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**If Salvation is Secure,  
Why Should We Live Holy Lives?**

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Salvation is a truly miraculous event, but it is not an event without consequence and continual effect. The one who has been saved by the grace of God is not only called to recognize the grace of salvation from sin, but to seek to please the one who saved the sinner.

Sanctification, or the process by which a believer becomes more like Christ, is both a goal and a reality for the Christian. We as believers are encouraged and commanded by God to seek higher levels of holiness for his own glory. On the other hand, that grace that saved the Christian does not leave the Christian upon salvation but changes him irrevocably. There is a new reality to the new Christian; he is a new being.

Following the style which the great apostle Paul himself followed, what sanctification is will be discussed first, then what God has done to ensure sanctification. Second will be discussed the impact of these doctrines should have on our thinking and our desire to please God in all aspects of life, and various reasons why Christians ought to be obedient. But first, a definition.

**What Is Sanctification?**

The term “sanctification” is defined a number of different ways. Millard Erickson describes it as follows:

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Sanctification is the continuing work of God in the life of the believer, making him or her actually holy. By “holy” here is meant “bearing the actual likeness to God.” Sanctification is a process by which one’s moral condition is brought into conformity with one’s legal status before God.<sup>2</sup> Grudem defines it by saying that “Sanctification is a progressive work of God and man that makes us more and more free from sin and like Christ in our actual lives.”<sup>3</sup>

Both of these definitions hit the basic idea of sanctification, that it is a process by which a believer’s moral behavior is increasingly conformed more closely to God’s desires. Throughout this article this understanding of sanctification is assumed.

### **The Work of God in the Heart of Man**

Sanctification does not begin in man’s own will but in the will and plan of God by His Spirit in the New Covenant. These are the foundational ideas that we must recognize before we have any hope of understanding how and why a Christian does follow and should follow the will of God.

### **Old Testament Promises**

Frequently the prophets of the Old Testament look forward to a time of renewal for the people of God. One very important thing that they looked for was the dawning of a new day in which God would bring obedience to the stray children of Israel. Two of the most commonly cited passages are from Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Jeremiah declares this promise about the future of Israel:

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My

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<sup>2</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 980.

<sup>3</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 746.

people. “They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”<sup>4</sup>

Ezekiel looks forward to a similar grand restoration of the people of God:

“For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. You will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God.”<sup>5</sup>

They look toward the general restoration, but more specifically, they look toward the spiritual and moral reformation of Israel. The prophets realized that it was the sin of the nation that was causing their problems and that the only real solution was for God to cause His people to be obedient. “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it.” Indeed, He says “I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.” But this was something they still looked forward to. When will it be fulfilled? Or has it been fulfilled already?

### **The Church As Recipients Of The New Covenant**

At the time of Jesus’ ministry, the people of Israel still lived in a state of “exile”, i.e., they were still being held under the judgment of God because of their sin. Their nation was not free as it should be, nor was a descendant of David sitting on the throne, reigning and ruling over the surrounding Gentile nations.

It was into this time that Jesus came and offered hope to Israel. We find Jesus doing this to a part of the remnant gathered around him in His last supper. Luke recounts the event:

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<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah 31:31-33, NASB.

<sup>5</sup> Ezekiel 36:24-28, NASB.

And after he had taken the cup, he gave thanks and said, “Take this and distribute it amongst yourselves, for I say to you, I will in now way drink the fruit of the vine from now until the kingdom of God comes.” And taking the bread, having given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them saying “This is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And likewise, taking the cup after they had eaten, saying “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, poured out for you.”<sup>6</sup>

N.T. Wright has ably pointed out what this action of Jesus meant. First, like all passover meals, this event spoke of leaving Egypt, i.e., the release from bondage and exile. Second, this covenant renewal and release from bondage, this new exodus, was happening in and through Jesus Himself.<sup>7</sup> Jesus was not just having another passover meal, as anybody would recognize. Through the rich symbolism of the event he was saying so much more than mere words could say alone. Just as in the exodus from Egypt God brought about a new state for the descendants of Abraham, so also in this new exodus God would again do the same.

This new exodus is what Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the other prophets were looking forward to when they spoke of God bringing a new covenant and cleansing the people from their sin, by forgiving their past evils, creating a new heart within them, and giving them a new Spirit (His own, as it turned out) so that they would obey the Lord. And this fulfillment came in the establishment of the church. As Jesus himself said to Peter, “and upon this rock I will build my church,”<sup>8</sup> meaning that upon the ministry of him and the other disciples Christ would build his church, to these disciples that were present at the Lord’s Supper. Or as Paul says, “God made us adequate as servants of a new covenant.”<sup>9</sup>

So in the establishment of the church, God established his renewal of Israel. In the beginning the church was made up only of the remnant of believing Jews, i.e., those that recognized the work of Jesus as the work of God. As time progressed Gentiles were brought into the covenant by the grace of God (or “grafted in” in the words of

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 22:17-20. Unless otherwise noted, the translation is my own.

<sup>7</sup> N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 556-7.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 16:18.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:6.

Paul in Rom 9). It is in this covenant that the church now stands, and in its effects we see why a consistent measure of holiness is event possible for the child of God to achieve.

### **The Practical Effects Of the New Covenant**

One of the most significant reasons for the establishment of a new covenant is to create a different kind of people, i.e., people that obey. This obedience is Spirit wrought and empowered.

In Romans 8:3-4 Paul says clearly that those who have the Spirit do in fact fulfill the commands of God. Though the law (under the old covenant) was unable to bring this about, God brings it about through those who walk by the Spirit.

For the inability of the Law, in that it was weak through the flesh, God accomplished by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and concerning sin he judged it in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

In context, who is it that walks by the Spirit? It is those to whom the Spirit has been given, Christians. So then those who are members of the New Covenant do in fact do what the old covenant members could not do adequately: they please their God by their obedience.

The apostle John in his first epistle made it very clear that the Christian does indeed follow the commands of God:

And in this we know that we have come to know Him: If we keep His commandments. The man who says, “I know him” and does not keep His commandments, that man is a liar and the truth is not in him! But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God has been perfected in him; in this we know that we are in Him. The one who claims to be in Him ought to live in the same way that He lived.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> 1 John 2:3-6. It is commonly recognized that here John is speaking in general terms. He is not holding up an absolute standard of perfection that true Christians must live up to, but is speaking in general terms, that the true Christian will be characterized by obedience. Also, this idea is consistent with the use of the present tense participle throughout the epistle to describe the believer's Christian life. Often a present tense participle will imply the idea of a continuous action, which is the idea here. It is obvious that John does not believe that all Christians are perfect, however; that would contradict a number of statements in this letter.

This is in contrast, of course, to the one who is characterized by sin rather than obedience. In the context of 1 John, the one who does not know God is the one who disobeys God as a lifestyle, hates his brother, and denies that Jesus has come in the flesh.

So then, the church has received the new covenant in fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament. In realization of this very thing God has put His Spirit in us and that Spirit brings about obedience in the covenant people of God.

### **Why We Should Live Holy Lives**

Those who have been given the Spirit of God have a firm foundation for obedience and that foundation is the one laid by the Spirit in our hearts and minds. At times we might feel a tension between these two ideas, that on the one hand we *ought* to live a holy life, but on the other hand that we *will* live a holy life. It is a strange tension but it is not one unfamiliar to the apostles themselves. For example, this can be seen in the passage from 1 John that we previously examined. Though John was clear that the child of God would in fact be obedient, he was quick to mention in encouragement that “The one who claims to be in Him out to live in the same way that He lived.” Though we know that the Spirit will bring obedience in every true child of God, that does not mean that we should not seek encouragement to do so. And there are many reasons to seek greater levels of obedience.

One of these reasons is that it is quite obvious that we are not all perfect. Though the coming of this New Covenant brings obedience in the people of God, in the New Testament there is no assumption that perfection would come before the glorification of all believers, not to mention the obvious fact that perfection has not been grasped by the church. So what things can we do or what can we keep in mind to help us move forward into greater levels of obedience?

### **Because It Brings Reward**

A very appropriate place to start is with the exhortations of Jesus. One important motivation that Jesus employed was the motivation to reap great rewards. Take, for example, Jesus’ exhortations in 6:1-18. Several times in this periscope Jesus exhorts for the sake of reward. After a number of statements, he says “And your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (v. 4, 6, 18). Indeed, the Son of Man will come back and “will reward each man according to what he has done” (16:27). This idea can be found in the other synoptics as well (Mark 9:41; Luke 6:35). Similar ideas can also be found in the writings of the epistles. Take, for example, what Paul says in 1 Cor 3:14.

Speaking of the works a man does in his life, he says “If someone’s work remains (after having been purified with fire) that he has built, he will receive a reward.” John similarly speaks in 2 John 1:8.

That Christians are to seek to be obedient because of future reward is obvious. It is not selfish to think in this way; if that were true, in Jesus’ exhortation to seek reward even He would be leading us astray! The Christian should seek greater obedience to get a greater reward<sup>11</sup>

### **Because It Brings Personal Fulfillment**

It should not be surprising that there should be a connection between the joy and fulfillment in a believer’s life and obedience to the will of God. After all, when one becomes a Christian he is changed in the inner man. The old man is slain and new life is breathed into the believer. And the Spirit lives in the man, pushing and nudging him toward greater faithfulness. How could the true child of God not suffer when he sins?

Perhaps the best example of this is King David’s lament in Psalm 51. Though he lived before the blessing of the New Covenant, he is still an appropriate example. Because of the sin that he committed, he was a very miserable man. He described how he felt and said that his “bones were crushed” (v.8). And he longed for the sweet feeling of forgiveness (“Let me again experience the joy of your deliverance!”),<sup>12</sup> and knew satisfaction could not be gained without it. The psalmist even began the Psalms with this clearly in mind. “How *happy* is the one who does not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand in the pathway with sinners, or sit in the assembly of arrogant fools!”<sup>13</sup> The principle is clear.

Is personal happiness and fulfillment something to be desired? Of course it is, because it is something that God Himself would want us to have. And we can have it through obedience and trust in God. With disobedience comes misery, but with obedience comes happiness.

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<sup>11</sup> For further reading that makes this point very clear, take a look at John Piper’s *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Sisters: Multnomah, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Verse 12, NET Bible.

<sup>13</sup> Psalm 1:1, NET Bible. The italics are my own.

### Because There Is A Judgment

If the prospect of reward or personal fulfillment is not great enough, let anyone who would take the name of Christ note this, that there is a judgment coming. As Paul himself says,

(God) will repay to each according to his deeds. On the one hand, to those who in persevering in good works seek glory, honor, and immortality, he will give eternal life. But to those who out of selfish ambition and disobedience do not obey the truth but obey unrighteousness, wrath and anger.<sup>14</sup>

This is different than what we looked at before. That was concerned with further reward for those who are of God, but this is something different. This has to do with whether one receives eternal life or the ultimate wrath of God. The Scriptures are very clear that those who do not in fact seek the things of God will not be given eternal life. Indeed, when one does evil deeds he shows his true nature.<sup>15</sup> The author of Hebrews teaches that no one who lives to spurn the grace of God is given any hope; their outlook is very bleak.<sup>16</sup> Which is, of course, very consistent with a major message in the epistle of James? Can a faith that does not produce works save a man? Of course not!<sup>17</sup>

There is a kind of teaching in the church that ignores the necessity of a “believer’s” obedience to God. Often it is excused if a man confesses Christ at some point but later turns and lives his life in rebellion against the Lord Jesus Christ. Some will appeal to good Protestant doctrine that affirms the security of the child of God to defend the person’s salvation. However, the true Reformed doctrine of eternal security is not meant to be a comfort to the wicked, but an encouragement to the believer. In reality, those who live in disobedience ought to be warned of the judgment to come.

As Peter exhorted, “Make your calling and election sure.”<sup>18</sup> How does one do that? If the surrounding verses are examined, this

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<sup>14</sup> Romans 2:6-8.

<sup>15</sup> Titus 1:16.

<sup>16</sup> Hebrews 10:26-31 is a terrifying example of what the New Testament authors believed the fate of someone who failed to follow Christ would be. Clearly, those who refuse to follow Christ would fall under the condemnation of this verse, and for them it will certainly be “a terrifying to fall into the hands of the living God.”

<sup>17</sup> James 2:14ff.

<sup>18</sup> 2 Peter 1:10.



discussion is seen to be in the context of a contrast between those who follow God faithfully and those who are characterized by disobedience. Those who would name the wonderful name of Christ ought to seek greater holiness, because only through obedience can a man have any certainty that his own calling and election is sure.

### **Because Christ is King**

Another reason to be obedient is that the promises of ages past have finally come to fruition; Jesus the Christ is King. On the day of Pentecost Peter addressed those listening and proclaimed a very controversial thing:

This Jesus God raised up, and we are all witnesses of it. So then, exalted to the right hand of God, and having received the promise of the Holy Spirit from the Father, he has poured out what you both see and hear. For David did not ascend into heaven, but he himself says, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.”’

Therefore let all the house of Israel know beyond a doubt that God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Christ.<sup>19</sup>

This is no mere statement that Jesus was raised from the dead (though it certainly was, which is controversial enough). This is a declaration that Jesus is the true descendent of David and that God has fulfilled the Davidic promise to have an eternal King through this Jesus. What is the proper response to such a claim? Peter himself said it. “Repent, and each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>20</sup> Disobedience and rebellion are never proper responses to a newly crowned king. Only repentance for deeds done wrong.

This truth provides an excellent foundation for the last. If Christ has been made King and God is putting all his enemies under his feet, how could there be no judgment? What kind of king would be satisfied with a wanton rebel in his kingdom? This is why the Spirit of God is given, as we discussed before. The King wants an obedient people, so he gives them a Spirit that will bring it about.

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<sup>19</sup> Acts 2:32-36, NET Bible.

<sup>20</sup> Acts 2:38, NET Bible.

So then, let the Christian live a life of obedience. For the long awaited King has arrived and he reigns. Let all fear his anger and follow him in obedience because he rules in righteousness.

**Because It Pleases and Brings Glory To God**

If for no other reason, we should be obedient to God because it brings Him glory. As our Lord said, “Let your light shine before men so that they might see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”<sup>21</sup> The reason why the Israelites were punished by God was their disobedience. So, God promised a New Covenant that would solve the problem of a disobedient covenant people. God has always desired to show His glory, and one of His means is through the obedience of His children. This was one reason why Jesus was concerned that we let our light shine, that is, let our obedience to God be made clear, so that God could be seen as having brought a wonderful work into our lives. This same idea was later taught by Peter:

Dear friends, I urge you as foreigners and exiles to keep away from fleshly desires that do battle against the soul, and maintain good conduct among the non-Christians, so that though they malign you as wrongdoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God when he appears.<sup>22</sup>

Is it not most appropriate for the Christian to live in such a way to bring honor to God? Man will often seek to honor a family member or friend, or perhaps even a stranger who does something very good for him. Should not this same motivation constantly be on the Christian’s mind as he lives his life? What can any mortal man do that would be greater than what God does in the life of a man? Should we not honor God more than men?

This is the only appropriate thing to do. Christians ought to seek obedience, for it is something that honors God. Anything less is too little.

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<sup>21</sup> Matthew 5:16.

<sup>22</sup> 1 Peter 2:11-12, NET Bible.

### Living A Holy Life

We have so far discussed that we will be obedient because of the promise of the New Covenant, and that we should be holy because of reward, fulfillment, judgment, the kingship of Christ, and it brings glory to God. An important practice to engage in to help in this is the exercise of meditation on God and His revelation. As the Israelites were about to enter the Promise Land, Joshua commanded them that “This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but *you shall meditate* on it day and night, *so that you may be careful to do* according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.”<sup>23</sup> Later the psalmist repeated this idea: “*In my heart I store up your words, so I might not sin* against you.”<sup>24</sup> Both Joshua and the psalmist knew that focus upon the revelation of God would enable the child of God to live a life of greater obedience. But the greatest thing on which to meditate is God Himself, whom we can see through the revelation He has given us. The psalmist thought as much: “I have asked the LORD for one thing—this is what I desire! I want to live in the LORD’s house all the days of my life, so I can gaze at the splendor of the LORD and contemplate in his temple.”<sup>25</sup> To meditate on God is a truly blessed, and important, exercise.

Let us end with a brief discussion of something Paul said in Romans 6.

For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, we will certainly also be united with him in the likeness of his resurrection. We know that our old man was crucified with him so that the body of sin would no longer dominate us, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. (For someone who has died has been freed from sin.)...So you too consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its desires, and do not present your members to sin as instruments to be used for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who are alive from the dead and your members to God as instruments to be used for righteousness.

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<sup>23</sup> Joshua 1:8, NASB. The italics are my own.

<sup>24</sup> Psalm 119:11, NET Bible. The italics are my own.

<sup>25</sup> Psalm 27:4, NET Bible.

As Paul says, we should “consider” ourselves to be dead to sin but alive to God. The old nature has died; the new has come in our new life in Christ. This is a small picture of much of what we discussed. God has indeed given us new life in the New Covenant. In fact, as Paul says, “sin would no longer dominate us” because God has given us His Spirit, and the Spirit causes us to follow in obedience. But we also are not ignorant; we know of our own ability to sin despite the work of God in our life for the better. But neither was Paul. He held this tension firmly in mind, for in just a few verses he can say “the body of sin would no longer dominate us” yet can also exhort “Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its desires...” And so we try our best to honor God in our lives, and as we discussed, there are so many reasons.

Let us meditate on what God has done for us in the New Covenant. Let us meditate on why we should obey: reward to us, fulfillment for us, fear of judgment, Christ is king, and it brings glory to our Father in heaven. Strive to be everything that God has intended you to be. Do not let sin reign and rule in you, for God has given you His own Spirit.