

Our Life In Christ – Foundations For New Believers

V. Becoming like Jesus: How can I become like Jesus?

Aim: Explain how we are sanctified/transfigured by God into the likeness of Christ and show how we are responsible to kill sin and walk in newness of life while it is all the work of God in us.

Review: Last week we looked at how we can live with Jesus and saw that God enables us to do through the means of grace in the Church as well as through daily beholding Christ in our prayer and Bible reading but also by walking in the ten commandments. We saw that while we fail to keep them on our own, Jesus bore the punishment for us and the Holy Spirit changes and enables us to really walk in obedience to God.

Tonight is about how we are changed and enabled to live in the new life in Christ.

5.1. Grasping Holiness

What is Holiness?

The term “Sanctification” is related to holiness. It’s to become holy. However, defining what being “holy” means, is not easy.

We can only begin to understand holiness when we look at God, because he alone is truly holy. In a sense, that God is holy means that he is of a different quality to us. To be holy means to be “set apart”. He is far above us. It also means that he is pure, especially that he is morally pure. He is clean rather than unclean. He is perfect and sinless. On the other side, to be unholy is to be morally corrupt and sinful. It’s to be stained and guilty.¹

God alone is holy. We are unholy, unclean and drenched with sin. That means, humans cannot possibly come into God’s presence. He is too pure.

God emanates holiness. The place where he is present is holy and one can only enter if they are pure. When Moses encountered the burning bush in the desert, God told him to take off his shoes, because it was holy ground. God was present there.²

The prophet Isaiah had a vision, in which God called him to be a prophet. And there he saw:

¹ For further Study on what “holiness” means: Exodus 19-34; the book Leviticus.

² Exodus 3; Leviticus 16.

Isaiah 6:1-5: I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called to another and said: “**Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!**” ⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. ⁵ **And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”**

Isaiah saw a vision of God’s glory and holiness. The Seraphim, who are angels, have to cover their faces and feet before God’s perfect glory. And they cry to one another “holy, holy, holy” as if they cannot express enough that God is holy.

We also see here that God’s holiness is linked with his infinite glory and his exaltedness as king over the world.

What is Isaiah’s reaction to this? He realizes that he cannot stand in God’s presence because he is a sinful man! Woe is me! It becomes overwhelmingly clear to him that God is so perfect and pure and glorious that no one who is imperfect can be near him.

But what happens next?

Isaiah 6:6-7: ⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a **burning coal** that he had taken with tongs **from the altar**. ⁷ And **he touched my mouth** and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; **your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.**”

One of the angels took a burning coal from the altar in the heavenly temple and touched Isaiah’s mouth with it. And with this, his guilt is burned away, so to say. To say that his sins are atoned for means that someone else has paid the guilt that Isaiah had and brought a sacrifice that is sufficient to wash Isaiah clean from his sin so that he is sanctified, made holy.

In the Temple in the Old Testament, everything that was used to worship God had to be made holy, that is, set apart and cleansed, by sprinkling animal blood on it. Even the priests who were responsible to bring sacrifices for the sins of the peoples had to be sprinkled with blood.

There was a room in the temple “the holy of holies” where God was especially present. Only the high priest was allowed to enter once a year. Before entering he too would have to go through a process of purification through washings and sacrifices.

In the holy of holies, he would then sprinkle the blood of an animal sacrifice on the arc of the covenant to atone for the sins of the people. Then he would go outside, lay his hands on another goat and confess the sins of the people. This goat would then be cast out into the wilderness. It symbolically carried the sins of the people away.

Through the blood of a sacrifice the sins of the people would be taken away and that meant they were able to have some form of fellowship with God.³

So, God makes others holy, or clean, by his grace. He accepts a perfect sacrifice on their behalf and forgives the sin that makes us unclean.

Can we be made holy?

The letter to the Hebrews teaches us that Jesus is both the Sacrifice for our sins as well as our High Priest who intercedes for us and brings us into the presence of God.

Hebrews 7:23-27: ²³ The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, ²⁴ but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. ²⁵ Consequently, **he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.** ²⁶ For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, **holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.** ²⁷ He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, **since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.**

This text is about how Jesus is a new and better priest than the “normal” human priests. While they were many and all died of age, Jesus never dies and therefore is priest forever. Therefore, he always intercedes for us and thus saves us completely. Whenever we sin, he reminds the Father that our sin is paid for, and we can approach God because Jesus intercedes for us.

³ Leviticus 16.

Another reason why he is a better priest than those before is that he is perfect and holy. He does not need to purify himself before approaching God. He is the second person of the Trinity. Therefore, he is as holy as the Father and the Spirit.

But more than that, he doesn't need to sacrifice for himself, nor does he need to sacrifice for us daily, because he brought himself as a sacrifice once and for all. That was possible because he is completely holy. A sacrifice must be spotless and perfect. Jesus is that. Therefore, he was able to carry our sin for us as the perfect sacrifice.

Jesus gave himself once as the perfect sacrifice and as our holy high priest he brings us into the presence of God forever. But how can we become holy?

Hebrews 10:14: ¹⁴ For by a single offering **he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.**

This a beautiful and at the same time mind-boggling sentence.

So, the people Jesus brought himself as a sacrifice for when he died on the cross have been perfected by him. That means, they have been made holy. This is finished.

Yet these exact same people are in a process of being sanctified, of being made holy.

How can this be?

Jesus has extinguished all of our sins by giving himself for us. He paid the full ransom. He shed his holy blood as the perfect sacrifice. By being united to him, we receive his righteousness, and he takes our sin. In the same way he washes away our uncleanness and gives us his holiness. Therefore, we have been made holy by Jesus in our union with him.

Paul writes in **1 Corinthians 1:30:** ³⁰ And because of him [God] **you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom** from God, **righteousness** and **sanctification** and **redemption** [...].

We are in Jesus because God has saved us. When Paul says that Jesus "became to us" wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption, he means that when Jesus became human, he did that to give us his wisdom, righteousness, holiness and redemption.

How do we receive this? By **being in** Christ Jesus. By being united to him.

We share in Jesus' own righteousness and holiness. In one sense, we have been sanctified in our union with Christ in the same way that we have been justified. We now have access to God and are washed clean from our sins.

Yet we are also in a process of being sanctified, as we noticed in Hebrews 10. The one flows from the other. The fact that we now belong to Jesus and that he is present in us by his Spirit not only changes our status before God, but also slowly changes the persons we are. We have been made new, yet the fullness of that "newness" comes about slowly.

To be sanctified means firstly, that we belong to Jesus. By being in him we share in everything that is his. Including his perfect holiness. Yet, sanctification also means that we are being transformed, or changed, into people who are like Christ. This encompasses our whole person. We don't become Christians only in our thinking but not in our deeds, or only in our emotions but not in how we speak.

We belong to Jesus with everything we are. So, when God sanctifies us, this involves us entirely.

Illustration:

A mosaic is a complex piece of art. It can take a long time to make one. A mosaic consists of hundreds or thousands of small pieces of glass or stone. Left by themselves, they are neither really beautiful nor have they any meaning. It's just a piece of glass or stone. But now the artist comes along and picks up all these small pieces and starts to put them together. At beginning this might look a bit messy and it's not quite obvious what this collection of shattered glass is supposed to be. But given enough time, the artist forms these pieces into a stunningly beautiful picture.

In our sanctification, something similar happens: God picks up the shattered and broken pieces we are and slowly and patiently puts each piece into place and makes us whole. And we find that the longer the process goes on, the less we look like this heap of shards we used to be and the more we resemble someone else, namely, Jesus. And so, piece by piece we are formed into the likeness of Jesus. God heals us and transforms us.

In this course we talked about that God created mankind after his image and Jesus is that image. Mankind was created to be like Jesus. This was broken through sin and God restores us into this image by his grace. This is the goal of our redemption and sanctification: God by his grace

renews us into people who resemble Jesus and who are in relationship with God. That is who we are meant to be.

Look at what Paul says:

Romans 8:29: ²⁹For those whom he foreknew he also predestined **to be conformed to the image of his Son**, in order that he might be the **firstborn among many brothers**.

Paul speaks here about God's work of redemption and how he chose us even before we were created and how he decided beforehand to conform us to the image of Jesus.

To be "foreknown" does not simply mean that he knows beforehand what will happen. Rather, it means that he chose those who are saved beforehand. This is only confirmed by the statement that he predestined those he foreknew to be conformed to the image of Jesus: He chose to save you, and he decided to renew you through his grace long before you even existed. Before you chose to believe in Jesus, God chose you. Your faith is the result of God's eternal grace to you.

But what are we predestined for?

To be conformed to the image of God's Son. Before God created anything he loved you, he chose you and decided that he would redeem you out of your fallenness and renew you to be like Jesus.

This is what sanctification, or being made holy, is ultimately about: We are made new and that means we are formed by God to become like Jesus. Not in his divinity, to be sure, but like him in his humanity.

How can we become like Jesus?

So far, we have seen that:

- We have received the holiness of Jesus by belonging to him. He is our perfect sacrifice and high priest who has dealt with our guilt and uncleanness. Through him we can stand in the presence of God. It's the righteousness and holiness of Jesus in us.
- The process and goal of sanctification is that we become like Jesus. It's the righteousness and holiness of Jesus being formed in us by God's Spirit.

5.2. Become who you are

So, in our union with Christ, we have been made holy and yet are in the process of becoming holy. Some theologians speak of this as “becoming who you are”.

Paul uses this basic structure in many of his letters: He spends the main part of his letters with explaining what has happened to believers when they were saved and then he exhorts them to actually live in this new life. “Here’s what happened – now live in it.”

Here are some examples:

Romans 8:12-14: ¹¹ **If the Spirit** of him who raised Jesus from the dead **dwells in you**, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also **give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.** ¹² So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³ **For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.** ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

Those who are united to Jesus by the Spirit are indwelt by the Spirit. God raised the Son from the dead by the Spirit and God gives life to us. How?

The Spirit indwells us. He lives in us and let’s us partake in the life of Christ. This is resurrection-life. We have this life because the Spirit of God indwells us and thus unites us to Jesus.

Therefore, we are not debtors to the flesh. With “flesh” Paul means our old fallen nature and with that our inclination to sin. We no longer have to sin. It’s not as if we owe to our fallen self to continue in sin. We have been redeemed from that. When we live in our old ways, we will die. It’s the way of death.

But, if we kill the “deeds of the body”, we will live. Again, this means our old and fallen self. Do you want to live? Kill that which wants to kill you: Kill your sinful habits and inclinations. You do this by the Spirit who lives in you. You are not on your own in this. You are to act the new life that God gives you through his Spirit.

Christ is present in you, and he gives you his life. He renews you so you can walk in freedom from your old life. But you don’t do this by yourself, but by the Spirit, or with the Spirit who lives in you.

Don't go back to the sins you have so loved before you were saved. You owe them nothing. If you live in your old ways apart from Christ, you will die. If you kill your sin by the Spirit, you will live in the resurrection-life. Put to death what is old and live in the new life.

Philippians 2:12-13: ¹² Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, **work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,** ¹³ **for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.**

Paul is writing to the church in Philippi and is delighted to see them live in obedience to God. Independent of whether he is there with them or if he is somewhere else, he wants them to live in holiness.

What does it mean to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling”?

I thought God already saved me! I thought God takes away my fears. So why shall I fear and tremble?

To fear God means less to be scared of him and more to revere him and acknowledge his authority. It's not about being anxious that God will get angry at us for every mistake but rather living in the awareness of God's majesty and greatness.

Now, when we're exhorted to work out our salvation that means to live in a manner that is in accordance with the gospel. We are to live in our new life in Christ and thus live out our salvation. It is simply impossible for a person to be saved and to continue in sin like nothing happened.

In verse 13 Paul gives the grounding for his command. Work out your salvation because God is at work in you “**both to will and to work.**” So, you are to live worthy of the gospel because God works this in you. Even your will to obey Jesus is produced in you by God. And so is your lived out obedience.

So, who is active in this? Primarily God. But you too. Not on your own, but by the Spirit of God who dwells in you. God brings this about in you. Therefore, work out your salvation in fear and trembling.

To flesh this out more, let's look at a longer passage from Colossians 3:

Right before this passage, Paul writes about how we have died with Christ and were raised to new life with him and how our life is hidden with Christ in God. Now he draws the consequences from this truth:

Colossians 3:5-15: ⁵ **Put to death therefore what is earthly in you:** sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶ **On account of these the wrath of God is coming.** ⁷ **In these you too once walked,** when you were living in them. ⁸ **But now you must put them all away:** anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. ⁹ **Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices** ¹⁰ **and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.** ¹¹ Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; **but Christ is all, and in all.**

¹² **Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved,** compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ **And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.** ¹⁵ **And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.**

Again, Paul's exhortation is quite clear: Kill what is sinful in you and live in your new life. It's like we changed our clothes: We have put off our old, stinky, ragged clothes and in Christ have been dressed in new and pure clothes. You have put off your old self. You have been made alive with Christ. You are now in Christ. He is your identity.

But even though the decisive events have happened, we are not yet at the end. We have been justified, reconciled, and sanctified. But God has not yet brought this new reality about in its fullness.

Therefore, you are being "renewed in knowledge after the image of Christ."

Our sanctification is the same thing as being conformed to be like Jesus. We were created to resemble him. In his grace, God restores, or renews, us into this image so that we become like Jesus.

But what does it mean to be "renewed in knowledge"?

For one, this is simply a knowledge about who God is and what he is like. We can only know God in Christ.

But the fact that we are renewed in that knowledge as we are formed into the image of Christ points to a deeper “knowing” of God in the relationship with him which he made us for. You can know stuff about a person but that is not the same as truly knowing someone.

Being renewed in knowledge after the image of Christ then means that we increasingly grow to know God the more we are conformed to be like Jesus. Put on the love of Christ.

And this very practically shows in how we go about our days and what we think and do. Put off and kill all practices and habits that belong to the old and do what is in accord with the gospel.

There is a sharp warning here: Those who persist in disobedience to God’s commandments, God will judge in his holy wrath. God never takes sin lightly. God’s grace doesn’t mean that he no longer cares about our sin but that he rescues us from it. It might be a long and slow process but being united to Jesus must and will mean that we turn from sin and live a sanctified life. ⁴

In verse 12-15 Paul describes how we are to live. The virtues he lists there are all characteristics of Jesus. Put on, practice, live out, the character of Jesus.

And this flows from the fact that God has chosen you, that he has made you holy already and loves you. Again: Because we are in Christ, **we have him** and therefore his holiness. This will inevitably express itself in how we live our lives.

God does not save us to leave us as messed up as we were before. He renews us and does so by living in us.

5.3. The Fruit of the Spirit

The last text to study tonight is Galatians 5 which is about “the fruit of the Spirit”. If we ask again who sanctifies us, we find that God dwells in us by his Holy Spirit and he brings about, or forms, the character of Jesus in us because he unites us to him.

⁴ Other lists of „vices“ in the New Testament contain similar warnings: Galatians 5:19-21; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.

So, this is the work of God. Yet we are fully involved in this. This is something that God does **in** you. He renews you. Therefore, your desires will change and you can and must walk in this new life.

Galatians 5:22-24: ²² But **the fruit of the Spirit** is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. ²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Paul says there is **one fruit** which the Spirit produces and then lists **9 virtues, or character traits** that are this fruit.

This simply shows us that the Spirit will not produce only love in one person and only joy in another. Or that he might make you gentle but not self-controlled. He forms all these character traits in you because he changes you to be like Christ.

This is the goodness of Jesus formed in us by the Spirit. He is the one who joins us to Jesus, the bond by which we are united to Christ.

You didn't save yourself and you don't make yourself more like Jesus. The way we were saved is the same way in which we become more like Christ. That is: Union with Christ.

Yet you are called to live in holiness, and you actually can change because Jesus is present in you by his Spirit. The Holy Spirit dwells in you.

So, who is acting in our sanctification? Is it God? Yes. Is it us? Yes. But it is us in Christ.

Because Christ is present in us by his Spirit, he also forms his goodness in us. We are at the same time completely passive and fully active. The Spirit is working in us not outside of us or without us. Remember, union with Christ means that we are in him and he in us.

If the Spirit joins us to Jesus, then he is more than an energy drink that pushes us to get the job done. He is more than a motivational coach who yells at you to move on.

He is God present in you, forming you to be like Jesus. Slowly and patiently.

We can never bring about our own righteousness or holiness. God's Spirit forms the righteousness and holiness of Jesus in us.

Some people think that means we'll just automatically become holier. This is wrong as well.

Grant Macaskill: “precisely because the gift involves union with Jesus, whose righteousness now actively inhabits our limbs through the Spirit, it will manifest itself in a transformed life.”⁵

As Paul says in **Galatians 5:25-26**: ²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.

The Spirit makes you alive. He joins you to Jesus. He forms the character of Jesus in you. We live by the Spirit who inhabits us. This means that as God is working in us we are thoroughly active in this. God’s work in us results in us striving for holiness and killing what is sinful in us.

Therefore, let’s keep in step with the Spirit. If he is our life, he enables us also to walk with him.

F.F. Bruce: “Living by the Spirit is the root; walking by the Spirit is the fruit, and that fruit is nothing less than the practical reproduction of the character (and therefore the conduct) of Christ in the lives of his people.”⁶

The gospel is the good news that in Christ God forgives us our guilt, he redeems us from our slavery to sin and sanctifies us completely. It’s the good news that we are reconciled to God and adopted as his children. It’s also the good news that we may live a new life in Christ in freedom from sin’s power.

Our once for all salvation by faith and the ongoing process of our becoming like Jesus are two sides of the same coin. Both is all by grace. It is God’s work of undeserved love in us and for us.

Illustration: Seeing an apple tree whose fruit is bad and then just buying apples and taping them onto the branches. That’s not fixing anything. We need new roots.

⁵ Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ*, 139.

⁶ Bruce, *Galatians*, 257.

How can we become like Jesus?

We are called to put our old, sinful behaviour to death and to keep in step by the Spirit. By living in us, the Spirit forms the character of Jesus in us. In this process we are completely passive and fully active.

5.4. Persevering in Jesus

There is so much more we could have talked about. Our faith is so rich and deep that we could spend the rest of our lives searching the riches of the gospel. I hope that this course has been a helpful introduction for you.

I hope that your hearts are encouraged and you come out of this with a deepened understanding of the gospel and greater love for Christ.

The note on which I'd like to end our course is to ask the question: "How can I make to the end?" Or, "What if I stop believing at some point?"

How can you know if you're going to grow until the end? What if you fall back into your old ways and walk away from Christ? You can take comfort in the fact that God is far more committed to your sanctification and to preserve you until the end, than you are. He has created you, he has chosen and predestined you to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.

He has called you out of the darkness into his light, he has cleansed you from your sin. You belong to him and your salvation is wholly the work of God. Trust him that he will bring it to a good end. At the end of the day, your salvation is not about you, but about God's glory. So trust God with it.

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24: ²³ Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ **He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.**

God has sovereignly called you to himself. He is faithful. He keeps his promises and achieves his purposes. If you belong to Jesus, God will keep you and sanctify so that on the day when Christ comes to judge the living and the dead, you will stand blameless before him together with the rest of the Church.