

Sanctification: A Short Study

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The description of mankind's basic nature, as given in the Scriptures, is that of depravity. Following Adam and Chavah's fall into sin and rebellion against their Creator, mankind was plunged into that same rebellion. The proof of this, as noted by Paul in Romans 5, was that death passed to all mankind. The penalty for sin, "you will surely die," is passed to all subsequent generations, proving that all were born as sinners (Rom 5:12). This was not an innovation of Paul, but is noted throughout the Tanach (Gen 6:5; 8:21; Ps 51:5; 58:3; 143:2; Ecc 9:3; Jer 17:9; Job 15:14-16; Is 64:6). All who are related to Adam participate in this generational depravity: children are born with a sinful nature—a natural bent to sin. Thus Paul writes in Eph 2 that we all are "by nature children of wrath," meaning that we all are born under the penalty of sin, i.e., the wrath of God.

This depravity does not describe the extent of our sin, as though we all sin as much as possible. But it means that 1) we are sinners by nature, 2) that we are unable to change our basic nature, and 3) that we are unable to seek and find the truth about God. In short, we are "dead in our trespasses and sins" (Eph 2:1) from the time of our birth.

This essential nature of all mankind means that left to ourselves, we have no hope of salvation, no hope of righteousness, and no hope of finding God. Apart from the sovereign and gracious act of God in coming to us and changing us, we are "without God and without hope in the world" (Eph 2:12). This means that even when the gospel is presented to us, we have no ability to receive it, or even to understand it. Since our basic nature is that of sinful depravity, when we are confronted with the gospel, we consider it foolishness (1Cor 1:23; 2:14). Left to himself, mankind will inevitably and always be unresponsive to the gospel—it is, in every way, contrary to his basic nature. Thus, the only way that anyone ever responds to the gospel in repentance and faith is if God first comes (by His Spirit) and brings life where there is spiritual death. Before the goodnews of God's salvation can be received, there must be an awakening of the spiritual "eyes" and "ears." The story of Lazarus (John 11) may be used as a fitting illustration of the spiritual awakening in the process of salvation. Consider the following:

1. Lazarus was dead, beyond any hope of living (from a 1st Century Jewish perspective, the body began to decay beginning on the fourth day after a person died).
2. This meant that he could not hear the words of Yeshua. Dead men do not hear the words of the living.
3. Yeshua presents a command to the dead Lazarus: “Lazarus, come forth.”
4. At the command of Yeshua, Lazarus comes forth from the cave which was his tomb. How did he hear the command of Yeshua?
5. The only conclusion that can be reached is that prior to the giving of the command, God had already brought life to Lazarus. He had already been awakened from his “sleep” in order to hear the command of Yeshua.

This illustrates the manner in which the command of the gospel is heard by the sinner who is, like Lazarus, dead in sin. If a sinner responds to the command of the gospel (repent and believe, cf. Acts 20:21), it is because God, by His sovereign act, as already awakened the heart of the sinner to respond to the gospel. This is why the Scriptures represent both repentance and faith as a gift from God, not something that man can manufacture on his own (Acts 5:31; 2Tim 2:25; Eph 2:8).

This reality has a significant impact upon the whole issue of evangelism. Our duty as servants of Yeshua is simply to give forth the message of the gospel. It is God’s work to open the eyes and ears, and to prepare the heart to receive the gospel. Apart from this sovereign work of God, the gospel will never be effective to bring about salvation. Thus, the manner in which the gospel is presented must take this basic fact into consideration. We do not convince the sinner to accept the gospel, as though if we are good “salesmen” we will save those who are lost. The presentation of the gospel is not a marketing scheme to reach the masses. The presentation of the gospel must be in giving the message as God intends, with a reliance upon Him to bring life where there is only death. This means that we do not try to make the gospel into something that will be easily received and non-offensive. We do not “dress up” the gospel or diminish its true message in order to make it palatable for the sinner. The message of the gospel is offensive to the depraved soul because it requires the sinner to admit his depravity and rely fully on God’s mercy. In short, the gospel requires the rebellious heart of man to humbly fall before God and plead for His mercy.

But what occurs when God, in His mercy, does awaken the soul to receive the gospel? According to the Scriptures, there is a radical change that occurs: the heart of stone is removed, and a heart of flesh is put in its place (Ezek 11:19f). The old man is crucified and the new man is recreated after the image of God (Rom 6; Col 3). The heart that by nature is bent toward sin and against God is replaced by a heart that longs for righteousness and willingly submits to God. This radical change can only be described as a new birth—a starting over, a person that is remade from the inside out. Moreover, the Spirit of God comes to dwell within the awakened soul and becomes the leading force in the life of the new believer (Rom 8:14). This means that the depravity with which a person is born is removed, and he or she becomes able to respond to God and to His Spirit. What is more, the will that had rebellion as its primary characteristic is replaced with a will that longs to please God. The believer “con-curs with the Torah of God in the inward man” (Rom 7:22).

This is the beginning of sanctification—the process by which the redeemed sinner is more and more conformed to be like Yeshua. However, this is not without a struggle (Gal 5:17). Even though the basic depravity is removed, and a new disposition is created within the heart of the believer, there remains the sinful nature, the ability to sin, and even the natural inclination to sin if one allows the sinful nature to rule. The volition or will has been changed, so that the believer desires to obey God. But the struggle comes in that the remaining sinful nature desires to return to the former way of rebellion.

We might use the illustration of a long-term habit. If a person is employed at a certain factory for 25 years, and then suddenly changes jobs and works at a different location, he may find himself naturally driving to the old factory. He had done so every day for 25 years, and the habit is hard to break. His intention is not to drive there, but if he is not consciously intending to drive to his new job, and if he simply allows his mind to be governed by the old patterns, he finds himself heading to the old place of employment without thinking.

This may illustrate the situation of the believer. Since the sinful nature is so ingrained within, if the believer is not consciously pursuing the ways of righteousness which is his true desire, and if he simply allows his actions and thoughts to be governed by his “old ways,” he will find himself drawn to sin as before. Therefore, the

life of sanctification is one in which there is a continual and consistent conscious effort to put into practice the things of the Spirit. This is precisely why the life of Torah is so vital to the duty of sanctification. God, in His mercy, has given to us the revelation of His Son and of His will for us. He has instructed us in the way we should walk. And He has given us a life filled with mitzvot which constantly aid us and remind us of who we are in Him, and how He intends us to live. The reminders of tzitzit, Shabbat, mezzuot, kashrut, moedim—all of these are constant symbols of our life in Him, and are aids to our sanctification.

This is because sanctification is not a monergistic work of God, but is synergistic. That is, our sanctification is a partnership with God, not a “rely and relax” enterprise. We are not “funnels” through which God pours His life, but we are renewed creatures, recreated after the image of God, and given the ability to genuinely pursue righteousness. Thus sanctification is a partnership: God working in us, enabling us to live out the salvation to which we have been called. We must engage in the process of sanctification—of setting our minds upon things above, of putting to death the deeds of the flesh, of disciplining ourselves to learn and live out the truths of God’s word, His Torah. While our rebirth was the work of God alone (we were dead in our sins—what could we do in terms of bringing ourselves to life!), our sanctification is a partnership with God to grow in holiness. Surely He has set Himself to make this an inevitability (Phil 1:6), but in the mystery of the divine-human cooperative, He has recreated us in such a way that He has enabled us to work together with Him to bring about holiness in our lives.

Whereas before we were born again, we had only the evil inclination, after our rebirth, we were given a good inclination, a true desire for righteousness that is more powerful than the inclination to sin connected to our sinful nature. As such, with the power of the Spirit Who applies the truths of God word to our lives, we are able to overcome the evil inclination and live lives of righteousness unto God. This is our calling: to be conformed to the image of Yeshua. And this is our eternal destiny, for when we see Him, we will be like Him, for we will see Him as He is (1Jn 3:2).