

## **“The Techniques of Sanctification”**

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**The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

In the early and middle years of my pastorate here I often used the last Lord’s Day evening of the year to commend to the congregation certain spiritual disciplines for their use in the coming year. I haven’t done that for some years but I was recently reminded that I haven’t and that I ought to return to this plan, at least from time to time. Obviously, there is never a reason to wait to do the right thing, but it is also true that, as the English essayist Charles Lamb once observed, “No one ever regarded the first of January with indifference.” Anything that helps us to take stock or to make a new beginning is to be embraced by Christians and the New Year is certainly that and has been that for many of us many times before. What better time to ask ourselves if there are not things that we ought to do that we have not done or have not done for some time?

I was reminded of the importance of urging Christians on in their life of faith and obedience by an article that appeared in the most recent issue of *Presbyterion*, the journal of our Covenant Theological Seminary. [Vol. XL (Fall 2014) Nos 1-2, 27-46] The piece by New Testament professor Jimmy Agan was an extended review of Kevin DeYoung’s book *The Hole in our Holiness: Filling the Gap between Gospel Passion and the Pursuit of Godliness*. Kevin DeYoung is the pastor of University Reformed Church, a Reformed Church in America congregation in East Lansing, Michigan, across the street from Michigan State University. More than simply a review, Agan’s article was also a description of an on-going controversy in our conservative Reformed and Presbyterian world concerning sanctification and the pursuit of godliness. Kevin DeYoung’s book had itself been a response to a view of grace and the Christian life represented in the teaching of a number of our men, as, for example, in Tullian Tchividjian’s *One Way Love: Inexhaustible Grace for an Exhausted World*. Tchividjian is the pastor of our Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. As Prof. Agan explains:

“The Bible’s teaching about sanctification -- and in particular, the relationship between divine grace and human effort in the Christian’s progress toward spiritual maturity -- is a hotly debated topic in Presbyterian, Reformed, and evangelical circles today.” [27]

Let’s begin with full disclosure: what you have been taught here through the years is the viewpoint represented in Kevin DeYoung’s book not in Tullian Tchividjian’s. It is the understanding of sanctification that you will find in the Reformers, in the Puritans, and in the American Presbyterians. To put it bluntly, in regard to the living of the Christian life, the Reformed tradition, emphatic as it has always been on the helplessness of sinners apart from the grace of God, helpless not only to be saved but to live the Christian life, has never shied away from the necessity of *effort* on the part of Christians in pursuing greater godliness and more consistent obedience. In the Reformed tradition a great deal of thought has been devoted not only

to the importance, even the absolute necessity of such effort but in the techniques by which godliness might be cultivated and increased in a Christian's life. While the other side would object, I'm sure, to any characterization of their position as a version of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously described as "cheap grace," grace, that is, that doesn't cost us anything, their teaching has seemed to a good number of observers largely to ignore the imperatives that loom so large in the Bible's own teaching about the Christian life. As J.I. Packer tartly put it, the Bible's prescription for a faithful Christian life is not "let go and let God," but "trust God and get going." [*Keep in Step with the Spirit*, 157] Our effort, even our struggle, is essential to faithful Christian living in the Bible.

But along the way of Reformed and Presbyterian history there has always been a much smaller, parallel tradition of antinomianism. "Antinomianism" literally refers to a view that denies the necessity or the importance of a Christian's obedience to the law. *Nomos* was the Greek word for law, so *anti-nomianism* refers to any view that deprecates or undermines obedience to God's law in a Christian's life. Antinomian views take a variety of forms, of course. In some cases the necessity of obedience really is denied. Because salvation is by grace and grace alone, while it may be better to be an obedient Christian, it isn't necessary. So long as one believes in Jesus one will go to heaven no matter that he or she lived even in active defiance of God's law. In recent American religious thought, this form of antinomianism, a kind of pure antinomianism, was referred to as "the carnal Christian theory." That theory holds that you can be a spiritual Christian or you can be a carnal Christian. It's better to be a spiritual Christian, but both are Christians and both will go to heaven. All the texts that seemed to teach that Christians are required to be holy and to bear fruit or else were reinterpreted to mean something else. In other cases antinomianism amounts to the idea that if divine grace is truly grasped and understood, a godly life will result as if by a natural law, no effort required. In this form of antinomian teaching holiness or obedience literally ought to be effortless. It is more of this latter form of antinomianism that has appeared in our churches of late. The fact that antinomianism crops up again and again in the history of the Reformed church suggests that there is something about our doctrine of sovereign grace, as well as something about the human heart, that makes these antinomian views almost inevitable. Paul had to deal with this view in his day (precisely because he was a champion of salvation by grace), the magisterial Reformers likewise in their day (reintroducing salvation by grace alone as they did), the Westminster divines in the 17<sup>th</sup> century were worried more about antinomianism than virtually anything else as they wrote the *Westminster Confession of Faith* in their day, and the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup> century forms of antinomianism have proved very attractive to Reformed Christians.

In the literature of the "Grace Only" camp -- of course, we all believe in salvation by grace alone; the question is what we mean by the term and how we apply it to the practice of the Christian life -- you are very likely to hear statements such as:

“Grace doesn’t make demands. It just gives.” Or,

“Religion consists of all the things (believing, behaving, worshipping, sacrificing) the human race has ever thought it had to do to get right with God.... Everything religion tried to do (and failed) to do has been perfectly done, once and for all, by Jesus in his death and resurrection. For Christians, therefore, the entire religion shop has been closed, boarded up and forgotten. The church is not in the religion business.” [Tchividjian, citing Robert Farrar Capon] I think we can understand what is meant by the statement, but the one-sidedness of it is exposed by a simple citation of James 1:27: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”

God’s grace is wonderful beyond the power of words to express. It is literally amazing, surprising, life-changing, and should constantly fill our hearts with gratitude, love, peace, and joy. Our salvation is indeed a free gift of God’s love and a mighty work of his power. That conviction and that experience must underlie any authentic Christian life. But God’s love is not one-way; it is most definitely two-way. We are to respond to his love with a love of our own and serious Christians have always sought to respond to God’s great gift in greater measures of faithfulness; they have sought to adorn God’s grace and to live worthy of it more and more. They have never taken God’s grace for granted but saw it as a spur to greater effort on their part. If the Apostle Paul, the supreme champion of the grace of God, should say of himself that he beat his body and made it his slave lest having preached to others he himself be disqualified for the prize, surely who are we to suppose that exerting effort to live a faithful Christian life is inconsistent with or somehow amounts to a denial of the grace of God?

The *bête noire* of this group of “grace only” thinkers is a perceived legalism still rampant in the church. The church is weak, in their view, because we are still attempting to earn our way to heaven, even those of us who preach and teach and who say we believe that salvation is by grace alone and justification by faith alone. In Tullian’s book, for example, we read this:

“It amazes me that you will hear concern from inside the church about too much grace, but rarely will you ever hear about too many rules.”

But is that true? I have never heard that once in all my years in the church: “There’s too much grace here and not enough rules.” Quite the contrary. In our day and age the common complaint is that there are too many rules and not enough grace. Indeed, that is precisely what we would expect to be the case in the antinomian and permissive world in which the church now lives. As I have told you before, *legalism is not the spiritual danger of our age*. This is not a culture that encourages people seriously to consider how they might earn their way to heaven. We live in a culture that doesn’t care and doesn’t think God does either. You perhaps have noticed the sign of

the church across the street, intended, I suppose, to attract visitors: “We won’t tell you whom to hate or what to think.” In our culture, everyone has the right to order his or her own life without interference from someone else. That is the gospel of liberation in 21<sup>st</sup> century America and it has been leaking into the church for a long time now.

In its Reformed and Presbyterian form this concentration on grace only is not explicitly antinomian, of course. Our theological standards forbid ministers and elders to hold such views. We understand from the plain-speaking of the Bible that holiness and good works are necessary in the Christian life and that effort is commanded and required. We are taught that a thousand times in the Bible. In our tradition this concentration on grace alone tends rather to amount to a suspicion of effort which, in turn, shows up as an indifference to the Bible’s teaching of the importance of an activist, effort-filled, technique-rich pursuit of godliness on the part of Christians. They don’t deny that teaching, it just doesn’t show up in their writing and preaching about the life of faith. They are not writing books entitled *Heaven Taken By Storm* or *On the Mortification of Sin* as the Puritans did. Their suspicion is -- and it is not without some justification, every thoughtful Christian understands this of course -- that working at one’s sanctification smacks as somehow a denial of grace or, if not a denial, a dangerous distraction. When we begin thinking about what *we should do*, we forget what Christ has already done. When we think about the steps we should take to grow in grace, we lose sight of the fact that without Christ we can do nothing. These are precisely the concerns that animated previous advocates of similar “grace-only” theories of the Christian life, such as the Keswick movement or Higher Life movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

So, it is no surprise to find Jimmy Agan listing what he calls misperceptions about grace and sanctification characteristic of those involved in this “grace only” movement. He means such things as these:

1. “Grace displaces -- or at least Diminishes -- the Demands of Holiness.” [38] As Kevin DeYoung cutely puts it in his book, holiness is the new campaign. While some enjoy it, most of us conclude that life is easier without it!
2. “Suspicion of Imperatives Is a Mark of Gospel Growth.” [399] Moral exertion, spiritual effort, even the pursuit of obedience, in this so-called grace-based thinking raises the suspicion of legalism and of a failure to understand that we are saved by grace and not by our own works.
3. “The Christian Life Does not Require Effort.” [40] It is so many statements like that in their material that should lead us to be highly suspicious of this teaching. The Bible after all has so much to say about “working out our salvation in fear and trembling” and “making every effort to make our calling and election sure” and “pressing on toward the goal” that reconciling this emphasis on grace *only* as the sufficient principle of the Christian life with the Bible’s actual teaching has always been its chief problem.

4. “Some People ‘Get’ Grace But Not Holiness -- So They Just Need to Emphasize Holiness.” [41] This is one of the worst features of this teaching, in my judgment. Any criticism of it is summarily rejected as simply a failure really to understand the grace of God. People who don’t agree with this single-minded emphasis on grace and grace alone as the way of the Christian life must be people who simply have not experienced the grace of God as *we* have. There is a very unhealthy spiritual elitism at work here. This was true in Keswick and Higher-Life circles earlier on. You either really understood the power of God’s grace or you didn’t; and the critics obviously didn’t and the fact that they criticized the movement was proof that they didn’t. Those who understood it already had holiness; they didn’t need to work for it.

There is enough of this grace only teaching now in our circles to have prompted a counter-movement. Of course, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century there can be no movement without seminars and a website. And so the Gospel Reformation Network (GRN) has both. It defines itself this way:

“The Gospel Reformation Network...is a collaboration of Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) ministers who are concerned about the balance and accuracy of gospel preaching in our denomination. Specifically, we are working to bolster the biblical and confessional doctrine of sanctification.... Our desire...is to point out the biblical mandate for sanctification, to warn against ‘gospel preaching’ that denies or downplays holiness and biblical obedience...and to restore the proper use of the law and biblical imperatives to our ministries.”

Chief among the concerns of the Gospel Reformation Network is a failure to emphasize the necessity of Christian effort and action in pursuit of holiness of life, a necessity that the Bible bears witness to on almost its every page. We are to put on holiness in the fear of God, we are to put our sins to death, we are to set our minds on things above, we are to flee youthful lusts, we are to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith and love, we are to fight the good fight; we are to run the race; we are to take up our cross and follow Jesus, we are to pray without ceasing; we are to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, we are to forget what is behind and press forward to lay hold of that for which Christ laid hold of us, and on and on it goes in the Word of God. These are the imperatives of the Christian life that the Gospel Reformation Network fears are being ignored in this new teaching that seems to pit grace against good works which the Bible never does.

All of that to remind you that it is only in keeping with the teaching of the entire Bible that I ought, from time to time, remind you that there are things for you *to do* in pursuit of that for which the Lord Jesus gave himself for you. You and I are not yet what we ought to be, not by a long, long shot and most of you sitting there know very well immediately in what particular ways you are not what you ought to be. In certain ways you even know yourself not to be what

any number of other Christians you know already are. And it will be pure and unmitigated ingratitude for his matchless gifts if we don't give ourselves to becoming more for Jesus than so far we have become. There are lots of things we need to do more faithfully, we need to get better at, and we need to make much more of in our lives day by day. There are sins it is high time we put to death, there are pieces of obedience that we should have made a staple of our daily living long before this, and there are means of grace and acts of service that should loom much larger in our lives than they do now. Isn't it terrifying to you, as it is to me, that we should finish our pilgrimage in the spiritual condition to which we have so far attained, that we will not have become any more than *this*, that we will have accomplished anything more than *this*? France Ridley Havergal, who wrote "Take My Life and Let It Be" and some other fine hymns, said that she wished to crowd into her life all she could possibly do for Jesus." I want more, not less of her spirit! Even pagans understand the principle. "Ille non est bonus qui non vult esse melior": "He is not good who does not wish to be better." For too many of us, our real mind, if we will simply be honest with ourselves, has been what Augustine so famously confessed his to be: "Lord, give me chastity, but don't give it to me yet." No longer for us, brothers and sisters.

And may I say as your pastor that this is not a self-centered concentration. Nothing is more likely to move us all forward as Christians, nothing is more likely to make us more fruitful in ministry to others, nothing is more likely to increase the power of our public and private witness to Jesus Christ as the world's savior and Lord than for many of us to be growing in grace and holiness and so enjoying ever greater measures of the blessing of the Lord in our lives. We need to be in a stream whose current carries us all forward.

Tonight's subject, "the techniques of sanctification," obviously would not feature in this new teaching about sanctification by grace alone. Technique presupposes that there is something for us *to do*. Technique supposes that are steps for us to take in order to grow in the grace and knowledge of God. Technique presupposes a human part of sanctification and the necessity of human effort. But the Bible is full of such techniques. The Puritans were masters of the techniques of the Christian life and if we would be wise, we would seek such mastery for ourselves.

So what will you concentrate on in the days and months of the New Year?

- I. *Well, for some of you, it is high time you set yourselves to be diligent readers of the Word of God.*

"How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your Word." [Ps. 119:9] But will he if he doesn't know that Word, if it is not a living voice in his heart? The Word of God, which is, after all, the voice of God, is a wonderful power in a Christian life if only it gets a chance to do its work. It is not the Word of God lying unremembered on the pages of your Bible,

but the Word of God living in your heart that changes your life, that awakens your conscience and keeps it awake, that enlivens your holy desires, that makes you wise in the choices you make, and keeps the Lord front and center in all you think and do.

One essential technique of sanctification is the personal, attentive reading of the Word of God. The Scripture commands us to study the Word of God, to meditate upon it, to hide it in our hearts or memorize it, all of which, obviously, require that first *we read it!*

Let me say for myself that nothing has meant more to my Christian life, whatever it has become, nothing has done me more good than the decision I made years ago to be an avid reader of the Bible. I shudder to think what I would have lost or never gained had I not read the Bible through each year these past thirty years. I am constantly reminded of biblical teaching I would otherwise forget or scarcely remember; I am regularly impressed by some statement of the Word of God as I read it and feel a new conviction rising within me to live in the truth of that statement; I am encouraged as I come across once again some promise that the Lord has made to his people; or, more regularly than you might think for a minister of the Word, I learn something that I don't remember ever knowing before.

The more church history, the more Christian biography I read the more I am reminded that the heroes of our faith were to the man and woman lovers of the Bible and daily readers of it, students of it, memorizers of it, masters of it. None of us knows this book nearly as well as we might or as we should or as we must if we would put on godliness in the fear of God to the extent we ought to and long to.

We have a number of plans for you to use, to help you get started, but I don't care if you read the Bible through in a year or two years or three; I don't care if you use this plan or that, what matters is that you are reading the Word of God, reading it carefully, intentionally, thoughtfully, and prayerfully. No one can tell what difference this makes until he has the voice of God whispering in his or her ear all day long!

*II. Others of you are already faithful readers of the Bible; but you know that you are not yet a man or woman of prayer.*

You pray, to be sure. You pray before meals, you pray in church, you pray now and then, but prayer -- earnest and familiar talking with God, as John Knox defined prayer -- is not the lifeblood of your daily life as you know very well it ought to be for a serious Christian, for any man or woman who intends to live by faith.

"Pray without ceasing," Paul exhorts us, but for many of us, those words are more rebuke than they are encouragement. Alexander Whyte was only speaking the truth when he said that there is

nothing we are so bad at all our days as prayer. The Lord Jesus was a man of prayer and he had no need to pray for the things that usually take up most of our prayers. He also taught us to pray and urged us to pray. Surely he knows what it best for us. Whatever effort faithful prayer requires of us, it must be worth it, altogether worth it.

Set yourself to read some good books on prayer in the new year -- Alexander Whyte's *Lord Teach Us to Pray*, or C.S. Lewis' *Letters to Malcolm*, or Thomas Goodwin's *The Return of Prayers*, or any other of the classic works -- and then set yourself a reasonable goal and begin to pray each day. Pray for the things you know you ought to pray for and say to God the things you know you ought to say to him.

### *III. Perhaps it is time for some of you to make use of a vow.*

A vow in the Bible is a promise you do not have to make, but once you make it must be kept. Vows are intended, among other things, as a technique to advance the faithfulness of a Christian life. It was a way of putting oneself under a greater obligation to do the right thing. I find it a striking and important fact that the Apostle Paul himself, years after becoming a Christian, was still making vows; in his case, as a Jew, a Nazirite vow (Acts 18:18), called in the Bible, "a vow of separation to the Lord." Separation by the way is a synonym for sanctification. That's what we all want for ourselves, a greater measure of separation to the Lord. Paul was a man who took steps in his Christian life. He did not let the grass grow under his feet; he pressed forward and taking a vow was one way he did that. We read in Ecclesiastes 5 that we must make our vows carefully. No rash promises; no promises you cannot keep. But here is a biblically approved way of giving yourself a leg up in doing what you ought to do and want to do.

Perhaps you could make a vow regarding your life of prayer. Obviously you shouldn't promise the Lord that you are going to pray for forty-five minutes or half an hour every day. You might very well not keep that promise. But you could tell the Lord that you want to pray every day for a certain amount of time or to pray for certain things every day and then vow that you will keep careful track of whether or not you actually do. Holding yourself to account can be a very useful way to form holy habits.

The great Charles Simeon once promised the Lord that if any morning he didn't get up in time to pray -- Simeon was a man who knew the value of money -- he would throw a gold crown into the River Cam. Somewhere in the muddy river bed of that gentle stream that runs along the backs of the University colleges there lies, no doubt deeply buried, one gold crown. Simeon knew both that he needed to be a man of prayer and what steps to take to make sure he became one.

Or perhaps your vow to the Lord should be that you will make a serious effort to lead someone to Christ this year. That you will cultivate a friendship for the sake of someone's salvation, that



you will invite him or her to church, that you will explain your faith and the gospel to him or to her. Plan to memorize this little poem in January and then recite it to yourself throughout the year:

Lord, lay some soul upon my heart  
 And love that soul through me;  
 And may I bravely do my part  
 To win that soul for Thee.  
 And when I get to the beautiful city,  
 And the saved all around me appear,  
 I want to hear somebody tell me,  
 "It was you who invited me here."

That actually comes from an old Christian song; I heard it first from Henry Gerecke, the Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor who became the chaplain to the Protestant Nazi war criminals at Nuremberg and may well have led some of them to Christ. It was a favorite of his and, though Gerecke died in 1961, I heard him recite it *viva voce* on the website of St. John's Lutheran Church in Chester, Illinois where you can find a recording of Gerecke speaking about his time with the Nazi high leadership.

Or perhaps your vow should concern some care that you will take of others in need, some active engagement with the life of someone or some several folk who need some practical human love and attention that you can provide. You know your life should be more other-centered than it is. That could happen through your participation in a ministry or could be something you do yourself in your neighborhood, with someone you work with, or someone you know in some other way.

Or perhaps for some of you your vow should be to make a new beginning in your marriage or with your children; to love them as you know you ought to love them, to take the anger and resentment out of your relationship and to put the affection, the respect, the consideration, the practical help back in.

The point is to move forward in the New Year, not to stand pat, still less to slide backward as is all too possible to do in the Christian life. The Lord Jesus gave you his very best and that was the best indeed! It is ours to give him our best in return. We have never done that, you and I; not even close. But to want to give him our best and to strive to give him our best is simply to the love the Lord as we ought to love him. Surely you agree with that!

Make going forward for the Lord's honor in your life a matter of faith in him. Say to him again and again throughout the year, "Command what you will, O Lord, but give what you command."

Remember, the Lord wants you to do this. What do we read in his Word: “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified.” He wants you to do this, to expend effort to be holy before him and to serve him more faithfully, so you can count on him to honor your effort if only you will make it. Take it from the Apostle Paul, a man who knew something about the Christian life:

“Aim for perfection.” [2 Cor. 13:11]