

**General Topics :: The imperishable crown for a holy life**

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The heroic conduct of martyrs who suffered the deepest and most terrible anguish has often been a challenge to lukewarm and backslidden Christians to recommit their lives to serve the Lord with greater devotion and holiness: "Seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith..." (Heb. 12:1-2).

The image of the Christian as a competitor in a race, with a set goal, striving to win and be crowned as victor at the end of the race, must have occurred to Paul while he was attending the Olympic or Isthmian games in Greece. Hence his remark to the Corinthians: "And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified" (1 Cor. 9:25-27 NKJV).

It must have struck Paul that athletes not only commit themselves wholeheartedly to arduous fitness programmes, but also abstain from anything which might negatively influence their performance. This is also essentially what sanctification means – to lead a pure, disciplined life in which Christians abstain from all habits and activities that could damage their spiritual lives. Paul once again challenges the Corinthians in this regard in his second letter, indicating that both body and spirit must be cleansed while we strive to please the Lord in every aspect of our lives: "Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1).

Sanctification implies more than Christians purifying their lives from outright sin and unrighteousness. It also means abandoning any activity or commitment which may not be sinful of itself, but which hinders us from serving the Lord wholeheartedly. The devotion of time, money and effort to earthly things which are not essential to our or our family's temporal needs and do not directly further the Lord's work, will stunt our spiritual growth or even completely ruin our witness for Him (see Phil. 3:17-19). We need to urgently identify and remove these hindrances.

It is only when Christians deny and crucify their old natures, which are focussed on earthly goals and pursuits, that they make a full surrender and pursue "holiness without which no man shall see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14): "As obedient children, not yourselves to the former lusts in your ignorance: but as He which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy" (1 Pet. 1:14-16).

The Lord wants to purify our whole life, to fill it with His Holy Spirit and set it apart for His service (Rom. 6:13). His desire is that even the most hidden thoughts of our hearts should be acceptable in His sight (Ps. 19:15), so that He can have full control of every facet of our lives and thought processes. Only then can we be transformed into examples of His holiness, and our lives be a positive witness so that we shine like stars in this dark world, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation (Lev. 10:3; Phil. 2:14-15).

The wish of the apostle Paul for all true Christians is that they should conform to God's high standard in personal sanctification. He assures them that, even though God's command to holiness is far beyond the reach of the unregenerate to attain to, He will make it a reality in the lives of all Christians who are unconditionally committed to Him: "And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He that calleth you, who also will do it" (1 Thes. 5:23-24).

Only along the path of sanctification can Jesus Christ in all His excellence be manifested in the lives of His disciples. This experience of being clothed with the Lord Jesus also renders them suitably adorned to be introduced to Christ at the marriage supper of the Lamb in bright and clean linen, without spot or blemish (Rev. 19:7-8).