

Salvation – The Power of the Cross

Session 5

In this session we're going to be taking a look at Adoption into God's family, Sanctification, Dying with Christ and Victory Over Evil.

Adoption into God's Family

Immediately we turn to Christ in true faith we are justified and reconciled to God (both of which are concepts we looked at last time) and this enables us to be adopted into God's family as His children with all the privileges and obligations of family members. Isn't that amazing.

Previously we were sinners by nature and 'children of wrath' but once we are justified we become children of God:

"Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." (John 1:12-13 NIV)

Jesus himself gave us permission to approach God as 'Abba', Father:

"He said to them, "When you pray, say: "Abba Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come." (Luke 11:2 NIV)

and Paul takes this up emphasising the privileges we have in being sons instead of slaves, and therefore God's heirs as well:

"because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory." (Romans 8:14-17 NIV)

and

"You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." (Galatians 3:26-29 NIV)

This is all part of the wonderful new relationship with God that we are enabled to enter into through the blood of Christ once we turn to Christ in faith and are redeemed, justified and reconciled to God.

As God's adopted children we have Christ as a brother, but this does not in any way make us equal to Christ. He is the head of the new covenant, its mediator and guarantor. Immediately we are justified, God gives us the Holy Spirit as the spirit of adoption:

"Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." (Galatians 4:6 NIV)

and this Spirit gives us assurance that we are indeed God's children and begins to carry out the work of sanctification within us – and we'll come to that in a moment. Firstly though you may remember that I spoke earlier of the obligations of being a member of God's family. We

must uphold the family values, the values of the head of the family, God our Father, and live lives worthy of our new status.

Sanctification

Sanctification is the means by which God makes those who have been made holy or righteous *legally* through justification, holy or righteous in *actuality*. In other words God declares repentant sinners righteous in justification, but through sanctification he makes them actually, objectively righteous. Although there are conflicting views amongst Christians as to what sanctification really is, I believe it's the gradual process of God making us really holy and Christlike through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The concept of 'holy', which really means 'pure' and 'set apart', lies at the heart of sanctification. It's being Christ-like in the midst of a Godless world.

Believers should be set aside for God's possession and declared holy by faith in Christ. In the NT, they are usually referred to as 'saints in Christ Jesus', emphasising that their holy status derives through Christ. However, the God who declares believers righteous demands that they make strides in the practical holiness of life. As Thomas Watson said "It is absurd to imagine that God should justify a people whom he could not glorify." Progressive sanctification is a real objective advance towards spiritual maturity from within the believer. It's a demand for us to elevate our actual moral condition to the level of the legal status that's been conferred on us by justification. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians:

"It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honourable, For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life." (1Thessalonians 4:3-4, 7).

Scripture tells us clearly that God's work in producing Christ-likeness in us through the action of His Holy Spirit is gradual and progressive rather than sudden or instantaneous. Peter commanded Christians to:

".. grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ .." (2 Peter 3:18) and Paul wrote:

"Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day." (2 Corinthians 4:16 NIV)

and:

"And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18).

The writer to the Hebrews expressed the contrast between justification and sanctification: "because by one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy." (Hebrews 10:14).

In the OT, the emphasis was on becoming holy like God; in the NT, the emphasis is on becoming holy by becoming like Christ. So Paul wrote:

"For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers." (Romans 8:29).

Antinomians in Paul's day argued that since Christians have been made right with God why not sin boldly in order that grace might abound. Paul opposed this line of reasoning with a firm "By no means" (Romans 6:2), because Christians have died to the old life of sin and so must allow sin no place in their lives. Also, at conversion believers were united with Christ

in his resurrection and thus reckon themselves alive to God and become servants of God and righteousness which leads to holiness:

“Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.” (Romans 6:13 NIV)

and

“You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness.” (Romans 6:18-19 NIV)

As Christians we need to firmly put aside any notion that we can continue to sin just as we did before our conversion. That completely devalues what Christ achieved for us on the cross.

Paul described sanctification as the process of progressively discarding the ‘earthly nature’ or ‘old self’ and the putting on of the ‘new self’ which is being renewed in the image of its Creator:

“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.” (Colossians 3:5-10 NIV)

The old nature is the capacity to serve Satan, sin and self whilst the new self is the capacity to serve God and righteousness acquired through new birth. This is not an easy or painless process. Paul emphasises that Christian growth involves struggle, sometimes intense struggle, against indwelling sin. Thus within believers the old nature and the new nature do battle. As Paul wrote:

“For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.” (Galatians 5:17).

I’m sure we’ve all experienced this and this struggle; this tension between the two natures will persist as long as we live.

The process of sanctification will not be completed in this life, but it will take place – I believe instantaneously – at the second coming. John wrote:

“Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” (1 John 3:2).

John tells us that we will then achieve perfect moral purity, absence of sins and actual objective righteousness:

“Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure. Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. No-one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No-one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him. Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.” (1 John 3:3-7 NIV)

Meanwhile Christians advance in sanctification by abiding in Christ (John 15:4, 7), walking in the light of God's presence (1 John 1:7), holding fast to their Christian calling (Revelations 2:25; 3:11), purifying themselves from sin (1 John 3:3), continuing in Christ's teaching (John 14:23; 15:7), and submitting to God's discipline (John 15:2).

In closing on the topic of sanctification, I just want comment briefly on two matters which I think are quite widely believed, but which I consider to be incorrect.

Firstly there is the question of a 'second blessing experience. Some Christian writers claim that believers can advance to a higher plane by a sudden, post conversion, 'second blessing'. In my view, this is not scriptural. Paul explicitly taught that we are baptised into the Holy Spirit at the commencement of the Christian life (1 Corinthians 12:13). Paul's use and indeed repetition of the word 'all' makes it clear that this applies to all Christians even apparently carnal ones – and the Corinthians were certainly that. However, even though there is one spirit baptism at conversion, believers can and should experience many subsequent fillings with the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, this is but a part of the process of sanctification and does not indicate that Christians receiving such fillings are of a different kind to other Christians.

Secondly, there are some who hold that sinless perfection is a real possibility within this life and a goal to be attained. As we have already seen the old, carnal nature cannot be entirely defeated in this life and will not be eliminated until the second coming. Accordingly, Christians who set too much store in this idea are headed for disappointment and defeat and risk becoming discouraged. Of course, we should strive to achieve as high a level of sanctification as possible, but keep a realistic attitude and expect struggle and failure. Luther said "You will most certainly never achieve sinless perfection here on earth; otherwise you would have no need of faith and Christ.

How then should we respond to this issue of sanctification?

Firstly, we need to identify God's part and our own part in the process. Sanctification is primarily a work of God. Paul wrote:
"May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through." (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

Contrary to the humanist view, we labour in vain to establish holiness by our own efforts. John said that the prospect and possibility of holiness is due to God's gracious implantation of new life in the believing heart (1 John 3:9; 5:4). However, we must co-operate with the sanctification process and ourselves expend purposeful effort. As Paul wrote:
" 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." (2 Corinthians 7:1).

The author of Hebrews wrote:

"make every effort To be holy" (Hebrews 12:14).

Although God plays the leading role in sanctification, it is a co-operative venture. Augustine wrote "Without God we cannot; without us God will not." Human effort by itself is futile; inspired and enabled by the Spirit it is fruitful.

Secondly, we need to be filled with the Spirit. That is we need allow God to release the Spirit into our lives. As we have seen, we receive the baptism of the Spirit at conversion. Unfortunately, Christians do not consistently allow the Spirit unhindered freedom to promote

holiness in them. We often grieve the Spirit (Ephesians 4:30) or put out His fire (1 Thessalonians 5:19) by being preoccupied with self and sin. Let us do our best to offer the Spirit a wide open door to our hearts and permit him to infuse every part of our mind and being. When the Spirit has permission to control our lives, the results will be glorious.

Thirdly, we must imitate Jesus Christ. We have seen that holiness is being like Christ. We become like Christ as we imitate him – his values, goals, words and deeds. He is our example, model and guide. We need to remember His command “Follow me”. Thomas a Kempis wrote:

“Jesus has many lovers of His heavenly kingdom, but few actually carry His cross. He has many who like consolation; few desire tribulation. Many wish to feast with him; few want to fast with him. All want to rejoice with him; few will endure for him. Many follow Jesus to break bread; few follow to drink His cup of sorrow. Many respond to His miracles; few share the disgrace of His cross. Many love Jesus with this proviso: no adversities.”

God’s discipline

I’m not going to dwell on this issue, but I do feel that any discussion of sanctification would be seriously incomplete without some reference to God’s discipline.

Sanctification is not an easy or comfortable process. Indeed, it can be made even more uncomfortable by God’s chastening (as older Bible translations would have it) or God’s discipline (as modern Bible translations put it). In some ways the word chastening (which means ‘correction by punishment’) is more accurate, but it is rather an obscure term for Christians today. Many Christians are uncomfortable with the idea of God disciplining believing Christians – punishing them in order to correct them – but there is no doubt that the concept is well established in the NT. There are eight references to God’s discipline in the NT, but the basis of this discipline is well expressed by the writer to the Hebrews: “because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.” (Hebrews 12:6)

The purpose of God’s discipline is to make us Holy, to advance our sanctification and it is always for our good (Hebrews 12:10). It is unpleasant at the time (Hebrews 12:11), but it eventually produces ‘a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it’ (Hebrews 12:11):

“Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” (Hebrews 12:10-11 NIV)

This discipline is absolutely NOT to be confused with the wrath of God against the sins of mankind we discussed earlier. That wrath has been propitiated once and for all by Christ’s sacrificial death.

If we never committed sin following our conversion, then there would be no need for God’s discipline, but as we have seen, we are not instantly made holy by conversion, but that the growth of our sanctification is rather a gradual process. Thus, we do continue to sin after our conversion:

“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” (1 John 1:8).

But, God is very concerned that we should be holy, as Peter wrote:

‘Be holy because I am Holy’ (1 Peter 1:16),

and in his concern, he disciplines us as necessary in order that we should become holy.

Let us also remember that one day we shall appear before the *bema* or judgement seat of Christ:

“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” (2 Corinthians 5:10).

At this point, I want to make it absolutely clear that this statement by Paul does not in any way contradict the doctrine of salvation by faith we have already examined in some detail and which Paul also teaches in Romans and Galatians. Those of us who have genuinely accepted the free gift our salvation through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross are eternally saved. What I AM saying is that there will be a judgement even amongst those who already have Christ’s righteousness imputed to them and this judgement will extend amongst those who are not saved (1 Peter 4:17-18) – because our Lord Jesus is Lord over all men and at his name every knee shall bow and confess him as Lord (Philippians 2:9-11). This ought to mean not only that we should try and live lives which are as holy as possible, but also that we should deal correctly with each other. As Paul said:

“You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat.” (Romans 14:10).

Of course, if we repent of our sins, then God will be merciful and forgive us these sins – but let us not forget that the word repentance in Hebrew is composed of two words which mean ‘to turn around’ and ‘to feel sorrow’. Consequently real repentance must involve not only genuinely feeling sorry for our sins but also a genuine turning away from those sins and going in the opposite direction. Of course, we may again fall into the same sin of which we have repented – and can again be forgiven – but God knows our hearts and our intention at the time of original repentance must be genuine and we must exert some real effort to stick to the new path we have promised to follow.

Dying with Christ

This is really the process of dying to the self, to our old carnal and sinful nature and partaking of the life of the risen Christ:

“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20 NIV)

It’s really very closely aligned with co-operating with the process of sanctification. Paul says:

“So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.” (Romans 7:4-6 NIV)

Let us give ourselves freely to the service of our Lord just as Paul did:

“We put no stumbling-block in anyone’s path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work,

sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonour, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.” (2 Corinthians 6:3-10 NIV)

Victory Over Evil

On the cross Christ triumphed over Satan and the powers of evil. This is a further achievement of the cross. The cross appeared to be the defeat of goodness by evil, but was actually the defeat of evil by goodness.

Perhaps the most important NT passage proclaiming the victory of Christ is found in Colossians:

“When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” (Colossians 2:13-15).

Paul here brings together two of the three achievements of the cross namely the forgiveness of our sins – which we have already looked at – and the cosmic overthrow of the principalities and powers. Here I believe it is quite clear that Paul is referring to spiritual rather than earthly powers and authorities (despite the attempt of some authors to argue otherwise), although we must of course recognise that Satan and his demons can use earthly powers and authorities for their ends. The word used by Paul, which is translated ‘disarmed’ by the NIV Bible, really means ‘stripped’. Paul certainly did mean that they were ‘stripped of weapons’ or disarmed, but I think he also meant that they were stripped of dignity or degraded.

The passage also refers to nailing the ‘written code’ to the cross. Here the Greek word translated as ‘written code’ is *cheirographon*, which was usually used to mean a handwritten certificate of indebtedness. Thus, I think that what Paul was saying is that our sins (being our certificate of indebtedness) were nailed to the cross (that is imputed to Christ, because a persons crimes were nailed to his cross) just as Christ’s righteousness was imputed to us.

Christ also overcame the devil by totally resisting his temptations, not only in the desert following the baptism but throughout his life. Tempted to avoid the cross Jesus persevered and:

“..... he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:8).

This obedience was an essential part of his saving work:

“For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.” (Romans 5:19).

If Jesus had disobeyed, deviating at all from the path laid down by the Father’s will, then the devil would have gained a foothold and the plan of salvation would have been frustrated. But, Jesus obeyed, and the devil was defeated. Provoked by the insults and tortures to which he was subjected, Jesus refused to retaliate even in the smallest degree. By means of his self-

giving love, he ‘overcame evil with good’ (Romans 12:21). He could have used his supernatural powers to escape for no one, neither Pilate nor the Jewish authorities or anyone else, had power or authority over him and he could have escaped – as his mockers challenged him to do! But he declined to resort to worldly power. In his obedience love and meekness, he won a great moral victory over the powers of evil.

The resurrection was the conquest confirmed and announced. We must NOT regard the cross as defeat and the resurrection as victory – rather the cross was the victory won and the resurrection merely proclaimed and confirmed that victory. Death was unable to keep its hold on Christ, because on the cross death was defeated:

“But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.” (Acts 2:24 NIV)

The evil principalities and powers, which, as we just saw, were deprived of their weapons and dignity by the cross, were now in consequence put at Christ’s feet and made subject to him: “which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills everything in every way.” (Ephesians 1:20-23 NIV)

Of course, we should maintain a strong, indeed unbreakable, link between the crucifixion and the resurrection – as we do in the sacraments of the baptism and the Eucharist. Nevertheless, we must be clear that it is the ‘blood of Jesus’, that is his death on the cross, which propitiated God’s wrath and by which we have been redeemed, justified and reconciled to God. Christ’s death and not his resurrection dealt with our sins. In his death, he conquered death and destroyed the power of him who held the power over death – Satan:

“Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” (Hebrews 2:14-15 NIV)

The resurrection merely confirmed Christ’s victory, already won and allowed his righteousness to be imputed to us.

Finally, we look forward to Christ’s conquest consummated at the second coming. On that day every knee will bow to him and every tongue confess him Lord:

“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,” (Philippians 2:9-10 NIV)

So let’s do that now whilst we may still avail ourselves of God’s grace.

Our Response to Christ’s Victory

So how shall we respond to Christ’s victory? Although life spells conflict for Christians, it also spells victory. We should be victorious like the victorious Christ. Jesus promises a right to share his throne to he who overcomes (1 John 2:13; Revelation 3:21).

Yet, the parallel is only partial. By ourselves, we are unable to fight and defeat Satan. Also as we have already seen we are unable to become righteous, to be sanctified, without God’s help. The good news is that we don’t need to fight because Christ has already done it. Our victory consists in entering into the victory of Christ. However, although the devil has been

defeated he has not yet conceded defeat. He has been overthrown, but not yet eliminated. This is why we need to be strong in the Lord's strength and clad in his armour (Ephesians 6:10-17). This is all part of the tension in the Christian life between 'the already' of Christ's victory on the cross and the 'not yet' of awaiting his second coming. The kingdom of God has been inaugurated, but not yet fully consummated. We are no longer slaves, and are already God's sons and daughters, but we have not yet entered 'the glorious freedom of the children of God' (Romans 8:21). This tension between the now and the not yet explains why we are not yet free from such weaknesses of the body as sickness and disease – such things will persist until the second coming.

Consequently, we need to keep a balance between overemphasising the 'not yet' (which would lead us to feel defeated) and overemphasising the 'now' (which might lead to discouragement as some expected benefits are unrealised).

We should also remember that we are no longer under the tyranny of the flesh, that is, we are no longer dominated by our fallen selfish, wicked nature. Freedom from our fallen nature comes through the cross, although this freedom will not be fully realised until our sanctification is complete. Nevertheless, when we believe in Christ our values start to change, we no longer conform to the world's values, but find instead that we are being transformed by our renewed mind and the infusing of the Spirit. As we resist the devil, standing firm in our faith, the devil will flee from us (1 Peter 5:8-9; James 4:7). Clad in the full armour of God we can take our stand against him (Ephesians 6:10-17). We can command the devil to depart in the name of Jesus, for the devil well knows his conqueror.

Next, we should remember that we are no longer under the tyranny of death. The fear of death is practically universal in our generation. But Jesus Christ is able to set free even those who all their lives have been 'held in slavery to their fear of death', because by his own death he has deprived of power him who formerly held the power of death – that is the devil (Hebrews 2:14). That is because on the cross Christ has dealt with our sins, and it is sin that causes death and brings judgement upon us. Paul likens death to a scorpion whose sting has been drawn, and a military conqueror whose power has been broken. So he says: "'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.'" (1 Corinthians 15:55-57).

What then should our response to death be? Jesus himself has told us:

"Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26).

Jesus' promise to us is that those who are alive at the second coming will never die and that those who have died in the meantime will be resurrected.

Finally, we must proclaim the good news of what Jesus Christ has done for us all. In this way, God's kingdom will grow and the kingdom of Satan will diminish. The preaching of the cross is the power of God. It is by preaching the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ that we shall turn people from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to the power of God (Acts 26:18). No other message has the same power and force, for the real objective victory won by the Lamb over the powers of evil and darkness when he shed his blood on the cross was and is the most important event in human history.