we growing in our ability to love other people – even difficult people? Are more and more areas of our life surrendered to God – our thought life, spending habits, use of time, treatment of family members, how we act at work, or at party? Can people around us see more of Jesus in us than they did a year ago? 5 years ago? *So often, we're content where we are in the Christian life – we don't aim high enough!*

How do we grow in our being sanctified and set apart for God? How do we move forward towards perfection in love? Here are some thoughts: ***First of all, holiness is attained through God's grace and power.*** This is not something we achieve on our own. We can't pull this off just by will power alone! Hebrews 13:12 says, "Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood." Jesus shed His blood on the cross so we can be set free of our sins and live a life set apart and dedicated to God!

Living a holy life comes about through the power of the Holy Spirit in us. 1 Peter 1:2 speaks of Christians as those "who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and *sanctified by the Spirit* to be obedient to Jesus Christ." In the *EUB Confession of Faith* it states: "We believe sanctification is the work of God's grace through the Word and the Spirit...". Once we commit our lives to Christ, the Holy Spirit comes and lives in us. We can yield daily to the Holy Spirit and ask Him to take over more and more areas of our life.

Secondly, we grow in holiness and sanctification when we work at it and make it a priority in our life. Sanctification is a work of the Spirit, but we have to do our part! Frankly, it just may not be important to some of us. We are pursuing a lot of things – but not holiness! *So we have to strive for it.*

Spiritual disciplines are important - taking time each day to pray, to read the Bible. Coming here to worship. Being part of a Sunday School class or small group. Tithing. Getting involved in some type of service to others. These classic spiritual disciplines can be a "means of grace" and growth! The old hymn speaks of this: "Take time to be holy; speak oft with thy Lord; abide in him always, and feed on his word. Make friends of God's children, help those who are weak;

forgetting in nothing his blessing to seek."

Sanctification. Holiness. Whenever I think of a Christian who embodied John Wesley's idea of going on to perfection, I think of a man in the church I grew up in. In many ways he was a simple, humble man. He wasn't a stiff or killjoy. He was funny and warm and friendly. And I would look at him and think, "Here's a man who in everything he does, wants to please God and honor God. He is pure in his motives and has a singleness of heart and desire to love God, and a big heart that just overflows with love for people." *I want to be like this man.*

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February 12, 2017