

SANCTIFICATION...

Counseling Implications from Romans and Other Pauline Epistles

Sanctification is at the heart of Christian counseling. The believer, having been reckoned *positionally* righteous by the work of Christ, is now exhorted to "walk in the newness of life" (Romans 6:4) by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Pagan systems of counseling may settle for achieving the counselee's self-oriented agenda--to feel better, to rearrange sinful patterns so as to become more "functional," and such as that. Not so for the *Christian* counselor and counselee! The *Christian* counselee must be conformed to the image of Christ. He must now live to please God, not himself. His union with Christ has provided him with the power that he needs to live this new life. The biblical counselor is called to come alongside and assist him in this life-long process of sanctification.

Paul's epistle to the Romans, along with his other New Testament writings, provide a wealth of information for the Christian counselor on this doctrine of sanctification. Romans is a systematic book of theology. As one begins to carefully pour over its pages, God's plan for *sanctification* unfolds right along with His plan for *justification*. These intimately related doctrines must be carefully distinguished and understood as the believer grows in His walk with Christ.

This paper will systematically explore Paul's doctrine of sanctification and its implications for Christian counseling, concentrating on Romans but also referencing other Pauline epistles (plus occasionally other Scripture). Some basic questions and issues will be addressed. Why the *need* for sanctification? How is justification related to sanctification, and how can it help in counseling? What is the provision for sanctification, and who or what empowers the believer to obey God? How does suffering relate to sanctification? What are godly motives for sanctification? What are the reasons for sanctification? What are the results of sanctification? What are possible misunderstandings and dangers, and how can the Christian counselor and counselee avoid them? It is expected that an in-depth look at Paul's New Testament epistles will provide solid answers and biblical hope in the face of these questions.

The Believer's Need for Sanctification

Justification by faith alone is one of the great essential doctrines of the Christian faith. Salvation is a free gift of God's grace. It is not based on works or merit in any way. Marshall puts it well:

"Christ would have the vilest sinners come to Him for salvation immediately, without delaying the time to prepare themselves for Him."¹

The old hymn says, "just as I am," which means that the new believer has years of sinful patterns to be overcome. He is now positionally righteous, but he has a lot to learn about how to live a life that is worthy of his calling (Ephesians 4:1)!

The first three chapters of Romans are normally understood as demonstrating the universal need of man for salvation. They fulfill this purpose without a doubt. But let's see how these same passages also expose the enormous gap between the practices of the old life apart from Christ, and the holiness that the believer must now seek. The need for sanctification, as well as justification, can be found in these same three chapters.

Romans 1:18-32 points out three basic areas where man has made fatal exchanges. Each is an area that must be addressed in Christian counseling.

Worship. Man has exchanged the worship of God for the worship of created things, or idols (1:22, 25). While he may not bow before a literal golden calf in the 20th century, he yields to a variety of other idols--alcohol, achievement, sex, food, people. Counselors often use the word "addictions," but the real heart of the problem is *idolatry*. The idols of the heart must be exposed in counseling, and the counselee must return to the worship of God, his Creator. Sin originates in the **heart** of man. The Christian counselor must seriously explore the issues of the heart, using the powerful Word of God (Hebrews 4:12).

Man was created to bear the image of God, to reflect His glory as a mirror might reflect an image. Instead, he lusts after his own glory and fails to glorify God. He fails to acknowledge God and holds down the truth in unrighteousness (1:18). He fails to give thanks to God (1:21). In Christian counseling, one of the primary goals is for the counselee to be conformed to the image of Christ. The image destroyed by the fall must be restored. The counselee must learn to live for **God's** glory rather than his own.

Truth. Man has also exchanged God's truth for a lie (1:25). While professing to be wise, he is foolish and his mind is darkened (1:21-23). It is crucial that Christian counseling be founded on God's truth, rather than the futile speculations of unregenerate men, as the counselee's mind is renewed and his life

¹ Marshall, p. 87.

transformed (Romans 12:2). There is no other foundation that is both inerrant (1 Timothy 3:16) and sufficient (2 Peter 1:3, 4).

Practice. Finally, man has exchanged obedience for disobedience, purity for impurity, and God has given *him over* (1:24, 26, 28) to his evil practices. Homosexuality is described in this passage as an exchange of the natural for the unnatural (1:26-27). Other sins are listed in graphic detail--wickedness, greed, evil, envy, murder, strife, deceit, slander, arrogance, disobedience to parents, faithlessness, hatred (1:18-32). There are sins here of character, sins against others, and sins of speech. Although one person may not commit *all* of these sins, the depravity of the human heart is evident, and the need for sanctification cannot be doubted. Many of these sinful practices have become automatic prior to regeneration, and change will require godly counsel and discipline as new habits are formed.

While Romans 1 focuses on the obviously immoral person, the second chapter points out the equal need of both the moralist and the Jew. The former, passing judgment on others, hopes to escape God's judgment (2:1-4). Sanctification, for him, will involve a change of heart from self-righteousness to humility. It will also involve change of sinful habit patterns, even though they may be more subtle, because Scripture says that this moralist also practices the very things he "preaches" against (2:1). The Jew is also described as needing salvation--then sanctification. He has God's law and even teaches it to others, but apart from the Spirit he is unable to practice it (2:17-29). Sanctification for him will focus on increasing practice of the law which he already knows to be good and holy. Along with the moralist, his heart must be humbled and softened, and his self-confidence must be replaced with dependence on the Holy Spirit.

The first portion of Romans 3 clearly summarizes the universal need of salvation--but also sanctification. No one seeks after God or does good in his own strength (3:11-12). Sins of speech are rampant (3:13-14). Apart from Christ, man creates misery and chaos in his relationships (3:15-17), and he lacks the reverential fear of God (3:38). All of these are crucial areas to be addressed in Christian counseling. The believer, redeemed and aware of God's gracious gift, must now seek after Him. His speech must now honor Christ (Colossians 4:6). He is to live at peace with all, insofar as it depends on him (Romans 12:18). He must learn to fear God, worshipping Him alone.

When a believer comes to Christ, "just as he is," there is clearly much work to be done!

Justification: The Foundation for Sanctification

Sanctification is not an instantaneous transformation, but a life-long process of change from sinful to righteous living. Believers progress at different rates, and conflict at times abounds. Solid biblical teaching is essential. Christian counselors must exhort their counselees to the practice of holiness. But to avoid the dangers of legalism and mere outward holiness, on the one hand, or antinomianism, on the other hand, sanctification must be firmly grounded in a correct understanding of *justification*. The counselee's right standing before God is based on His mercy and the work of Christ, not on his acts of obedience, even though his sanctification is vitally important. This clear distinction is crucial.

Justification and sanctification distinguished. Let us first distinguish between these intimately related doctrines. Marshall's timeless words are an excellent beginning for our understanding of justification by faith, apart from the law:

"The difference between the law and gospel doth not at all consist in this, that the one requireth *perfect* doing; the other, only *sincere* doing; but in this, that the one requireth *doing*, the other *not* doing, but *believing* for life and salvation. Their terms are different, not only in degree, but in their whole nature."²

Here we see how justification by faith is distinguished from the law as a way of salvation (which it cannot be!). Romans 3:21-31 drives home the point that absolutely no one is ever justified before God by his own works in keeping the law. A few verses later (Romans 5:12-21), Paul further stresses the abundance of God's grace. Adam's sin is imputed to all men, but then the sins of believers imputed to Christ and His righteousness imputed to them. There is a beautiful analogy drawn between these two imputations, as well as a comparison: God's grace is *so much greater* than the former reign of sin!

Let us pause momentarily to consider the implications here for Christian counseling. First, the struggling counselee can take comfort in the fact that his standing before God is based on the work of Christ and not his own efforts. His efforts are a *response* to God's gracious free gift of salvation. Second, as he does grow in holiness, he has no room whatsoever for boasting (3:27), self-righteousness, comparison with the progress of others, or condemnation of others.

² Marshall, p. 69.

Exactly how do justification and sanctification differ, and how are they alike? They are similar in that both are empowered by the grace of God rather than efforts of the flesh, as the next section will discuss further. Yet their differences are significant:

1. Justification is *completed at conversion*. Sanctification only *begins* at conversion, and is completed until the believer is with the Lord in eternity.
2. Justification involves *only* the work of God; even faith itself is His gift (Ephesians 2:8). Sanctification, too, involves the work of God, but it *also* involves the believer actively, as many New Testament exhortations attest.
3. Justification is necessary for eternal salvation. Sanctification is not a *prior condition* for salvation, but a consequence of regeneration.
4. Sanctification cannot take place *prior* to justification. Justification *must* take place *prior* to sanctification.

Sanctification may be described as a fruit of justification, a consequence. Its progress is grounded in a proper understanding of the basis for one's right standing before God.

Assurance of salvation. The believer's eternal security is a firm foundation for progress in sanctification. Scripture assures God's faithfulness, love, and provision. The believer is promised access to Him (Romans 5:1, 2) and comforted in the knowledge that, having this initial peace with God through Christ, he will not be denied God's divine assistance in all matters of life (5:9, 10). Because of this glorious hope, he will never be put to shame (5:5). Christian counselors and counselees alike must never forget these glorious promises!

Some, however, take issue with this assurance. Koberle, for example, issues what seems a stern warning:

"If the break with sin is not complete, nor rightly timed, nor constant, faith will at last be lost. If sin be not cut off it will grow and finally triumph. It is true that God's faithfulness that was pledged in baptism remains but there is no longer any desire for forgiveness, no hunger to seek His face in prayer. God's saving, purifying power is even still ready to act but there is no longer any willingness to be judged and renewed by His Spirit."³

³ Koberle, p. 227.

Calling sanctification "a fruit of the tree of faith," which it is, he claims that "its omission destroys both the fruit and the root. The tree that cannot grow dies."⁴ He fears the error of antinomianism:

"When men are unequivocally taught that the saving faith that has been given through Word and Sacrament will be lost if it be without the actual following of Christ in obedience and love, then the antinomian misunderstanding that has followed in the steps of the Gospel like some dark shadow, even to our own day, will finally be overcome."⁵

Indeed, twisting God's grace into a license for sin (antinomianism) is a grave error to be avoided. Sanctification is not optional, and Scripture clearly refutes the misuse of grace (Romans 6:1-14). However, Koberle has not carefully and clearly distinguished justification and sanctification. We can agree that continuance in deliberate, willful sin is irreconcilable with saving faith. However, such a lifestyle more likely indicates a lack of genuine saving faith, or perhaps, serious doctrinal misunderstandings accompanied by extremely slow progress in sanctification. Koberle seems to motivate by fear rather than the wonderful, reassuring promises given by God to His elect. He sees that there is an intimate connection between sanctification and justification, but not the proper *sequence*:

"The connection between the two is actually so intimate that if one were to perish the other would be taken away and where one remains and is rightly used, it also brings the other with it."⁶

Sanctification can only grow out of, and subsequent to, justification. It cannot *cause* justification, either its beginning or its continuance. Such would be a salvation by works rather than strictly faith. Sadly, the type of teaching promoted by Koberle on this point is one which can too easily lead to hypocritical works performed in a spirit of fear and enslavement, rather than the spirit of adoption that we have received (Romans 8:15).

Marshall helps us discern the truth of the matter, that:

⁴ Koberle, p. 239.

⁵ Koberle, p. 246.

⁶ Koberle, p. 253.

"...we are all, by nature, void of all strength and ability to perform acceptably that holiness and righteousness which the law requireth."⁷

Original sin, as attested by numerous passages of Scripture, exposes our total natural inability to even *desire*, let alone perform, righteous acts--we are *dead* in our sins and trespasses apart from God's intervention (Ephesians 2:1-3; Romans 8:7-8). Marshall notes that "the duties of the law are of such a nature, that they *cannot* possibly be performed while there is wholly an aversion or mere indifference of the heart to the performance of them."⁸ This is because the *love of God* is the first and greatest commandment. A radical change of the inclination of man's heart is needed. It is just that kind of transformation that takes place in regeneration and enables obedience to God's commands based on love, rather than the fear of punishment (1 John 4:18, 19). We are first reconciled to God--our sins forgiven and Christ's righteousness reckoned to our account--before there is even the possibility of obedience. That reconciliation is based on God's sovereign election and His work of redemption in Christ (Ephesians 1:4-8). The believer's future destiny is assured. Armed with this amazing, glorious comfort, he can joyfully proceed in the life-long adventure of sanctification. The hope and assurance of future glory, in contrast to the fear of its loss, is an *encouragement* to his practice of godliness on earth.

Having established assurance, the believer is now on the road to sanctification. Bridges note that "true salvation brings with it a desire to be made holy...we are through Christ *made* holy in our standing before God, and *called* to be holy in our daily lives."⁹ Growth in holiness, over the years, gives evidence of saving faith. The believer is separated *from sin, to God*. His justification does not imply freedom *to sin*, but rather freedom *from sin*. He is encouraged by God's grace, that he might be strengthened in *every good deed* (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17). In a privileged and unearned position before God, he now has serious responsibilities to consider as he grows in Christ.

God's Provision and Power for Sanctification

It has been noted earlier that prior to regeneration, the person is unable to obey God's commands. The inclination of his

⁷ Marshall, p. 4.

⁸ Marshall, p. 12 (emphasis added).

⁹ Bridges, p. 38.

heart is at enmity with God, and he cannot submit to or please God (Romans 8:7, 8). This entire orientation undergoes drastic change at the time of conversion, and the believer is now equipped with all the power that he needs for sanctification. It is essential, in Christian counseling, for the counselee to clearly understand God's provision for him to overcome the sinful patterns of his former way of life.

Man, in his sinful arrogance, likes to boast of his autonomy, his free will, but Scripture characterizes his condition as one of bondage. Apart from Christ, his enslavement is to sin and its tyrannical reign. He is under the curse of the law and its requirements. The Christian, however, has been given liberty--not to *sin*, but *from sin*, so that he might serve Christ. Here Berkouwer is helpful:

"To be a servant, a δούλος, to sin is to have a relentless tyrant as master; to be bound as δούλος to Christ is to have love itself as Master. The terror of the former condition is supplanted by gratitude and willingness in the other."¹⁰

Paul uses three analogies in Romans 6 and 7 to show the nature of this radical change in allegiance. First, he shows the believer's union with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. The person who is "dead" can no longer sin (6:7). The physically dead person no longer has a living body which can be used in the service of sin. The person united with Christ in His death is considered "dead to sin" (6:3, 5, 6, 8, 11), but "alive to God" (6:11). Bridges reminds us to give glory to God when he says that:

"...our dying to sin is not something we do, but something Christ has done, the value of which accrues to all who are united with Him," and this "is a fact whether we realize it or not."¹¹

He helps us further in noting the implications of this "death:"

"Only as we reckon on these twin facts--that I am dead to sin and its reign over me and that I am alive to God, united to Him who strengthens me--can I keep sin from reigning in my mortal body."¹²

¹⁰ Berkouwer, p. 181.

¹¹ Bridges, p. 55.

¹² Bridges, p. 73.

Indeed, Paul exhorts the believer to reckon himself dead to sin, and **therefore**, to no longer yield his life to sin (6:11-14).

In addition to the analogy of death/burial/resurrection, Paul uses the imagery of slavery. Sin rules over the unbeliever as a master exercises absolute lordship and authority over his slave. Living in a relatively free society, the believer needs to recall from history the nature of human enslavement. The authority is quite unlike that of employer/employee in modern America, but extends to all areas of life and at all times. Christ has freed the believer from this authoritarian rule of sin, and he no longer has an obligation to obey its lusts (6:6), nor will he collect its wages, which is death (6:23). This is the judicial basis for his sanctification. He is now set free to obey and serve God, growing in righteousness and destined for eternal life (6:17-18).

Our third and final analogy ought to nail the point without question. In the first verses of Romans 7, Paul compares the unbeliever's relationship to sin, and the believer's relationship to Christ, with marriage (7:1-6). (One must bear in mind here God's intention that marriage be a lifetime covenantal commitment, and not be misled by today's divorce rates!) Prior to conversion, the believer was "married" to the law, which can only lead to eternal death if used as a way of salvation. When her husband dies, the widow is free to remarry (7:5). Likewise, the believer has "died to the law" and is now "married" to another, to the Lord Jesus Christ (7:4, 6). He is released from the law of sin and death, set free to serve by the power of the Spirit (7:6). It is therefore quite correct for Koberle to state that the imperatives of the New Testament "are not addressed to unbelievers, who are thus to be driven to a decisive ethical choice" but rather "to the regenerate" who "already possess what is being required of them."¹³ Notice the connecting causal particles, such as "therefore" or "so," used repeatedly by Paul in his exhortations.

Nevertheless, the believer does experience struggles in his pursuit of godliness. We must take a brief look at Romans 7:14-25, as this passage is the one normally referenced as describing the nature of that conflict. This presupposes that the speaker in that passage is a believer. Some take issue with that position, with good reason, because of phrases such as "sold as a slave under sin" (7:14), which hardly describes the Christian (see all of Romans 6!). So as not to digress too far (this issue could consume many pages), let us note that other passages, such as Galatians 5:17ff., along with the abundance of New Testament exhortations, attest to the reality of the believer's continuing struggle with sin. The latter portion of Romans 7 must not be

¹³ Koberle, p. 150-1.

ripped out of context so as to discourage the struggling believer. It may well ring true to some of his experience, particularly some of the issues that emerge in counseling! But he dare not wallow in that text. He must look back to the provision outlined in Romans 6, and forward to the hope of Romans 8. The Christian counselor must help him view this section on sanctification in its entirety, and when he does, he will emerge with hope and confidence in the midst of his struggle.

God's full provision and power for sanctification comes to a grand climax in Romans 8, where the believer is promised the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit after being reassured, once more, of the basic gospel message of grace (8:1-4). The fact that he **is** a believer assures the presence of the Spirit, because if the Spirit were not in him, he would not even be a believer (8:9). It is this powerful Spirit, who raised Christ from the dead, who now controls the life of the Christian (8:9) and makes intercession for him (8:26, 27).

Earlier it was noted that, prior to regeneration and apart from God's work, sinful man *cannot* please God, submit to God, or even desire a righteous life. His "free will" is an illusion. God gives the believer a **new heart**:

"If anyone can judge that this new, clean, circumcised heart, this heart of flesh, this new right spirit, is such a one as hath no actual inclination and propensity to good, but only a power to choose good or evil, undeservedly called free will, with a present inclination to evil, or an indifference of propensity to both contraries, it will not be worth my labor to convince such a judgment: only let him consider, whether David could account such a heart to be clean and right, when he prayed (Psalm 119:36), 'Incline mine heart unto thy testimonies, and not to covetousness.'"¹⁴

This radical reorientation of the **heart** is a crucial issue for counseling, and a wonderful comfort. The believer is no longer under the penalty of sin, no longer under the power of sin, and no longer oriented toward sin and its evil desires. His freedom is not to choose between sin and righteousness, but a basic freedom *to choose righteousness*--period. The counselee who undergoes the pull of temptation must remember, being both warned and comforted at the same time, that as a believer he now has the power and freedom to choose what God requires.

Finally, the closing of Romans 8 puts the finishing touches on God's provision for the believer's sanctification. God is at

¹⁴ Marshall, p. 14.

work in all circumstances to conform him to the image of Christ (8:28-29), and His purposes will be completed--the believer will be glorified, indeed (in one sense) *has been glorified* (8:30). The Christian is more than a conqueror (8:37)! **Nothing**--absolutely nothing--is able to separate him from God's eternal love (8:31-39). Even though he slips and falls on that rocky road of sanctification, as all sometimes do, no one can bring charges against God's elect (8:31-34). God has graciously promised him all things--all that is needed for his sanctification--in addition to the initial free gift of salvation (8:32).

HOW Does Sanctification Happen?

At this point, the believer should understand his position in Christ as well as God's gracious provision of power for his ongoing sanctification. But exactly *how* does this marvelous transformation take place? This is the cry of many a struggling believer who desires to live for God.

First, let us look at some definitions--what sanctification is, what it is not--and then some dangers that must be guarded against.

Sanctification--what it is. J. C. Ryle, writing at length about holiness, lists a variety of definitions that will help us get started. Sanctification is "the inseparable consequence of regeneration" and "the invariable result of that vital union with Christ which true faith gives to a Christian," as well as "the only certain evidence of that indwelling of the Holy Spirit which is essential to salvation."¹⁵ He goes on to note the believer's responsibility for pursuing holiness, the importance of scriptural means, the facts of both process and struggle, and the necessity of preparation for heaven.¹⁶ Perhaps even more specific, and helpful in determining the "how to," are his statements about the *habitual* nature of sanctification. It is *habitual* "respect for God's laws," "endeavor to do Christ's will," "desire to live up to the standards of Scripture," and attention to love, submission, forbearance, and the like.¹⁷ It encompasses "being of one mind with God," self-denial, humility, fear of God, and recognition of one's status as a resident alien whose citizenship is in heaven.¹⁸ These basic definitional statements will be helpful as we explore more specifics about seeking holiness.

¹⁵ Ryle, p. 17.

¹⁶ Ryle, p. 18-22.

¹⁷ Ryle, p. 26-27.

¹⁸ Ryle, p. 34-37.

Sanctification--what it is not. Ryle also notes that sanctification is *not* mere talk about religion, fleeting religious emotions, outward formalism, living as a hermit away from the world, or occasional performance of right actions.¹⁹ Here we become aware of some avenues we ought *not* to pursue, such as withdrawing from life, relying on outward good works while neglecting the heart issues, talking about religion but not putting it into practice, or working up an emotional fever. Yet all of these methods have been pursued by various believers with great vigor from time to time. One would do well to look at the very opposite actions: living *in* the world yet not embracing its values, examining one's hearts according to God's Word, putting that Word into disciplined practice, and obeying God's commands regardless of feelings.

Dangers!! There are several, some of them opposite extremes. One of the most obvious is what we call legalism, and what has been formally termed Perfectionism. Berkouwer acknowledges the danger of either "legal rigorism or of overestimating the strength of one's own footing" when taught that "the believer is able completely transcend the pollution of sin."²⁰ The error here, in making sanctification a "moralistic process," is "bound to produce an insidious self-esteem" which is "surely not the holiness of the branches that abide in the vine and so produce much fruit."²¹ Furthermore:

"In true holiness it is not hard to understand that our works cannot even be a part of our righteousness since they are polluted and imperfect."²²

The believer must lay to rest any notions of perfectionistic, slavish adherence to the law as a system of *earning* favor with God, and he must humbly remember that absolute perfection this side of heaven is not a real possibility...even though he must be faithful in his ongoing efforts. He is to abide in Christ, depending heavily on the power of the Holy Spirit. He must trust God to produce in him, over time, those glorious qualities that characterize the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). God is at work in him, transforming him into the image of Christ, and he can rejoice in that knowledge even during temporary setbacks.

¹⁹ Ryle, p. 23-25.

²⁰ Berkouwer, p. 52, 53.

²¹ Berkouwer, p. 129.

²² Berkouwer, p. 130.

Yet there is an opposite error, one of sitting back passively, waiting to be "zapped" and refusing to act at all:

"Those, however, who would preclude self-praise by condemning all activity and commending passivity, are equally in error. They remind us of the man in the parable who buried his talent and who thought that by not doing anything he could escape all the dangers attending the coming of his 'hard' master (Matthew 25:24)."²³

Bridges also cautions to beware of thinking that "living by faith" (Galatians 2:20) means that no effort is required.²⁴ The mere presence of numerous New Testaments exhortations to the believer is evidence that effort, by the power of God's Spirit, **is** required. It simply is not the efforts of the flesh striving alone, which would be horrendously burdensome, but efforts made light by God's empowering.

One other danger is pointed out by Bridges, that of confusing *defeat* with *disobedience*. It is important to distinguish between God's provision and our responsibility.²⁵ The orientation of the heart helps the believer to know whether he is defeated or disobedient, a distinction that is critical in counseling:

"Obedience is oriented toward God; victory is oriented toward self."²⁶

The believer's attitude toward sin must be God-centered rather than self-centered. He must take sin seriously--all sin--not dismissing some sins as excusable because they appear relatively small. Practice of holiness in even the seemingly less important areas prepares the believer to diligently practice obedience in *all* areas of his life.

Habits and discipline. Sin is habitual in nature. Note the phrase "ever-increasing wickedness" in Romans 6:19. Holiness is also habitual. Paul compared growth in godliness with athletic training, exhorting the believer to repeated, faithful practice in order to establish new, godly habits (1 Timothy 4:7, 1 Corinthians 9:25). Godliness is not like instant pudding, but requires

²³ Berkouwer, p. 121-2.

²⁴ Bridges, p. 21.

²⁵ Bridges, p. 14.

²⁶ Bridges, p. 21.

perseverance even in--or especially in--times of struggle. Here Koberle's analogy is helpful:

"When God accepts a man and endows him with the Spirit He does not destroy the evil within him in an instant, but he is like a dead twig that is grafted into a living tree, to grow and quicken to the increasing mastery of evil."²⁷

Sometimes, as Bridges notes, the gap between the *knowledge* of holiness and the *practice* of holiness may actually widen as the believer grows in Christ.²⁸ The believer must never give up:

"The path of obedience in the pursuit of holiness is often contrary to human reason. if we do not have *conviction* in the necessity of obeying the revealed will of God as well as *confidence* in the promises of God, we will never persevere in this difficult pursuit."²⁹

The Inner Man--the Heart. Christian counseling must focus consistently on issues of the inner man, the heart, as well as the outer man and his habits. Due to the deceitfulness of the heart, "we fight with an enemy we cannot fully search out" and must therefore "be careful to let the Holy Spirit do this searching."³⁰ God uses His powerful, living, active Word for this purpose (Hebrews 4:12). It is not the counselor who searches the heart, or even the counselee, but the Holy Spirit. Both must humbly acknowledge the unique role of the Spirit and cooperate with His work in this regard.

The heart, biblically speaking, encompasses the will, the reasoning and understanding of the mind, as well as desires. The relationship of these three is crucial in sanctification. Temptations to sin "reach our wills through either our reason or our emotions."³¹ The desires of the heart bring strong influence to bear on the will. Sin does its evil work largely by appealing to those desires (Ephesians 4:22-24; James 1:14). Meanwhile, the reasoning and understanding of the mind may be deceived, and thus Scripture exhorts the believer to be "transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2). Bridges recommends "frequent

²⁷ Koberle, p. 152.

²⁸ Bridges, p. 107.

²⁹ Bridges, p. 143.

³⁰ Bridges, p. 64, 65.

³¹ Bridges, p. 126-7.

contemplation on the holiness of God and His consequent hatred of sin," in addition to the knowledge of His love, in this process.³² Reverential fear of the Lord is a vital issue, along with sound doctrine. Counselors dare not exalt feelings and desires as the major focus of their work, although the heart must be examined. Sound doctrine must take precedence, blocking sin in its attempts to deceive the mind and gain illegal entrance (remember Romans 6) by way of desires or feeling. The thought life must be carefully guarded, along with what our eyes are allowed to see, which may stimulate sinful thoughts.

Koberle notes the largely *negative* nature of many New Testament commands--"to flee, not to be deceived, not to despise the riches of His grace, not to harden the heart, not to cast aside our confidence, not to turn aside from the living God."³³ This observation, he believes:

"...is intended to tell us that the flesh can never by itself renew and quicken our will or understanding, but it can defy, reject, destroy, and for that reason needs continued warnings, threats, exhortations and coercion just as well as the man who is still under the Law."³⁴

It has been shown earlier that some believe saving faith can actually be lost by failure in sanctification. While we must disagree with this conclusion, it is wise to note the possibility of deception, wherein holiness is greatly hindered in its progress. We must also note, however, that many of these negative commands ("put offs") are accompanied by the positive alternative ("put ons"). Our crucial sanctification passage in Romans 6-8, for example, exhorts the Christian to stop yielding his members to the control of sin (6:12), yielding instead to God and offering his members as instruments of righteousness (6:13, 19).

Motives for Sanctification. We can hardly leave our discussion of the heart without consideration of the believer's motives for pursuing holiness. Godly motives are crucial in sanctification that encompasses both the inner and outer man. Bridges notes Paul's warning (Colossians 2:23) "against misguided and wrongly motivated attempts to control the body that leave our thought lives unrestrained."³⁵ The attitudes and motives of the

³² Bridges, p. 33.

³³ Koberle, p. 153.

³⁴ Koberle, p. 153.

³⁵ Bridges, p. 118.

heart must be examined and confronted. The believer must desire righteousness because it pleases God and accomplishes His will. He no longer lives for himself (2 Corinthians 5:15). He lives in gratitude to God for His gracious gift of salvation, not claiming honor or glory for himself. It is not coercion or compulsion, but privilege and liberty from sin's dominion, that rightly motivate holiness. Self-righteous, self-glorifying, self-confident motives have no place in godliness, but lead only to despair and failure. Marshall puts it well as he considers what it means to be conformed to the image of Christ:

"The image of God...consisteth in an actual bent and propensity of heart to the practice of holiness: not in a mere power of will to choose good and evil."³⁶

Conviction of sin must also be considered, because:

"Without conviction of sin, men may seem to come to Jesus and follow Him for a season, but they will soon fall away and return to the world."³⁷

That conviction is intimately related to godly sorrow over offending the Lord (2 Corinthians 7:10), which leads to repentance and life. It contrasts sharply with the worldly sorrow or remorse which leads to death.

Thus godly motives are essential, and certainly an area for constant attention in Christian counseling. Without holy motives, true holiness is impossible. Man may look at the outward appearance, but God peers into the heart and exposes its inmost intentions and imaginations (1 Samuel 16:7; Hebrews 4:13).

Role of the Law. Justification is never obtained through the keeping of the law. Yet Paul is emphatic in his statements that the law is good, holy, and righteous (Romans 7:12-14). Therefore, what is its proper role in sanctification?

Legalism (improper use of the law) becomes a serious danger:

"...if one assigns independent significance to the law as regulator of the believer's life and abstracts this law from a responsive gratitude to God for being brought out of the house of bondage."³⁸

³⁶ Marshall, p. 13.

³⁷ Ryle, p. 10.

³⁸ Berkouwer, p. 167.

Going on to cite Calvin, he notes that God's law has been inscribed on the hearts of believers, who are now inclined to obey. The law has an important place in giving the Christian a more precise understanding of what God requires and how he can live to please Him.³⁹ The law is something that the believer loves, because he loves God. It is his delight (Psalm 119:24, 92), because it gives him the specific guidance he needs to glorify God. Thus the purpose of the law is not to provide a way of salvation, or a way to gain God's favor, but rather to instruct the Christian on how he can demonstrate his love for Christ. God's law--His eternal Word--must occupy a primary place in Christian counseling. It must not be replaced by the idle speculations of unregenerate men. It must not be set aside for occasional superficial reference, and certainly it is not a weapon to beat the counselee into submission. Rather it is to be received with thanksgiving, because God has not left His children to wander aimlessly like sheep without a shepherd.

Some practical questions. Using God's Word as the standard, Bridges offers four helpful questions to the believer who is seeking holiness:

1. Is it helpful? (1 Corinthians 6:12)
2. Does it bring me under its power? (1 Corinthians 6:12)
3. Does it hurt others? (1 Corinthians 8:13)
4. Does it glorify God? (1 Corinthians 10:31)⁴⁰

This is an excellent example of the practical tools for sanctification that can be developed from faithful study of God's Word, and used in the counseling of others believers.

Sanctification is possible! In the maze of everyday living, and certainly when problems become serious enough for counseling, the believer may be inclined to wonder...is sanctification really possible? We won't be totally sinless on this earth...just how far can we go in achieving holiness? We could hardly do better than the answer Koberle offers:

"To the burning question as to whether sanctification, growth, and constancy are actually possible here on earth there is hardly a clearer answer than the New Testament imperatives that are spoken to congregations existing in a corrupt and perishing world."⁴¹

³⁹ Berkouwer, p. 166.

⁴⁰ Bridges, p. 91.

⁴¹ Koberle, p. 152.

Indeed, the believer's struggle is not in vain! God gives strong exhortations because He has also provided the Christian with power and hope. He has not even spared His own Son! Certainly, He will also provide all that is necessary for continued growth in sanctification (Romans 8:32).

Sanctification and Suffering

Suffering is an inescapable reality in this earthly life, and it is often the fuel that drives a person to seek counsel. Questions of "why?" frequently emerge, sometimes with bitterness toward others or even God. For this and other reasons, it is important to seek out the significance of suffering in the sanctification of the believer.

Scripture refers to God as the One Who works out all things according to the counsel of His will (Ephesians 1:11). He is in control, regardless of circumstances--even under persecution. He has *purposes* for the suffering of His children, and in this knowledge, the believer can have a solid hope through his trials.

Much Scripture addresses the subject of suffering, and it is not reasonable to cover all of it here. However, certain key passages in Romans 5 and 8 are highly relevant.

First, Romans 5:1-5 demonstrates that tribulation produces steadfast endurance, which in turn produces character, which then leads to *hope*. God intends suffering as a part of the process whereby He molds the believer into a person of perseverance, character, and solid hope. It is therefore not in vain that the believer suffers. Romans 8:28-30 clarifies further in its statement that the believer, elected and called according to God's sovereign purposes, is being conformed to the image of Christ. Knowing the goal that God intends--and what God intends He **will** accomplish--the believer has a firm basis for his hope, even when he cannot fathom every specific detail of God's design.

The middle portion of Romans 8 teaches the believer that it is worthwhile to endure his present sufferings because they are not worth comparing to future glory (8:18). Paul builds on this initial point with a description of the bondage of all creation, subjected at the present time to futility, yet destined to one day be liberated. The believer's citizenship is in heaven, and he is called to set his mind on heavenly things rather than the troubles of the present life (Colossians 3:3).

God also uses suffering to discipline and teach the believer, contributing to his sanctification (Hebrews 12:4-12). He may also ordain trials in order that His child be a testimony to the world,

perhaps even leading others to Christ.

In summary, suffering is a key ingredient in sanctification that must not be overlooked.

Reasons for Sanctification

Justification is an act of God's grace which cannot be merited by works or worth or in any other way. Since the believer's eternal destiny is now assured, why pursue sanctification? Or if it is pursued, why emphasize it? Is there any urgency, and if so, why?

Sanctification is indeed of the utmost importance. While it does not cause justification, it does please and honor God, and it is not an option, afterthought, or something of minor importance that can be postponed indefinitely. Since sanctification is at the heart of Christian counseling, the reasons for pursuing it should be made clear at the outset.

Ryle discusses the importance of holiness at length, and the reasons he notes are worth repeating. Sanctification is *evidence* of our faith in Christ, our love for Him, and the fact that we belong to God as His children.⁴² We should add that it is also evidence of our gratitude to God for his gracious gift of eternal life. In fact, it is evidence that we have indeed received that gift. It proves that our salvation is real.

Ryle also notes that Scripture commands holiness.⁴³ The many New Testament exhortations directed to believers leave no doubt! Loving the Lord and His Word, this alone is reason enough to pursue sanctification with eager desire.

Another important reason is that sanctification equips the believer to do good to others, to love others as the second great commandment requires.⁴⁴ Sanctification is not merely for the benefit of the person sanctified, but it benefits others as well. In addition, it bears witness to others of what God can do!

Finally, sanctification is God's grand and final purpose for the believer.⁴⁵ It would hardly be reasonable to continue a sinful

⁴² Ryle, p. 40-1.

⁴³ Ryle, p. 39.

⁴⁴ Ryle, p. 41.

⁴⁵ Ryle, p. 39.

lifestyle here, having little regard for holiness, yet expect an instant transformation in heaven. The believer must consistently progress toward what he will one day become in glory.

Results of Sanctification

As the believer seeks holiness, what results can he expect here on earth? In Christian counseling, what are the signs that a counselee is truly on the road to sanctification?

Most importantly, the Christian should be growing more like Christ. Berkouwer calls the imitation of Christ the very essence of sanctification, not simply one form of it.⁴⁶ Bridges reminds us that "God has not called us to be like those around us...He has called us to be like Himself."⁴⁷ This is consistent with Romans 8:28-30 and 12:1-2, along with many other passages. The believer is called to be transformed by the renewing of his mind, and *not* conformed to the world. He should be increasingly aware of the radical difference between the standards and practices of the world, and his calling as a Christian.

Sanctification also results in a growing humility. Christ humbled Himself when He became a man, and He humbled Himself at the cross. His followers must imitate His humility. Berkouwer puts it this way:

"...sanctification as increased immersion in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ must result in a deeper sense of unworthiness."⁴⁸

He also warns of the danger of seeing sanctification as one's own achievement--a danger that does not exist in justification, which is pure grace.⁴⁹ The person who is truly soaking in God's Word and seeking to live what God commands, however, will be humbled as he recognizes the gap between his knowledge and his efforts. He will also grow in gratitude to God for saving him!

This growing sense of need is likely to also result in some inner conflict, a conflict unlike anything experienced by the unbeliever. The unbeliever is spiritually dead. But with the entrance of the Holy Spirit comes conviction of sin and a growing

⁴⁶ Berkouwer, p. 135.

⁴⁷ Bridges, p. 26.

⁴⁸ Berkouwer, p. 129.

⁴⁹ Berkouwer. p. 123.

desire to please and serve God. Since sanctification takes place progressively, rather than instantly, there will be struggle whenever the believer does fall into sin. This can certainly happen in counseling, where one often encounters struggles with sin! The inner conflict, painful though it is, may be regarded as a positive indication that the believer is growing in awareness and conviction of sin, and that he indeed has the indwelling Spirit. At the same time, of course, the struggle must be viewed from the perspective that God has broken the enslaving power of sin. It isn't a valid reason to *remain* trapped.

The fact of struggle, as the believer grows, ought to be accompanied by an increasing hatred of sin, as God hates sin. While guarding against self-righteousness, he should be acutely aware that while he lives *in* the world, he is not *of* the world.

One very positive and visible result of sanctification is service to others--good works that honor God. While justification has nothing to do with works, sanctification involves works that are the fruit of the believer's union with Christ and abiding in Him. His service to God brings glory to Him, evidences the genuineness of his saving faith, and leads others to Christ. Such works are not a reason for self-congratulations or boasting, but another basis for thanksgiving to God because He is the one that has graciously provided--first salvation, then the power to obey and serve.

This list is not intended to be exhaustive, but only to scratch the surface. However, the discussion would not be complete without mentioning joy. Bridges puts this well:

"The Christian living in disobedience also lives devoid of joy and hope. But when he begins to understand that Christ has delivered him from the reign of sin, when he begins to see that he is united to Him Who has all power and authority, and that it is possible to walk in obedience, he begins to have hope. And as he hopes in Christ, he begins to have joy.

In the strength of this joy he begins to overcome the sins that so easily entangle him. He then finds that the joy of a holy walk is infinitely more satisfying than the fleeting pleasures of sin."⁵⁰

"Jesus links obedience and joy in a cause and effect manner; that is, joy results from obedience."⁵¹

This is important to remember in Christian counseling, where joy

⁵⁰ Bridges, p. 156.

⁵¹ Bridges, p. 154.

may initially be lacking! Emotions are not the first line of attack. Mere relief of negative emotions may only be a short-cut approach that hinders sanctification over the long haul. But the counselee can take hope, and he can *consider* it joy (James 1:2), because God promises that joy does result from living a righteous life by the power of His Spirit.

The Grand Finale: Sanctification Completed!

Whatever God purposes, He **will** accomplish! Paul wrote a verse to the Thessalonians that gives a wonderful assurance to the believer that his sanctification will one day be fully completed:

"May God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The One who calls you is faithful and He will do it."
(1 Thessalonians 5:23)

Note the repetition of completeness, and the assurance ("He **will** do it") of complete sanctification on that glorious day in the future, "at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." Warfield calls this the "certain heritage of every Christian man,"⁵² and acknowledges gratefully that "the accomplishment of this our perfection...does not hang on our weak endeavors"⁵³ but is God's gift. Certainly this is a promise worth remembering--worth committing to memory! Romans 8:30 confirms the hope, as Paul teaches that those God predestined, He also called, justified, and *glorified*. Note the past (aorist) tense. God's purpose is not subject to uncertainties, even though we do not presently see the full and final results.

Meanwhile, the believer seeking holiness is exhorted to press on toward this certain final goal:

"Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."
(Philippians 3:12-14)

⁵² Warfield, p. 462.

⁵³ Warfield, p. 461.

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