

MORTIFICATION, VIVIFICATION, AND THE EXERCISE OF JUSTIFYING FAITH

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The New Testament addresses the believer with genuine commands. Paul charges the church to “put to death the deeds of the body” (Rom. 8:13, English Standard Version) and to walk in “newness of life” (Rom. 6:4), and he directs these charges to those whom God has already justified freely by His grace. This combination creates a durable theological problem: if a sinner is justified through faith alone, apart from any work, what is the believer doing when he obeys these imperatives, and what relation does that obedience bear to the faith by which he was justified? A recurring impulse within Reformed circles, running from the seventeenth-century antinomian controversies to contemporary preaching, resolves the tension by collapsing sanctification into justification, so that the commands merely describe what a believer who reflects on his acceptance will spontaneously do. The opposite error grounds acceptance in the obedience itself. Neither reckons adequately with the way Scripture joins the imperatives to the believer’s union with Christ. Because the one faith that receives Christ for justification also unites the believer to Him as the root and principle of sanctification, the New Testament imperatives of mortification and vivification come to the believer as genuine commands whose obedience is the Spirit-empowered exercise of that same faith, so that putting sin to death and walking in newness of life are the necessary fruit of free justification rather than its rival or its ground.

Sanctification flows from the believer’s union with Christ through the same faith that justifies, and it arrives as a benefit really distinct from justification yet never separated from it. The Reformed tradition has guarded this distinction with care because collapsing it in either direction produces a different religion. Turretin draws the line with characteristic precision: as to their object, “justification is concerned with the guilt of sin; sanctification with its pollution.” Justification is a forensic act, completed at once, in which God acquits the sinner and imputes the

righteousness of Christ; sanctification is a real renovation, begun in this life and perfected only in glory, in which God progressively conforms the believer to His own image.¹ Yet Turretin refuses any separation, because the two benefits hang on the twofold relation Christ sustains to His people. As surety, Christ justifies; as head, He sanctifies. According to Turretin, “it is not sufficient that Christ died and lives for us, unless he also mortifies the old man in us after the likeness of his own death and vivifies the new man, so that what was done in the head is done in the members,” and the very faith that is the instrument of justification stands as the root and principle of sanctification, purging the heart and working through love (Gal. 5:6).² One Christ, received by one faith, confers both benefits, which is why the imperatives of mortification and vivification can never threaten the believer’s acceptance with God.

The indicative on which those imperatives rest is union with the exalted Christ, and that union is already an accomplished reality in the believer. Paul presents the resurrection of Christ as “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20), language that binds His resurrection and the resurrection of His people into a single harvest. Gaffin argues that this solidarity has a present dimension: believers have already been raised with Christ, so that at the core of their being they “will never be more resurrected than they already are.” Gaffin further observes that the relation between this indicative and the New Testament imperative is irreversible yet inseparable; the indicative grounds the imperative and never reverses into it, while the imperative remains the fruit apart from which the indicative is present in no one.³ The

¹ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, vol. 2 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994), 690–91.

² *Ibid.*, 692–93.

³ Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *By Faith, Not by Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 67, 76, 81–82.

commands of the New Testament are addressed to people of whom this resurrection is true. Paul does not exhort the Romans to die to sin so that they may come alive; he commands them to consider themselves alive to God in Christ Jesus and, on that ground, to present their members to God as instruments for righteousness (Rom. 6:11–13). Union with Christ thus supplies the foundation on which the whole argument stands: the commands come to those already justified, and the same faith that received Christ now goes to work.

The duty of mortification belongs exclusively to the justified, and Romans 8:13 establishes this in its very grammar. Paul writes to those for whom “there is therefore now no condemnation” (Rom. 8:1), and to them he says, “if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Rom. 8:13). The conditional does not make life uncertain. Owen explains that the “if” expresses the certainty of connection between mortification and life, the way a physician tells a sick man that if he takes the remedy he will be well; the relation is one of means to end, never of cause to effect, for eternal life remains the gift of God through Jesus Christ (Rom. 6:23). From this text Owen derives the thesis that governs his whole treatise: “the choicest believers, who are assuredly freed from the condemning power of sin, ought yet to make it their business all their days to mortify the indwelling power of sin.”⁴ Every term matters. The duty is daily, the duty belongs to believers, and the duty presupposes their freedom from condemnation rather than earning it. The same verse names the Spirit as the principal efficient cause of the work, so the believer’s killing of sin is at every point a Spirit-empowered act. The command to mortify is therefore a genuine command resting on a settled indicative: God bids the justified man kill the very sin that can no longer condemn him.

⁴ John Owen, *Sin and Temptation*, ed. Kelly M. Kopic, Justin Taylor, and John W. Tweeddale, vol. 15, *The Complete Works of John Owen* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2024), 79–81.

The believer carries out this duty through one great means, faith acting on Christ. Owen's great direction is to "set faith at work on Christ for the killing of your sin," for "his blood is the great sovereign remedy for sin-sick souls."⁵ Faith ponders the provision laid up in Christ for this very lust, raises the heart to a settled expectation of relief from Him, and acts particularly on His death, bringing the cross into the heart so that the believer is conformed to it (Rom. 6:3–6). This direction closes the door on the moralist alternative, for mortification attempted from self-strength, by ways of self-invention, for the end of a self-righteousness "is the soul and substance of all false religion in the world."⁶ The unregenerate man warring against a single lust builds without a foundation, and his proper work is conversion, not mortification. Yet Owen guards the opposite flank with equal care. Life and comfort do not flow from mortification as their immediate cause; the privileges of adoption and justification, witnessed to the soul by the Spirit, hold that office, while mortification serves by removing what weakens and darkens the soul.⁷ The believer who kills sin is not purchasing peace with God. He is weeding the garden so that the graces already planted may flourish. Mortification thus proves to be justifying faith at its appointed work, obeying a real command, in the power of the Spirit, on the settled ground of acceptance.

Vivification, the positive half of sanctification, is the Spirit-wrought growth of the new man, and it is evangelical from root to fruit. The believer's holiness does not begin in himself any more than his righteousness does. Bavinck states the principle in a single sentence: "Christ is our holiness in the same sense in which he is our righteousness." The holiness that must become

⁵ Owen, *Sin and Temptation*, 189.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 104–5.

ours awaits us whole in Christ, who rose from the grave to communicate Himself to His people for both benefits, so that sanctification, no less than justification, arrives as a gift, purely of grace, granted in the one undivided Christ.⁸ Scripture gives this evangelical holiness its shape in commands. Paul charges believers to present themselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life (Rom. 6:13), and to put on the new self, seeking the things above where Christ is seated (Col. 3:1–10). These imperatives summon the believer to real activity, walking in newness of life and putting on compassion, humility, and love, precisely because the resurrection on which they rest has already occurred. The new man is not an aspiration awaiting achievement; he is a creation awaiting exercise. Vivification is therefore the other half of the one duty: the same justifying faith that kills sin also clothes itself in the graces of Christ.

Holiness is therefore both gift and task, and faith is the hand that takes up both. Bavinck captures the duality in the rule of organic life: those born of God increasingly become the children of God because in principle they already are His children, so the standing summons of the Christian life is “Become what you are!”⁹ The becoming is no polite suggestion. It proceeds by faith, which Bavinck calls “the means of sanctification par excellence,” the one great work Christians have to do according to the principles of the gospel (John 6:29).¹⁰ Living faith does not merely recall the verdict of justification; it works through love (Gal. 5:6), takes hold of Christ’s fullness, and yields the obedience the gospel commands. Gaffin presses the same point through Philippians 2:12–13, where Paul commands believers to work out their salvation with fear and trembling precisely because God works in them to will and to work: sanctification is

⁸ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 230–31.

⁹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:255.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4:257.

wholly the work of God, and for that very reason it engages the whole activity of the believer.¹¹ There is no division of labor in which God supplies a percentage and the believer supplies the remainder. Grace does not shrink the task; grace funds it. In vivification the commands of the gospel summon justifying faith into its fullest action, and the Spirit who united the believer to Christ carries the work He began toward completion.

The strongest objection to this account comes from within the Reformed house itself, and it deserves a fair statement. The antinomian impulse, recurring from the seventeenth-century controversies in England and New England down to the present, holds that sanctification consists essentially in reflecting on one's justification: the believer who truly grasps his free acceptance will spontaneously produce holiness, so the imperatives merely describe what justified people do, and any command pressed as command smells of legalism. The position is attractive because it means to guard free grace, and free grace must be guarded. But the guard is posted at the wrong gate. Jones observes that Rutherford's verdict on the antinomians was that they "make all duties a matter of courtesy," obedience becoming optional gratitude rather than commanded duty, and Jones demonstrates that the New Testament moves in precisely the opposite direction: because the indicatives of the new covenant are greater, the imperatives are not relaxed but strengthened.¹² The Lord who washed His disciples' feet did not loosen the command to love; He issued a new commandment measured by His own sacrifice (John 13:34). A scheme in which the gospel only describes and never commands renders superfluous the warnings, exhortations, and threatenings that Scripture addresses to believers, and it collapses into one benefit what God has

¹¹ Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight*, 83.

¹² Mark Jones, *Antinomianism: Reformed Theology's Unwelcome Guest?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 36–37. Jones quotes Samuel Rutherford, *A Survey of the Spirituall Antichrist*, 2:29.

joined as two. The objection fails at the point of its deepest concern, for it cannot account for the gospel's own voice.

The Reformed answer to the antinomian is not less grace but rightly ordered grace. Good works contribute nothing to the believer's justification, yet they remain necessary, and the tradition has specified that necessity with care. Jones recounts Davenant's formula: good works are necessary to the salvation of the justified "by a necessity of order, not of causality," as the way appointed to eternal life rather than its meritorious cause.¹³ The order runs one direction only. Obedience never grounds acceptance, and acceptance never excuses obedience. Owen compresses the whole settlement into a sentence: "our interest in God is not built upon our holiness; but it is as true that we have none without it."¹⁴ Here justification and sanctification stand in their proper relation, distinct in nature, inseparable in the believer, both flowing from the one Christ received by one faith. The imperatives of mortification and vivification therefore threaten nothing and accomplish everything they were given to accomplish: they call justifying faith to its appointed exercise. The believer who hears the command to put sin to death is not being invited to doubt his pardon. He is being summoned to live from it.

The question posed at the outset admits of a clear answer. When the believer obeys the New Testament imperatives of mortification and vivification, he is doing nothing other than exercising, in the power of the Spirit, the same faith through which God justified him. The commands are genuine, for the gospel speaks with the authority of the risen Lord; the obedience is empowered, for the Spirit who raised Christ dwells in those He commands; and the whole

¹³ Jones, *Antinomianism*, 65. Jones quotes John Davenant, *A Treatise on Justification*, trans. Josiah Allport (London: Hamilton, Adams, 1844–46), 1:302.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 69. Jones quotes John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 3:576.

work rests on a verdict already rendered, for union with Christ confers justification and sanctification together, distinct and inseparable, from one Savior through one faith. The antinomian fears that commanded holiness will eclipse free grace, and the moralist fears that free grace will dissolve commanded holiness, but the believer united to Christ need fear neither, because his putting sin to death and his walking in newness of life are the fruit his justification was always appointed to bear. The gospel bids the believer become what he already is in Christ, and then it supplies what it demands. The God who justifies the ungodly is the God who sanctifies His people wholly, and the work He has begun He will surely complete at the day of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:6), so that in both benefits the praise belongs to Him alone.

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