

“What Happens to Us Now?”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Christine Chakoian on New Life in Christ
based on 2 Corinthians 5:16-19



Some of the most essential questions of Christian faith include, “Where do we start?” “Why are we here?” and “Why did Jesus come?” Some of the answers are that, first, we start by acknowledging that *the sovereignty of God* is the beginning and end of faith. God is in charge, and not we ourselves. This is the starting and ending place of faith. Second, we’re here as followers of Christ not because we chose to believe, but because *God chose us—elected or predestined us*, to be instruments for God’s purposes. Third, *Jesus came to save us from sin, through grace alone*: “By grace you have been saved, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” This radical grace—this lavish love of God, this astonishing gift of mercy—is God’s way of doing for us what we ourselves could never do. No single image can capture the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Christ redeemed us from slavery to sin; justified us when we are guilty; quenched our thirst in life’s parched deserts; ransomed us from captivity to temptation. We are saved by grace, and it is not our own doing. It is the gift of God through Jesus Christ.

But grace is not the *end* of the story; rather, it is only the beginning; so we also ask, “What happens next?” And here the Apostle Paul helps us in his second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 5 verses 16-19:

From now on we regard no one according to the flesh, even though we once knew Christ according to the flesh, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

Paul’s answer to “What happens next?” is, “New life in Christ!” Jesus’ parable of the 100 sheep in which God goes looking relentlessly for the one lamb that had run away until that one lost sheep is found exemplifies this new life in Christ that results from God’s amazing grace. Again and again, Scripture points to the amazing grace of God ... in the way God displays such love for us through Jesus’ life and death and resurrection ... in the way God runs to welcome the prodigal home ... in the way God judges us, not by our trespasses, but by Christ’s perfection. Love. Welcome. Forgiveness. This is the good news of the gospel: in Jesus Christ we are forgiven. We, who had run away, are reconciled to God. We have new life!

But sometimes it is tempting to end there—at the point when we were lost and now are found. It is tempting to end with every wrong we’ve ever done swept clean: every foolish word forgotten, every vengeful act forgiven, every self-indulgent vanity erased. The poet W. H. Auden once put it this way: “Every crook will argue, ‘I like committing crimes. God likes forgiving them. Really the world is admirably arranged.’”¹ As St. Paul asks early believers, “Should we sin so that grace may abound?” (Rom. 6:1).

Choosing to sin might actually make sense if the grace of God ended there, with forgiveness. But, of course, it doesn’t. Let’s look at the second half of grace: the part that shows us how we are made new.

These two parts of grace have technical terms: justification and sanctification:

Justification literally means “made innocent,” so we can be reconciled to God. Justification is a one-time event, done *for* us by God through Jesus Christ. Justification is the beginning of our new life.

Sanctification means “being made holy.” Sanctification happens over time, done *in* us by God through the Holy Spirit. Sanctification is the ongoing process of living our new life.

One of the best descriptions of the two-part process of grace was shared by theologian Shirley Guthrie:

Justification tells us how a person becomes a Christian.
Sanctification tells us how a person grows as a Christian.

Justification tells us that God is *for* us, forgiving and saving us from sin.
Sanctification tells us that by the Holy Spirit the same God works *in* us, helping us to leave our sin behind and begin a new and radically different kind of life.ⁱⁱ

I might put it this way:

Justification tells us what we are saved *from*.
Sanctification tells us that we are saved *for*.

And I’m convinced that even children can grasp the way salvation is worked out in us through God’s gracious love. Do you remember the wonderful book *The Velveteen Rabbit*? There is a boy who receives a splendid velveteen rabbit as a present. For a while, the rabbit just looks good—plush and soft and shiny. But then he is chosen as one of the boy’s favorites. He comes to know a very wise and very well-worn old Skin Horse. One day, the Velveteen Rabbit asks the old Skin Horse a question:

“What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”

“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.”

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?”

“It doesn’t happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t

matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

"I suppose *you* are real?" said the Rabbit. And then he wished he had not said it, for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive. But the Skin Horse only smiled.ⁱⁱⁱ

Becoming real—this may be the most perfect description of sanctification. We are sanctified—made “real”—not by our own doing, but by a life-long process of being loved into being. It doesn't happen all at once. It takes a long time. But to whatever extent we have been made real, we wouldn't trade it for anything in the world.

My guess is that you know some people who are Real ... some people in whom the Spirit's work of sanctification is clearly evident. I think, for example, of some people I know who are in a Twelve-Step program, in a life-long recovery from addiction. Their first step was grasping their powerlessness, but bit by bit, they entrusted themselves to a higher power, made amends, and began a life that, step by step, reaches toward wholeness. They are keenly aware that they are never completely made whole—the process will continue the rest of their lives in the bit-by-bit process of sanctification.

So how does sanctification work, and what does it look like in our lives? Just as the once-and-for-all action of God through Christ to justify us can't be captured by one single image or metaphor, Scripture describes the bit-by-bit action of God through the Spirit to sanctify us in myriad ways.

- Jesus redeems us from slavery to sin. But, Scripture reminds us, *“You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Rom 8:15-16).* Day by day, bit by bit, we are called to remember who we are: no longer slaves to sin, but children of God.
- Jesus justifies us. In spite of our guilt, God judges us as according to Jesus' innocence. But, like Jean Valjean in *Les Miserables*, what will we do with our second chance? Scripture says, *“God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, has given us the ministry of reconciliation.”* Day by day, bit by bit, we are urged to remember who we are: no longer guilty thieves, but messengers of hope.
- Jesus ransoms us from our captivity to our insecurity and fear, our arrogance and false measures of success. But what will we do when we're set free? Scripture urges us, *“You were called to freedom; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence. Live by the Spirit; the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal 5:13, 22-23).* Day by day, bit by bit, we are encouraged to remember who we are: no longer self-absorbed, but humble stewards of God's gifts.

Does this mean we will never be tempted? Of course not. The same temptations that have always plagued us will continue, whether in the form of urges to take that which is not ours or aspirations to lord our success over others. We'll still be tempted to confuse material possessions with spiritual wealth, or to be so absorbed in our small concerns that we turn away from those who are truly suffering. Life in the Spirit does not protect us from being tempted; rather, the Spirit invites us, again and again, to turn away from those temptations and turn instead to God's gracious, life-giving will.

The great Reformer John Calvin once said it this way:

We are not our own: let not our ... will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds.

We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh.

We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours.

Conversely, we are God's: let us therefore live for him and die for him.

We are God's: let his wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions.

We are God's: let all parts of our life accordingly strive toward him as our only ... goal."^{iv}

How do we live this sanctified life, this life made holy by the Spirit? There is no one magic answer. Through prayer and self-awareness. Through the practice of rigorous honesty. Expecting setbacks and relapses, and then starting over again, not from scratch but from some paces back. Through trustworthy sponsors and family, friends, and spiritual guides, our brothers and sisters in Christ. Through people who are to us as the Old Skin Horse once was to the Velveteen Rabbit.

Becoming Real. Becoming sanctified. Over and over again, we practice being loved into new life by God. Over and over again, we practice living into the Spirit instead of living according to the flesh. Does it happen all at once? No. It happens bit by bit. Does it hurt? Sometimes. But it doesn't matter. Because, to whatever extent you become Real, you wouldn't trade it for anything in the world.

ⁱW.H. Auden, "For the Time Being," *Collected Poems* (NY: Random House, 1969), p. 303, cited by Stephen W. Plunkett, *This We Believe* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2002), p. 100.

ⁱⁱShirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. 331, cited by Plunkett, p. 98.

ⁱⁱⁱMargery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit: or How Toys Become Real* (NY: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1983), pages unnumbered.

^{iv}John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.7.1.