

# Herald

**ANTIPAS**

*"Antipas, My faithful witness" (Rev 2:13)*

No 11

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## ***SANCTIFICATION: WATERMARK OF GENUINE CHRISTIANITY***

*Part 2 : Some basic principles*

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When the New Testament speaks about the sanctification of Christians, it does so in *two* ways. Firstly, it speaks of sanctification as a *completed matter* (see AH 10). Secondly, it speaks about a *continuing, progressive process*. This is what we now focus on.

*Continuing sanctification is the process in which a believer, between new birth and death, as a justified sinner, is increasingly redeemed from the depravity of sin and is further renewed in heart, thought, will and behaviour according to the image of God and in conformity with the nature of Christ.*

Actually, we should keep speaking of continuing or progressive sanctification – to distinguish it from sanctification's completed component. But, for the sake of convenience, we will, from now on, speak only of *sanctification*.

### **THE AUTHOR OF SANCTIFICATION**

☐ God Himself is the only source of all holiness. A creature can as little bring forth holiness as life – and how much less a fallen creature. Hardly can a greater delusion possess a person, hardly can he exhibit a more offensive presumption before his Creator, than in the attitude that he can so elevate himself that he qualifies to live eternally in perfect communion with the thrice-holy One. This is the reason why God so detests all man-made religion.

*As is definitive sanctification, so is*

*progressive sanctification, from A to Z, a matter of God's free grace.*

All three persons of the Triune God are involved in the sanctification of believers. It is the will and work of the *Father* (Ro 9:22-24; Eph 1:3-5; 1 Thess 5:23; 2 Tim 1:8-9; Heb 10:10 and preceding verses; 13:20-21). Further, the New Testament is packed with references to the necessity of *Christ's* mediatory work for every aspect of sanctification. And finally it is the *Holy Spirit* who actualizes sanctification in the believer (Ro 8:12-14; 15:16; 2 Cor 3:3; Gal 5:16-22; 2 Thess 2:13; 1 Pet 1:2). Because the Spirit is the direct agent of sanctification, there is even a certain emphasis in the New Testament on Him as the Sanctifier.

☐ While God, and He alone, is the Author of sanctification, it is equally true that *believers co-operate completely in this process*. This does not mean that man is independently involved, so that sanctification is partly God's work and partly man's. It means that God works in a person in such a manner that he, as a rational being, is consciously and strenuously involved in the process. *Therefore, as far as my sanctification is concerned, I am completely and unavoidably responsible and accountable!*

The co-operation between God and man comes to the fore explicitly in Philipians 2:12-13: "... work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to

his good purpose" (NIV). (Cf. also Col 1:28-29.)

Note that God not only gives believers the *desire*, but also works in them *to work*.

Amongst the promises of Ezekiel 36 regarding the New Covenant, is God's promise: "And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws" (v.27, NIV). There is thus not a particle of sanctification in my life for which I can take any credit.

Nevertheless, *it is I myself who must work out my salvation* – and that with fear and trembling. Let no one rest under any illusion: genuine sanctification is a day-by-day battle. This co-operation demands exertion, commitment, discipline and perseverance. For everyone who is serious about his calling to live a holy life before the face of the Lord, his heart – the world of his thoughts, desires, motives and attitudes – is a continual battle field. It is *here* that victory must be obtained – because whoever rules my heart will necessarily determine every expression of my life.

An illustration may help to convey something of this mysterious co-operation. Wind supplies all the energy whenever a windmill pumps water out of a borehole into a dam. Yet it is the creaking windmill which pumps, not the wind. Without the wind (by the way, in both Hebrew and Greek the word for "Spirit" also means "wind") not a millilitre of water will land in the dam – but neither without the windmill.

As in the case of sanctification, this is not an instance of a fifty-fifty partnership. There is one hundred percent involvement from both sides.

It is extremely important to remember that the Holy Spirit, in the outworking of my redemption, and therefore also in my sanctification, works through *the means of grace*. The Lord has provided certain channels through which His grace and blessing flow into the lives of His children. *He thus works through means*. And it is our responsibility to be faithful in using these means. It's like waterpoints in a refugee camp – anyone who is too lazy to carry water will perish from thirst.

The means of grace can be divided into two groups.

There are the *personal or private means of grace* – especially involvement with God's Word, and prayer in the inner chamber. Every true believer knows how dependent he is on these.

There are the *corporate or public means of grace*. These concern the life of the local church, specifically the preached Word, corporate prayer, the ministry of godly elders, the fellowship of the saints, and the sacraments. Everyone who is part of a living congregation will know that these things are worth more than all the treasures of the world.

□ This balanced approach to sanctification helps us to avoid two pitfalls in relation to sanctification. The one misconception says, simply stated, *you must do everything*, and

the other, *you must do nothing*.

On the one hand, it is forgotten that sanctification is a gift of God's grace, and that it is worked by His Holy Spirit in His children. The believer is therefore largely left to himself.

This error finds expression in radicalistic preaching which seldom proclaims the mighty acts of God in Christ, but regularly leaves the impression that only the most committed will make it to heaven.

This leads to a legalism which adds all kinds of man-made prescriptions to Christ's merits. Hand in hand with this goes an exclusivism that looks down on those who are "less committed".

The opposite distortion also raises its head before long. People who cannot keep up become despondent and give up. Afflicted by feelings of inferiority and unsure of their salvation, their Christianity becomes a misery. Their prayers largely involve the confession of sin and, stripped of confidence, their witness is silenced.

It is obvious that this error and its bitter fruits lead least of all to genuine sanctification; rather the contrary. "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Ro 14:17, NIV). Besides, someone who is in despair can hardly mean anything in the Lord's service.

On the other hand, it is forgotten that sanctification is a matter of responsible and conscious effort and self-discipline. Of necessity, this one-

sidedness also causes distortions in practice.

Sometimes it is reasoned thus: because the new birth involves the reception of a new heart – on which God's law is written – sanctification will follow automatically and spontaneously. In a sense this is, of course, true. But if the conclusion is drawn from this that strenuous and disciplined sanctification is unnecessary, the argument goes astray. As always with half truths, this reasoning has results which dishonour God – a passivity which produces no genuine sanctification.

This view is a naive disregard for human responsibility, as well as for the fact that the Scripture gives hundreds of commands – also to Christians. Sanctification comes naturally to the believer, *yes, but not automatically*.

Certain groups (ironically enough, very conscious of holiness) lapse into the same one-sidedness, but in another way. The real problem, so they say, which prevents people from experiencing victory over sin, is that they try too hard. Their efforts are fleshly and legalistic – and only succeed in getting in the way of the Holy Spirit, as it were. No, it is said, leave yourself, in your utter inability, completely and utterly to the work of the Spirit. Make a "total surrender", "let go and let God" – and victory over the flesh will follow.

This half-truth leads, in the end, to disillusionment. He who does not consciously "put to death" the sinful nature (Ro 8:12-13 and Col 3:5), will

not reign over the flesh. Let us never forget: *the Christian life is, to the end, a war – a war with remaining sin.*

## THE NORM OF SANCTIFICATION

□ Without a norm, a standard, our pursuit of sanctification will lapse into directionlessness and arbitrariness. Therefore, when we think about the Biblical norm, the most fundamental principle is that *God Himself is the standard.* Actually, this is obvious. The concern of sanctification is to restore the image of God in sinners. This truth has an excellent prominence in the typical Biblical formula: "Be holy, because I am holy" (Lev 11:44-45; 19:2; 1 Pet 1:15-16; and also Mt 5:48).

□ An extremely important and balancing truth must, however, never be lost sight of: *between God as God and man as man there is a difference in nature.* It is the difference between Creator and creature, between the absolutely Sovereign and the completely dependent. Conformity with the image of God is therefore never absolute; it is always qualified. *Indeed, in a certain sense the ambition to be like God is the height of sin.* Indeed, this is precisely the point at which Satan deceived man (Gen 3:5).

□ There are therefore, in this connection, two vitally important

Biblical truths which must be adhered to. On the one hand it is man's highest calling to be like God (in one sense). On the other hand it is man's most abominable sin to try to be like God (in another sense).

Now it is clear that if God Himself does not reveal wherein we must be like Him, and if He does not limit and define this likeness, we are doomed blasphemously to transgress all kinds of boundaries.

This God has indeed done – *in His moral law, namely the Ten Commandments.*

This law is thus an expression of God's perfect character and leads us on a path in harmony with His holiness. But at the same time it protects us against the mother of all sins, namely wanting to be like God. This is why neglect of the Ten Commandments regularly leads to arrogant behaviour which trespasses into the field of God's sovereign prerogatives.

□ The perfect revelation of God's image and His will for man, and thus of how the Ten Commandments are lived out, is found in *the person, teaching and life of the Lord Jesus Christ* (Jn 1:18; 14:9; Heb 1:3). In a life here on earth, in a body like ours, the holiness of God was perfectly demonstrated. God could not have made His will for man clearer.

Every time we are called to follow Jesus, *servanthood* is at the heart of the call (Mt 20:27-28; Mk 10:44-45; Jn 12:23-26; 13:15; 2 Cor 8:8-9; Phil 2:3-8; 1 Pet 2:21).

The natural man's tendency is self-assertion, self-indulgence, self-promotion. This is the *upward* path which seeks to rival God, the sinful ambition which desires to be like God. In contrast with this, there is the *downward* path of self-denial – which seeks to be like God in a different sense. *This* is God's will for us; *this* is the living out of His moral law (Gal 6:2).

The summarizing principle of the moral law is *self-denying love towards God and man* (Mt 22:36-40; Mk 12:28-31; Ro 13:10; 1 Jn 3:14-18).

It is, however, very important to observe that the Word of God leaves no space for arbitrariness. Therefore, I don't simply decide for myself how, when and where my love will be expressed. No, God's express prescription is that my love for Him as well as my neighbour will at all times flow in *ten channels*.

□ Seeing that the moral law is an expression of God's character, it is obvious that it is an *eternal and unchangeable* rule of righteousness. Therefore nothing can be further from the truth than the view that the New Testament has abolished the meaning and relevance of the Ten Commandments.

Naturally the believer is not "under the law" – meaning that he must not and cannot earn God's favour through obedience to it. But as a rule of gratitude and a norm for holiness, the Ten Commandments are of the greatest importance for him.

This continuing validity and authority of the moral law is confirmed by Christ in Matthew 5:17-20.

What can be clearer than verse 18: "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished" (Mt 5:18, NIV).

The Ten Commandments are God's will for man in summary form. All the hundreds of moral prescriptions which appear throughout the Scriptures, especially in the New Testament, are in reality developments and explanations of the Ten Commandments.

## A FEW MORE ANCHOR POINTS

□ *A holy life has, in the first instance, not to do with moral standards and excellent character qualities. It is concerned, most deeply, with separation for and commitment to the Triune God.* It therefore concerns, in the first instance, love for Him – singleness of heart, zeal, servanthood, surrender and faithfulness. It concerns *Him* – *His* honour, *His* kingdom, *His* gospel of truth, *His* church! A holy man (or woman), is therefore a man of one concern. He lives before the face of God and in the light of eternity – because he must give account to God Himself for the stewardship of his life. His one ambition is stated in Matthew 25:21, 23: "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have

been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" (Mt 25:21, NIV). Therefore his continual prayer is: "Lord, continually teach me and enlarge my heart, so that I may know you as well as is possible for a human being; conform me increasingly to the image of Christ; equip me to bear more and more fruit to your honour."

☐ *The whole being and life is affected by sanctification.* All the faculties of the inner man are changed: the *understanding and convictions* (Jer 31:33; Jn 6:45; Ro 12:1-2; Eph 1:18; 3:18; Phil 1:9-11; Col 1:9-10; 1 Pet 1:13); the *will* (Ezek 36:25-27; Phil 2:13); the *emotions* (Gal 5:24); the *conscience* (Tit 1:15; Heb 9:14).

Inevitably, the body cannot remain unaffected (Ro 6:12-13; 1 Cor 6:15,20; 1 Thess 5:23). It is the instrument by which the inner man expresses himself in this world. Besides, man is a psychosomatic being and his inward state must, in time, have a physical influence – whether directly or indirectly.

☐ *Sanctification has a progressive character.* Scripture teaches this (Ro 12:2; 2 Cor 3:18; Eph 4:11-16; Phil 1:9; 1 Pet 2:2; 2 Pet 3:18). And it can, in time, be seen in true believers.

☐ *Sanctification will never reach perfection in this life.* The Scriptures

and experience teach that even those of us who are most graced fall far short of God's perfect standards (1 Kgs 8:46; Prov 20:9; Ecc 7:20; Ro 7:13-26; Jas 3:2; 1 Jn 1:8). This is why, after even a lifetime of sanctification, a still more dramatic intervention of God – glorification – is necessary to prepare me for perfect fellowship with Him, the Thrice-holy One.

☐ *Increasing conviction of sin is one of the surest signs of growth in sanctification.* This is how the Spirit makes us more humble – and forces us to hide more deeply in Christ. And *that* is faith – which pleases God more than anything else.

Listen to two of the most outstanding men of God.

Jonathan Edwards: "When I look into my heart and take a view of its wickedness, it looks like an abyss infinitely deeper than Hell ... It is affecting to think how ignorant I was when a young Christian, of the bottomless depths of wickedness, pride, hypocrisy, and filth left in my heart."

John Newton, concerning his expectations at the beginning of his Christian life: "But alas! these my golden expectations have been like South Sea dreams. I have lived hitherto a poor sinner, and I believe I shall die one ... I was ashamed of myself when I began to serve Him, I am more ashamed of myself now, and I expect to be most ashamed of myself when He comes to receive me to Himself. But oh! I rejoice in Him,

that He is not ashamed of me!" 🙏

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