

Lecture 3

Sanctification and Union with Christ

Sanctification

What is sanctification? Basically it is the process by which sinners are made into perfect saints. It is transforming the wicked into holy men and women. The aim of sanctification is that we should be like Christ, perfectly holy. The essence of holiness is obedience. The word means separation. It is a twofold separation – separated from sin and separated unto God. Christ said, “Be ye therefore perfect even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Your duty is to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling: for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12-13). We are to put energy into it, and labour at it. Yet it is not all of man. Nor even is it part of man and part of God. Rather, it is you working, and God enabling you to work. As you strive to be holy, He gives you the desire and the ability. All glory at the end of the day must be given to God.

Definitive Sanctification

Regeneration takes place in a moment. The dead sinner is resurrected and brought to spiritual life. Justification and adoption also take place in a moment. They are acts of God. Sanctification has two aspects. There is the act by which God transforms us in an instant, which is known as definitive sanctification. It changes a sinner into a saint and yet that saint is far from perfect. Then there is the ongoing work of making the born-again Christian holy which is known as progressive sanctification. It follows definitive sanctification and takes place during the rest of the Christian’s life. Definitive sanctification involves a radical break with sin. You die, are buried and rise with Christ. The old man or unconverted man is crucified (Romans 6:4-6). The world is crucified unto you and you to the world (Galatians 6:14). You are dead with Christ to the past. The old master Satan is dead. We must not play down the immensity of this change. Be what you are! “Reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin” (Romans 6:11-13). Be as those dead to sin! No longer be Satan’s slaves! Be God’s servants! You are made free from sin and therefore should walk in this liberty (Romans 6:22).

Perfectionism

Taking the Biblical language for definitive sanctification some have argued for perfectionism. This is the idea that it is possible for some to achieve perfect holiness in this life. Such special people claim in every way to be dead to sin and free from sin. They usually speak of an experience subsequent to conversion, the “second blessing” or “baptism of the Holy Ghost”, following which they stop all sin or at least all conscious sin.

But in Romans 6 Paul is not speaking of a few very special Christians, but of the universal experience of all Christians. All who have been converted have died to sin. John says, “Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin” (1 John 3:9). All who are born again do not “commit sin”. Yet earlier in the same Epistle he writes, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). Those who claim to have stopped sinning deceive themselves and call God a liar. His Word is not in them (1 John 1:10). Every Christian is a sinner, but there has

been a huge change at conversion and those born again will not “sin unto death” and damnation. The Christian life is one of constant warfare against sin (Romans 7:14-25). Sometimes, conscious of our sins and failure, we cry out in disappointment, “O wretched man that I am!” but at the end of the day we will have the victory. “I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord”.

Progressive Sanctification

Following the act of definitive sanctification, progressive sanctification continues for the rest of our lives. It involves negatively, dying to, and turning from sin and, positively, growing in grace: “If ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body ye shall live” (Romans 8:13). There is an ongoing work, a “Pilgrim’s Progress”. The Westminster Shorter Catechism refers to this progressive sanctification: “Sanctification is a work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin and to live unto righteousness” (Answer 25).

The Pattern

There is a pattern set before us to be aimed at:

- 1 The ethical holiness of God: “Be ye holy; for I am holy” (1 Peter 1:16).
- 2 The example of Christ: “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5). We are to be, “conformed to the image of his Son” (Romans 8:29).
- 3 The preceptive will of God, His commandments, which we are required to keep. Holiness is essentially obedience to God’s revealed will.

The Goal

In sanctification we aim at perfect conformity to the pattern God has given us. But we strive for something more than mere obedience. We must struggle also to know God: “That I may know him” (Philippians 3:10). This was the great longing of the apostle Paul. Knowing God is not simply an intellectual thing. Rather it is a relationship. We are to strive personally for an intimate knowledge of God. A holy person is one who has warm piety, love and devotion to God. It involves delighting in God and enjoying Him. We must be content with nothing less than experiencing God, as we walk with Him, listen to Him and talk to Him.

Legalism

Today, if you stress the duty of keeping the commandments many will accuse you of legalism. But legalism is adhering to the law rather than to the Gospel as a way of salvation. It is trusting in your own keeping of the commandments and goodness rather than the cross of Christ. Legalism is seeking salvation in the covenant of works rather than the covenant of grace. It is putting faith in your own efforts to save yourself, rather than receiving the gift which God freely offers. Legalism is trusting in your own abilities rather than union with Christ as the dynamic power, the energy to expel sin from your heart and life. Legalism is failing to look to the enabling of the Spirit.

Although we are saved by faith in Christ alone, yet God’s law, summarised in the ten commandments, has a vital part to play in our salvation. The law has three uses:

- 1 It is the God-given code of life for society.

- 2 It is a schoolmaster to convict you of sin and force you out of every refuge till you come to Christ.
- 3 It is the rule of life for the Christian. “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). Our love for God is expressed in our keeping of the commandments. Paul, who so forcefully stated, “We are not under the law, but under grace” (Romans 6:15), also declared that he is “under the law to Christ” (1 Corinthians 9:21). John, the apostle of love, puts it quite plainly: “For this is the love of God that we keep his commandments” (1 John 5:3). Sadly the heresy of antinomianism which rejects the law as a rule of life for the Christian is very common. Rabbi Duncan called it the mother of all heresies, the one from which all the others come.

The Means

Sanctification is the work of God’s Spirit. He is called “Holy” because His work is to make men holy and not because He is holier than the other persons of the Trinity. It is through the Spirit that we are to mortify the deeds of the body (Romans 8:13). Yet the Spirit uses means in our sanctification. The means are as follows:

- 1 The primary means is the reading and especially the preaching of the Word and also the reading of good books which explain the Word. “Sanctify them through thy truth” (John 17:17).
- 2 The sacraments are another important means of grace. Being baptised, separate yourself from your sins and seek to live according to your high profession. Remember you are by baptism united to Christ and therefore carry the name of Christ in the world. In the Lord’s Supper feed on Christ and remember the Lord’s death till He comes.
- 3 Prayer is vital. Pray against temptations, for forgiveness, and for grace to persevere and grow. Meet God in prayer. There you will get to know Him.
- 4 The fellowship of the saints stirs us up and encourages us. It is dangerous to be isolated. Provoke one another to love and good works. In the old illustration, a lump of burning coal will soon cool down and blacken if it is removed from the other coals in the fire and placed alone on the hearth.
- 5 Providence has a role. God chastises and corrects us for our sins and backslidings. We must learn from this. Also the trials of life, purify faith, strengthen it and weaken our attachment to the world and make us long for heaven.

Conclusion

Children need to see holy parents who walk with God. What an impact that has upon them! Nothing is more effective in bringing them up for the Lord than the example of happy godliness. Congregations need holy pastors and elders. This reinforces the message and provides an example to the flock. Paul could say “Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). The world needs a holy church walking with God. Then they will be no longer justified in saying that the church is full of hypocrites. Then Christians will truly be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Union with Christ

Nothing is more important than our union with Christ. It underlies the whole application of redemption. Every blessing we receive comes to us because of our union to Christ, and outside of Christ there is no blessing, but only God's wrath and curse. Why then leave the treatment of such an important doctrine to this point in our lectures? The reason is that having dealt with most of the other aspects of the application of redemption we can now consider them in relation to the Bible's teaching about union with Christ.

Relation to other Teachings

Eternal Plan

Our union with Christ began before time. We were chosen and loved in Christ before the foundations of the world were laid and the purpose of this choosing in Him was that we might be holy: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: according as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love" (Ephesians 1:3-4). The Father predestinated us to be adopted as His children by and in Christ. There never was a time when God did not view us in Christ.

The Covenants

When God created man, He created all mankind in Adam in the covenant of works. Adam was our covenant head. That is why when Adam sinned we all sinned in him and fell with him in that first transgression. In a similar way all God's elect are related to Christ in the covenant of redemption. As Adam was our head in the covenant of works, so Christ is our head in the covenant of redemption: "As in Adam all die so in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22). With Adam we all sinned and died. In Christ we are perfectly obedient to God, keeping all His commandments in union with Christ. But more, when Christ suffered the penalty for sin, we suffered and we died with Christ, we were buried with Him and rose with Him. We were united to Christ as He atoned for us on the cross: "He hath made us accepted in the beloved. In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace" (Ephesians 1:6-7). Christ's righteousness is ours and His satisfaction rendered to the justice of God when He was punished for our sins, is ours too.

Effectual Calling

The work of salvation starts in our lives with the effectual calling. There may be convictions and stirrings before that point, but it is only when we are effectually called that we rise from being dead in sins. Effectual calling is being, "Called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:9). Prior to conversion we were, "without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world: but now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:12-13). We have been called into union with Christ by faith because we were elected in Christ and suffered on the cross in Christ our covenant Head.

Regeneration

Immediately following effectual calling in the application of redemption comes regeneration or the new birth. What happens in regeneration is that the Spirit of Christ enters into us and raises us from being spiritually dead. From now on Christ lives in us by His Spirit. We are crucified to the old life and risen with Christ to a new life: "Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in

the likeness of his resurrection: knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin” (Romans 6:4-6). We are united to Christ by being planted in Christ, and by Christ dwelling in us by His Spirit. Paul wrote: “But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness” (Romans 8:9-10). Regeneration unites us to Christ.

Faith

The first act of the regenerate soul is to respond to God’s call in faith and repentance. Repentance is turning from sin, and faith is turning to Christ and receiving Him as He is freely offered to us in the Gospel. To the church at Laodecea, He said, “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:20). Faith welcomes Christ into our hearts. Christ, by His Spirit, comes to dwell in the heart, and we become “the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you” (1 Corinthians 6:19). Faith comes to Christ and rests on Him. Jesus said, “Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out” (John 6:37), and having come, by faith we receive and embrace the Lord Jesus. By faith we are united to Christ who is in us and we in Him: “And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us” (1 John 3:24).

Justification

Faith is the instrument of our justification: “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1). By faith we lay hold on Christ for our justification and are united to Him, “Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification” (Romans 4:25). In justifying us God views us as perfectly obedient in Christ. He pronounces us pardoned and accepted because we are united to Christ. He sees us as having paid the penalty for our sins in Christ and now risen with Him.

Adoption

Paul states that our adoption follows our union with Christ by faith: “Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26). All who believe are assured of their adoption because “God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying Abba, Father” (Galatians 4:6). We are “heirs and joint heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:17), and so united with Christ in the family of God. The Spirit, dwelling in us, assures us of our adoption, by witnessing with our spirit that we are the children of God.

Sanctification

Our union with Christ plays a major rôle in our sanctification as an incentive and an encouragement. As Christians, united to Christ, we are not to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers (2 Corinthians 6:14-18). Being one body with Christ we are not to have fellowship with devils (1 Corinthians 10:16-21). Surely it would be outrageous to take the members of Christ’s body and join them to a harlot. Remember your bodies are the members of Christ (1 Corinthians 6:15-20). The Spirit of Christ in you is sanctifying you, fighting against the flesh (Galatians 5:17) and enabling you to die to sin (Romans 8:13). You are to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12-13).

Perseverance

Union with Christ assures us of our perseverance. Where God begins the good work in us He will complete it (Philippians 1:6). Christ dwells in us by His Spirit and will never leave us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). Paul assures the Romans, “I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord”

(Romans 8:38-39). Christ has come to live in us permanently and assures us that He is “the author and the finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2).

Glorification

The Christian’s death is described as falling asleep in Jesus (1 Thessalonians 4:14). The Westminster Shorter Catechism makes the amazing statement: “Their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection” (Answer 37). Man is made up of a body and a soul and that full person is united to Christ in regeneration and shall remain so for ever. Christ returns at the end of the world to raise our bodies, to unite our bodies and souls together once more, and so shall we ever be with the Lord, in eternal union: “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him.... For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:14, 16-18). Our Lord says: “To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne” (Revelation 3:21).

Pictures of our Union with Christ

The Scriptures present us with several pictures of our union with Christ. The church is described as a building with Christ as the foundation and we built on Him: “For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11). Christ is the rock: “Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). We are living stones, but He the cornerstone, “To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:4-5). In another picture Christ is presented as the vine and we the branches: “I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing” (John 15:5). Paul speaks of God’s church as being like a body with Christ as the Head and we the members or individual parts: “For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many.... Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular” (1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 27). When dealing with the subject of marriage the Apostle goes on to present Christ as the husband and the church as the spouse: “For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church” (Ephesians 5:31-32). Even the Trinity, the closest union there is, has been used by our Saviour to describe the relationship of union with Himself. He prayed, “That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” (John 17:21).

Implications of Union with Christ

Taking the pictures given above and using the insight which we receive from them there are certain implications of our union with Christ which it is helpful to express.

- 1 Take the picture of a building and its foundation. This implies our duty to abide on Him, resting, trusting, loving and building upon Him as our foundation. Some build on sand and perish but we, by grace, are building on Christ.
- 2 Think of the cornerstone. United to one another and to the cornerstone we find strength. Our eye must be upon Him constantly in prayer and faith. Without the cornerstone we fall apart, but cemented to Him and to one another, we stand.

- 3 The illustration of the vine emphasises that we bear fruit only through union with Him. Outside of Him we are dry, shrivel up and die. We are barren, cast away and burnt in the fire. But abiding in Christ we bear much fruit.
- 4 The vine also makes clear that we should seek closer and closer union with Christ, for it is only through this relationship that we can draw the nourishment we need from Christ, the sap and Spirit which we need, will make us healthy and fruitful.
- 5 The vine exists in the branches. It is seen there. We as the branches are to be witnessing constantly to Him. Christ is the light of the world. But then He says that “Ye are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14). We are to shine and transmit His light to the world. He is seen in us.
- 6 The figure of the body and the head emphasises that we must constantly look to Him for directions. The head guides the body in everything and so Christ should be our Lord and Master. The body can do nothing without the Head.
- 7 Without the head the body has no living existence. Outside of Christ we are headless, like a beheaded corpse, and have no life or blessings, but rather death and hell.
- 8 Union to Christ in the body means also union to one another. The hand needs the foot. We need one another. Let us love our fellow-Christians. They are part of us. If one member is in pain the whole body is in pain, and if one member is honoured all are honoured.
- 9 Marriage is the closest bond of love known in this life. It is wonderful that the love of Christ should be described in these terms. The Lord loved His bride and gave Himself for her. Keep yourself morally pure for Him. You are joined to the Saviour, how then can you join yourself to a harlot. Remember idolatry is adultery from Him.
- 10 The Trinity is a deep, mysterious union. Be intimately united to the Lord. Let His joy, peace and love flood your heart. Be filled with His Spirit, walk in the Spirit, and quench not the Spirit. Christ is in us the hope of glory, and so we are assured of heaven. Glory be to God! He came to live in us, has transformed us, will finish the work, and will never leave us. We will share with Him in His throne and His house and will be made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity.