

PRIMER *presents...*

Aslan is Growing

*Justification,
Sanctification,
Good Works
and Assurance*



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“Aslan,” said Lucy, “you’re bigger.”

“That is because you are older, little one,” answered he.

“Not because you are?”

“I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.”

C.S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian*

What a profound picture of sanctification this is. As the understanding of the faith-filled Lucy grows and her relationship with Aslan deepens, so he gets bigger and bigger. As she grows – if she grows, when she grows – he is magnified in her eyes.

The purpose of the Christian life – indeed of *life* – is the magnification of the greatness of God and his glory, most especially in the glory of his Son and the gospel of his grace. The purpose of justification is nothing less than union with Christ. Created in him, crucified with him, united with him in his resurrection, justified, sanctified, made alive in him and seated with him in glory. The Christian life is, literally, Jesus *everything*. To live is Christ. To live is to have Christ formed in us. Not only to be justified, but to become Christlike. As we grow, he is magnified. How could it be otherwise, seeing as the point of creation itself is that he might be supremely preeminent? (Col 1:18) No wonder Paul was wracked with anguish when the Galatians seemed to be allowing Christ’s formation in them, and them in him, to slip away:

Gal 4:19 ■ *...I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you...*

Christ in us, but not us in him?

Some time ago I found myself in conversation with an evangelist. He confessed his concern to me that out of the people he is seeing come to faith, about a year later the only difference in most of their lives will be that they have bolted on going to a church service on Sunday. As we explored why that might be I asked if he had given them any other expectation whilst proclaiming and explaining the good news and inviting them to come to Christ. Had he, for example, told them that they would receive the Holy Spirit and that they should expect and look for Jesus-shaped transformation in their lives? Or had he told them that if they come to Christ they will need to reorient everything in life to him now being at the centre? Had he mentioned that their life purpose would change, that Jesus would include them in one of his churches and give them gifts to participate in his disciple-making mission to the world?

The answer in each case was “no,” and his reasoning was accurate and disturbing: “What if I say those things,” he said, “and then they join a church where it is manifestly not the case? There will be a disconnect between the good news they think they have received and their subsequent experience.” Thus, he was in danger of tailoring his evangelism to a sub-biblical view of church and of omitting any expectation of transformation. He went on:

“I think I have been in danger of talking about justification only, forgiveness only. All the things that you cannot merit and don’t do anything to receive other than to trust God. And, in the process, have omitted the second half of the story – that Christ will dwell in you, transform you, include you, empower you and use you.”

That is a profound analysis. The omission effectively leads into passivity because we identify the whole gospel with the parts in which we are simply recipients rather than progressively sanctified participants. We receive with joy the truth that we are justified and forgiven but aren’t even told that Jesus is calling us to leave our nets, follow him, be transformed by him and included in what he is doing. Not only is he now in our lives, but he calls us to leave our old lives and become consumed with his life. If at – or before – conversion we are given no expectation of being filled with the Spirit, growing in Christlikeness and being transformed, then it should come as no surprise if subsequently there is little expectation of sanctification. People assume all the benefits of being in Christ with no expectation of what it will mean for him to live in them. Their understanding of union with Christ is one-sided, merely about what he will do for them and what they will receive.

Of course, the New Testament is full of appeals and expectation to grow in Christlikeness and service. When we leave it merely at conversion it is as if Aslan remains forever the same size. We seem to think that Christ is glorified in our justification but not in our sanctification or good works. But he should be glorified in our sanctification and works, as he is in the justifying of sinners. Not only are we recreated, we are *purposefully* recreated in Christ to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do. The goal of it all, according to 1 Timothy 1:5, is (unsurprisingly) love. God redeems us for his glory, progressively transforms us for his glory and prepares things for us to do that exemplify his love, for his glory. It is no good to give our attention only to the first of these.

Justification and Sanctification

Justification is the wonderful reality that that we are declared righteous before God, with mighty entailments for our status and eternal destiny. This righteousness is from God, not from ourselves, by grace alone and not earned by any merit from us. In the great exchange God imputes to saved sinners the righteousness and holiness of Jesus while simultaneously placing on him our sin and the judgement that it is due,

thereby satisfying his justice. This righteousness is received by faith alone in Christ, and renders us perfect in the sight of God because of Jesus: “For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.” (Heb 10:14)

Note the distinction here: Being perfected is one-time, accomplished by Jesus. And it describes the substance of justification: Jesus has taken away sins (10:4, 10:11); he has brought forgiveness (10:18). By contrast, sanctification is ongoing, progressive set-apartness, growth in holiness. Those who are thus perfected will be growing in holiness. Jesus has been magnified in their salvation, it is unthinkable that he won't be magnified in his transformation of their character.

The question of course is what is meant by being *sanctified* or *made holy*? Too often joyless, pseudo-pious religion has given the impression that it is all about self-induced moral rectitude accompanied by stern misery. But “sanctification” that is evidenced only by misery, sternness and what you don't do is no sanctification at all. Worse, it implies that Christ is miserable because being in him is so obviously joyless. A transformation has occurred alright, but not a very pleasant or Christian one!

Sanctification does, of course, include putting off the old self and fleeing the deeds of darkness. But it also involves putting on Christ. Colossians 3, for example, speaking of Christ being our life, urges us to put to death what is worldly, whatever is of the old self that attracts the wrath of God (3:5-6) and to putting on delightful Christlikeness:

Col 3:12, 14 | Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience... And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Moral growth in Christlikeness, then, isn't just about what one does not do. It is pre-eminently bearing the fruit of righteousness. People who are being sanctified are not usually known for their grim and spartan asceticism but for their vibrant and abounding love and joy. The language of fruitfulness is rich (and ripe!) in the epistles, most memorably in the fruit of the Spirit in Gal 5 but not only there; and it is usually connected with sanctification:

- “Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth)” (Eph 5:8-9).
- Praying that the Philippians love would abound, Paul's desire is that they will be “filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God” (Phil 1:11).
- Seeking wisdom and understanding from the Holy Spirit for the Colossian believers in order that they may live a life worthy of the Lord, Paul prays for them to be “bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God” (Col 1:10).
- In James we hear of “the wisdom that comes from heaven” which is “full of mercy and good fruit” (3:17).

Note the close connection between righteousness, the fruit of righteousness (“the fruit of the light” – what a phrase!) and God being glorified, in the Philippians reference. Note too, in the Colossians verse, the connection between bearing fruit and growing in the knowledge of God. Knowledge of God is obtained doing the good works he has prepared, not through mere cognition alone. In loving like God loves we know the God of love better.

It is, of course, vital to get the order right. Justification is the grounds of sanctification, not least of all because it is to the justified that God gives the Holy Spirit who is the one who transforms us in Christlikeness. Sanctification, in turn, is evidenced by its fruit in character and good works, these being the fruit of righteousness. Sanctification is not the ground of justification. If the order is reversed – attempting good works in order to attract the approval and justification of God through merit – the result is literally damnable. Not only so, but those who are embarrassed by the cross and its offence find it an easy way out. There is a long history of those who claim good works themselves are the gospel and that they are advancing the kingdom merely by doing good with no reference to the saving work of Christ. Mission, as defined from the perspective of works alone, can thus be completely divorced from evangelism. There are plenty of organisations and initiatives that style themselves as missions on this basis among whom you search in vain for anything explicit about the gospel.

However, for fear of either a theology of works-righteousness, or of confusing good works for the gospel, or of drift into being gospel-free “missions,” evangelicals can rightly be questioned about whether we make as strong and close connection between righteousness and the fruit of righteousness as we ought. The point of James 1:22-25 is that we are blessed, not by knowing the gospel, but by bearing gospel fruit because fruit is the evidence that we are in Christ. There is no justification without sanctification, and no sanctification that is not evidenced in transformed character, the obedience of faith and good deeds. If we claim to be justified but our claim has no obvious outworking in holiness, the fruit of the Spirit and obedience, then we are deluded. The justified person is inevitably involved in the process of sanctification and that growth is inevitably evidenced by deeds. They are the canary in the mine. Put another way, behaviour is the barometer of the heart. As the Apostle John says, if you claim to be in the light but hate your brother you are still in the darkness and are blind (1 John 2:10-11).

How are we sanctified?

In Phil 1:11 the fruit of righteousness comes through Jesus Christ. Just as righteousness itself is his work of grace in justification, so it is with sanctification, the fruit of righteousness. The key is the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of justified people. The false teachers in Galatia were proclaiming that we are justified by works of the law or/and that we go on with Christ by works of the law. Paul's famous response is that they became Christians (received the Spirit) not by works of the law but by hearing with faith, and also that they continue with Christ (God supplying the Spirit and working miracles among you) not by works of the law but by hearing with faith: *“Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness”* (Gal 3:6, cf. Rom 4:3).

How, then, is the Holy Spirit operating in sanctification in our lives? Consider Gal 5:5-6:

Gal 5:5-6 | *For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*

That is, the Holy Spirit is producing faith and that faith is evidenced by secure hope that the righteousness God has given us is going to be fulfilled at the triumphant return of Jesus. And this Holy Spirit-produced faith in future hope is also producing present love. As we walk by the Holy Spirit (v16, “led by the Spirit” v18) he produces new desires that expel the desires of the flesh.

Thomas Chalmers scintillating phrase “the expulsive power of a new affection” is rightly and helpfully in vogue at the moment. His contention was that we turn from our old affections:



Thomas Chalmers, *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection*, freely available online.

...by setting forth another object, even God, as more worthy of [the heart's] attachment, so as that the heart shall be prevailed upon not to resign an old affection, which shall have nothing to succeed it, but to exchange an old affection for a new one.

“When the spirit of adoption is poured upon us,” he continues “it is then that the heart, brought under the mastery of one great and predominant affection, is delivered from the tyranny of its former desires, in the only way in which deliverance is possible.”

Interestingly, he does not say much more about the Holy Spirit. As good and true as his analysis is, it explains mainly how the Spirit works in the first element of sanctification, namely the putting off, rather than in the putting on of Christ. And, dare I say, he doesn't go very far in explaining the means by which the Spirit produces new desires which expel the desires of the flesh.

Among the most illuminating passages is Titus 2 which encompasses many of these themes, written as it was “to further the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness, in the hope of eternal life” (Tit 1:1-2) which has been manifested in God's word through Paul's preaching (Tit 1:3). The word is preached and secure hope springs to life in our hearts (which according to Gal 5:6 is by the Holy Spirit). This Holy Spirit-inspired hope is rooted in knowledge of the truth and flows out accordingly in mature faith and truth-soaked godliness.

According to Titus 2 the grace of God *has* appeared, and *will* appear (2:11, 13), bringing salvation and teaching us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness. That is, grace applied to our lives by the Holy

Spirit both saves and sanctifies. We are saved by grace through faith and sanctified by grace through faith. Transformed by grace at the start of our Christian lives and transformed by grace going along. Of course, it couldn't be otherwise, else we would be able to take some credit for our own transformation. It would no longer be all of Christ and some of the glory would attach to us rather than him.

And how does grace make faith triumph over sin in our lives, by the Spirit, such that we grow in sanctification? How does it teach us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions, to live self-controlled and upright lives? To elaborate just four things:

1. The grace of God has appeared. That is, Jesus has come. He has decisively delivered us from the power of sin. We are now free from its power and free to be enslaved to righteousness (Rom 6:14-23). We gaze on Christ and are transformed by the Spirit who, along with a new heart, has given us new desires and obligations to live by the Spirit. Therefore, we have a whole new identity, one oriented to the Spirit, not to the flesh, and that therefore tends towards sanctification rather than sinning.
2. Jesus has conquered our hearts. We have seen the Lord in his beauty. Previously sin seemed attractive by lack of comparison. Now its attractions seem hideous in the light of his glory. He has won us. We are freed to serve in the new way of the Spirit.
3. We have a new, worthy object of worship and adoration. We used to fling our lives away worshipping rubbish. Now we pant after the living God and his Christ as a deer pants after streams of water. We will throw away anything and everything in order to have him. If you meet a Christian who doesn't seem to have much of a worship life, who struggles with adoration, there is a high chance they will also struggle with sanctification. Possibly they will even have got to the point of justifying and theologising away their lack of progress, simply expecting to fail and fail again until the New Creation. They have no expectation of the Spirit's transformative work, no anticipation of his power working in them.

Grace, then, in the power of the Spirit, transforms our identity and worldview, our slavery and obligations and what we worship. We have hearts of flesh attuned to God, not hearts of stone weighed down by and enslaved to sin. We are alive to God, so we can and do reckon ourselves dead to sin (Rom 6:11).

4. And then there is the grace of the glory to come. We wait *"for the blessed hope – the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good"* (Tit 2:13-14). In other words, the future coming of the Lord Jesus is so wonderful it makes us eager to do what he wants. We are enthusiasts! He has come and is coming. He has conquered and will conquer. He is reigning and will reign. The Holy Spirit is transforming us by this and for this.

*We are saved
by grace through faith*

*and sanctified
by grace through faith.*



Sanctification and Deeds

The first half of Titus 2 shows the results of all this: Christlikeness, evidenced in love-fuelled good works; transformed gospel patterns of behaviour flowing from grace-filled, Holy Spirit-transformed hearts that “*will make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive*” (Tit 2:10). Hearts that are being sanctified are those living in the light of Jesus’ first and second coming, attentive to grace that has come and is going to come. Titus 2:7 and 2:14 are clear that God makes people who are like this eager to do good works.

We should not be surprised then to see how readily sanctification is connected to deeds because love is the fruit of faith, a chief evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in our transformed characters; and faith working through love is the obvious outworking of our Spirit-inspired hope.

God is love. We love because he first loved us. It is thus impossible to think rightly about love without rooting it in the god-ness of God and the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. However, we have seen that it is equally impossible to think rightly about love without it manifesting itself in good works. It is explicit in Eph 2:10 that God has prepared good deeds for us to walk in, so that he receives glory. It is also implicit in Jesus’ command in Matthew 5:16: “*Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*”

Likewise in 2 Thessalonians, Paul speaks of Christ being glorified by our lives:

2 Thess 1:11-12

With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Justification, then, is for the glory of God, as Jesus, the best, sacrifices himself for the worst in order that they might become the righteousness of God. But so is sanctification, as the consequences of justification are seen in the fruit of righteousness and the reality of a new heart is evidenced in life-transformation by the Holy Spirit. And so are deeds, as God-given obedience of faith works its way out to God’s world in God-given love. This is the natural trajectory of justification. The result, according to Jesus in Matthew 5, is God being worshiped.

Of course, none of this comes easily, in this sin-stained world. But we are confident nevertheless because it is all the work of God and our justification is impregnably sealed by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Otherwise our deeds would

merely reflect a doomed fight for goodness with neither sure foundations nor the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us. However noble the struggle we would be bound to lose because you cannot be sanctified until the slavery to sin is broken by the redemption that comes through Christ.



Deeds and Assurance

Finally, what is the connection between deeds and assurance? I am tempted to simply quote question and answer 86 of the Heidelberg Catechism and leave it at that:



Question: Since we have been delivered from our misery by grace alone through Christ, without any merit of our own, why must we yet do good works?

Answer: Because Christ, having redeemed us by His blood, also renews us by His Holy Spirit to be His image, so that:

1. *With our whole life we may show ourselves thankful to God for His benefits*
2. *And He may be praised by us*
3. *Further, that we ourselves may be assured of our faith by its fruits*
4. *And that by our godly walk of life we may win our neighbours for Christ*

For our purposes, though, let's develop the third point: "That we ourselves may be assured of our faith by its fruits." As it is possible to tell a tree by its fruit, when we see the fruit of faith it increases our confidence that our faith is real. It is an experiential test that demonstrates we are prepared to act on the truth that we have received. It is an objective demonstration that we are submitted to the obedience of faith, following our new obligations to the Spirit.

In hardship this is even more the case. We could turn to many Scriptures to underline the point; when we persevere in good deeds in the middle of trial, because we have a hope in the glory of God, it is a sure sign of the Holy Spirit at work (Rom 5:3-4); it is commendable in the sight of God (1 Peter 2:20); it is like Jesus (1 Peter 2:21); and, thereby, a sure sign that we are being sanctified.

1 John is particularly helpful for its rich exploration of the relationship between objective and subjective grounds of assurance, and love. However, perhaps the clearest is 2 Peter 1:3-11 where we discover:

God “has given us everything we need for a godly life,” having called us “by his own glory and goodness” (1:3).

↳ Through these he has given us “his very great and precious promises” (1:4a).

↳ “so that through them you may participate in the divine nature” (1:4b) i.e. becoming Christ-like, Spirit-filled, sanctified, bearing the fruit of righteousness.

↳ For this very reason we put on things to do with faith, love and the fruit of the Spirit (1:5-7).

↳ If we don’t then we become ineffective (1:8) and show we have forgotten our justification (1:9).

↳ But if we do it diligently then we will be more and more assured of our calling and election (1:10).

When we act on the obedience of faith we not only make our calling and election more sure, we are actually doing what God has created us to do and prepared for us to do. To do otherwise undermines our assurance because it is disobedient.

The pastoring of those who lack assurance and therefore doubt their faith because, for whatever reason, they don’t see the fruits of faith in themselves is beyond the scope of this discussion. It does, however, highlight how important it is to encourage each other in these things corporately in the body of Christ. We see sanctification and deeds much more readily in others than in ourselves. Assurance is from the Lord. Assurance of assurance is often a matter of encouragement from other believers.

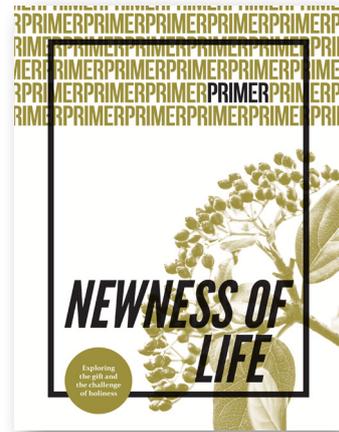
Conclusion

We began this essay with Christ being the purpose of life. To live is Christ. Therefore, we live seeking to become Christlike, submitted to the Holy Spirit, asking him to sanctify, attentive to the opportunities to do good that God has prepared for us. It is a package from which we do not have freedom to pick and choose. God has intended that he will be glorified in justification, in sanctification and through our Holy Spirit-enabled good deeds of love which flow from faith by grace. We are meant to believe the good news, speak the good news and be good news. As God receives glory, so we receive the inestimable help that is his full assurance of faith. To our limited and feeble – but faith-filled – gaze, Aslan is getting bigger and bigger.

Eph 2:8-10 | *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

This article is on the same topic as issue 06 of *Primer*, entitled *Newness of Life*. The issue explores the doctrine of sanctification, and includes contributions from Tim Chester, Dan Green, Julian Hardyman, Eric Ortlund, Matthew Roberts and David Shaw.

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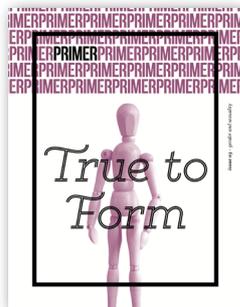


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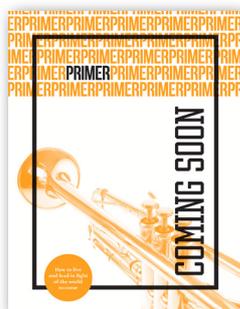
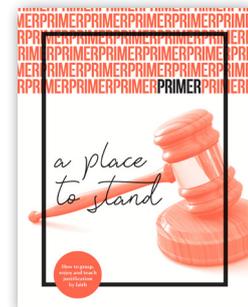


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