

Lesson 76: Chapter 13: Sanctification: What it isn't

OUTLINE

Keswick holiness explained

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Thomas did a great job giving us a positive explanation of the confession's view of holiness. I wanted to follow up by looking at some of the problematic teaching on holiness that most of us have probably encountered. The traditional view of sanctification is overshadowed by a particular brand of holiness teaching that denies key biblical truths and creates deep pastoral problems. The formal name for it is Keswick theology, after the place in the UK where conventions promoting a particular brand of holiness teaching. Keswick teaching is a modified version of the Wesleyan second blessing teaching. Where Wesley taught sinless perfectionism, Keswick was more modest allowing for remaining sin but no power in temptation. A higher life of victorious living that knows of no known sin and feels no temptation. The teaching was developed in the late 1800s and spread in influence very quickly. It was started by an American Presbyterian Robert Pearsall Smith and his Quaker wife Hannah Whitall Smith. J. C. Pollock in his retelling of *The Keswick Story* tells us, 'They had made a great discovery: 'that is was really a fact that the Lord was both able and willing to deliver us from every temptation if we would but trust Him to do it.'¹ You might have encountered it in the statement 'Let go and let God'; or 'the victorious Christians life'; or 'the higher Christian life.' This brand of holiness teaching has spread to numerous denominations. J. Oswald Sanders, a Baptist, became an advocate for the teaching after he had an experience here in NZ's Pounawea Keswick Convention.² As was the Baptist, F. B. Meyer. The Dutch Reformed Andrew Murray advocated it in works like *Absolute Surrender*. The teachings of Watchman Nee were influenced by it. Some of our beloved missionaries like Hudson Taylor and Amy Carmichael spread it through their writings. Scofield incorporated it into his famous reference bible and secured its place in dispensationalism as another approach to holiness apart from Wesleyan Perfectionism and the reformed view. R. A. Torrey; D. L. Moody; author of the hymn 'Take my life' Francis Ridley Havergal and many others have propagated its teaching, so that we have all likely encountered in one form or another.

Let me give you the details and see if you recognize it.

The central text is Romans 6:1-14. They admit as all Protestants do that we are sinners saved by grace through faith in Christ, and are justified. The difference is not in the doctrine of justification but sanctification. They agree that when saved we are united with Christ for holiness, and filled with His Spirit. But this is where things start to differ. Instead of recognizing as Paul teaches in Romans 6 that the reason we stop sinning as Christians is because we are united with Christ upon being saved, and that we have all that we need to make progress in holiness through our union with Christ. Certain parts of Romans 6 are misread. Using the Wesleyan two-part approach to the Christian life. In other words,

¹ J. C. Pollock, *The Keswick Story*, p12.

² <https://www.bdcconline.net/en/stories/john-oswald-sanders#:~:text=After%20learning%20hard%20lessons%20from,his%20career%2C%20with%20great%20effect.>
Accessed 20/02/2026

salvation is part one and this is sufficient for justification, but there is a second experience that is needed to advance in sanctification. They teach in 6:13 that Paul's call to present ourselves for righteousness is biblical proof of this second phase, 'Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.' Instead of teaching with Paul that God put our old man to death/crucified us with Christ. This is what A.W. Tozer calls a second work of grace where you have crucify yourself through an act of what Andrew Murray calls, 'Absolute Surrender.' And once you have given it all, then you feel a spiritual breakthrough which will make your sanctification easier. Already we can see that instead of the root of our holiness being our union with Christ and an act that God did to us when He united us with Christ in His death; this becomes a secondary act that we must now do ourselves. They teach that though united with Christ in His death the Christian may still be under the dominion of sin. Here they clearly misunderstand Paul notion of the dominion of sin describing someone in Adam and not in Christ. And because Christians can still be under the dominion of sin a second dying is necessary. Once you have had this crisis experience and given it all to God the effects are, and I quote, "Christians will be delivered from all known wrong. [Sinful cravings] . . . will be so completely counteracted by Christ that . . . [a person] will cease from all voluntary transgressions of the Law. The Christian's life (will) . . . potentially become one of endless victory over every form of temptation and moral weakness."³

A second verse that is misunderstood is Rom. 6:11, 'So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.' Instead of seeing what Paul is saying, that we have died with Christ, and the call to consider, the first command in the letter to the Romans is a call to recognize what God has done in saving you, namely uniting you to Christ and His death. Instead of a recognition of what God has done, the call to consider becomes a new thing, where you have to perpetually keep yourself in a state of surrender to gain the benefits of the surrendered life. Considering yourself dead to sin to them means keeping yourself in a state of constant absolute surrender; not remembering that you died with Christ when converted. This brings us to their strange teaching on sanctification by faith alone. Just as we are saved by faith alone, we are sanctified by a second act of faith. It is this act of faith, this continual act of believing yourself dead post your act of self-crucifixion that sustains your state of 'victory' where you find obedience easier and temptation powerless. To not apply yourself in this way, to not let go and let God is seen as acting in the flesh and doing things in your own strength. This is teaching from the quietist tradition. Instead of seeing doing things in your own strength as living a prayerless life and expecting spiritual outcomes, they turn the notion of doing things in your own strength to anything that does not agree with their faith sustained surrender. Sanctification is reduced to a passive state of believing that Jesus is doing it all rather than the traditional view that holiness comes as we exert ourselves and apply ourselves to the means of grace. We see the Bible teaching that we work and God works, not we rest and God works.

J I Packer in his summary of their view of holiness summarizes it this way: 'To achieve holiness in outward life, you must first receive the blessing of sanctification in your inward life—that is, you must enter upon the life that wins,

³ <https://www.gospelforlife.org/http:gospelforlifeorg/articles/2012/4/23/a-critique-of-the-higher-life-movement.html> accessed 20/02/2026

the life of continual victory over sin through a constant exercise of faith. You plug into this life by totally consecrating yourself to God (which it is assumed you have never before done). Having plugged in, you live this life by remembering that you are dead and risen with Christ and He by His Spirit lives in you, and on this basis you ask and allow Him to defeat sin in you every time you find it raising its head. To maintain consecration and exercise faith in this way is your part; do it, and your faithful Lord will certainly do His. In this way you will experience non-subjection to sin that is the birth right of all who are under grace, and living in this new experience (new to you, anyway), you will know peace, joy, spiritual growth, and usefulness to others as never before.’⁴

Packer raises other points of criticism. The teaching makes for poor pastoral advice. Like the teaching of faith healing, any failure to find the breakthrough is all down to your personal failure to consecrate yourself sufficiently. The result is one of morbid introspection, a self-centred not Christ centred view of holiness, and depression when the result does not come resulting from being too sinful to give yourself up in order to have the breakthrough, Packer gives a third person account of his own struggle with this teaching:

‘His perplexity was this: he had heard and read his teachers describing a state of sustained victory over sin. It was pictured as a condition of peace and power in which the Christian, filled and borne along by the Holy Spirit, was kept from falling and was moved and enabled to do things for God which were otherwise beyond him. To yield, surrender and consecrate oneself to God was the prescribed way in.... But the student’s experience as he tried to follow instructions was like that of a poor drug addict whom he found years later trying with desperate concentration to walk through a brick wall. His attempts at total consecration left him where he was—an immature and churned up young man, painfully aware of himself, battling his daily way, as adolescents do, through manifold urges and surges of discontent and frustration...it all seemed a long way from the victorious, power-packed life which those Christians were supposed to enjoy, who by consecration had emptied themselves of themselves.

But what should he do? According to the teaching, all that ever kept Christians from this happy life was unwillingness to pay the entry fee—in other words, failure to yield themselves fully to God. SO all he could do was repeatedly reconsecrate himself, scraping the inside of his psyche till it was bruised and sore in order to track down still unyielding things by which the blessing was perhaps being blocked. His sense of continually missing the bus, plus his perplexity as to the reason why he was missing it, became painful to live with, like a verruca or a stone in your shoe that makes you wince with every step you take.

However, he happened to be something of a bookworm, and in due course he stumbled across some reading which became a lifeline, showing him how to deal with himself as he was and enabling him to see that thing he had been seeking as the will-o’-the-wisp that it is...A burned child, however, dreads the fire, and hatred of the cruel and tormenting unrealities of overheated holiness teaching remains in his heart to this day.

Now I was that student, and the books I read were volumes 6 and 7 of the works of Puritan John Owen (Goold’s edition) and J. C. Ryle’s *Holiness*.⁵

⁴ P124-5.

⁵ P128-9.

A very serious problem with this view is its definition of sin. Sin is defined as 'known sin.' The trouble is the Bible recognises that we are sinful in deeper ways than we are aware of, Ps. 19:12, 'Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults.' 1 Cor. 4:4, 'For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.' Also there is nothing that we do that is perfect and does not fall short of the glory of God and need the righteousness of Christ to cover. The 1689 in chapter 16 paragraph 5 lays out this reality, 'We cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin or eternal life at the hand of God, by reason of the great disproportion that is between them and the glory to come, and the infinite distance that is between us and God, whom by them we can neither profit nor satisfy for the debt of our former sins; but when we have done all we can, we have done but our duty, and are unprofitable servants; and because as they are good they proceed from his Spirit, and as they are wrought by us they are defiled and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God's punishment.'

Let me end with a few pastoral points. This Keswick teaching has a mixed reception because although it gets the doctrine wrong it has led many to consecrate their lives to Christian service and we have seen thousands of missionaries give themselves to the task of ministry after adopting these beliefs. We are not to be distracted by this, we are only interested in what the Bible teaches not on pragmatic results. This teaching undermines the truth of God's provision for our holiness in the gospel; it moves the focus away from what we have because of what God has done in uniting us to Christ and moves the focus to our own self-denial as the root of our holiness.

There is a deep allure in this form of teaching because it is appealing to something we all want as believers. We all long for holiness, to no longer be so weak in the face of temptation, to be free from the love of sin. The great danger of this theology is that it is a silver bullet technique it promises with one simple action what it cannot deliver. The 'normal Christian life' to quote Watchman Nee is not living above the noise of the remaining sin in our hearts having entered into a peaceful and unruffled state of surrender as God miraculously sustains this otherworldly mindset as long as your consecration and faith endure. No the normal Christian life is one of warfare and striving. It is not the freedom from contending with our bodies, but like Paul we box, we discipline our bodies and keep them under control. We live in the place where the flesh lusts against the Spirit and the Spirit lusts against the flesh. If you feel temptation today, this is not an indication that you have failed in your consecration and love of God, that your faith is lacking and you need to find something else that you have not yet surrendered to get back to the place of victory. This theology has no place for the broken and contrite heart that mourns over indwelling sin. To humble yourself before God because of the sin that is still with you. The traditional view of Romans 7 that sees and mourns and hates the presence of sin that is still within us is removed from the normal Christian life. To mortify the sin in our members by a constant vigilance, prayerfulness, study of scriptures is no longer the path to holiness because we are offered a short cut free from these agonies.

The trite solution is to surrender all and believe that you will overcome as God defeats sin.

We want to avoid too pessimistic a view that is all Romans 7 without Romans 6 and 8, but Keswick theology is not the solution. It is true that those who are in what we call the Augustinian camp can merely see ourselves as justified sinners with no view of our death to sin through our union with Christ. Some resign themselves to a dim view of progress not reckoning with Paul's teaching in Romans 6 that we are dead to sin, that we fight from a position of victory. Any army engaging in a furious fight needs a high morale to know that we can overcome. Romans 6 gives us the truth we need. We will not continue in sin as believers because we are united with Christ, we are not in Adam, we are not under the dominion of sin, we are able to obey, we are able to present our bodies to Him in service. But on the other hand we also need to avoid too optimistic a view that says that we can live a type of perfectionism, whether its Wesley's perfect love driving out all love of sin; or Keswick's surrender enabling a victory so that we walk in no known sin. Sin does still remain in us, though defeated. We do await glorification for true victory and perfection. We cannot have an overrealized eschatology. The fight will still be bloody, sin will still feel alluring, progress can be made but it is incremental and progressive. We do not suddenly by a single act of surrender find ourselves above it all sustained by a passive faith.

In conclusion, in pursuit of the question, how are we to be holy? The answer is still the same, as those united to Christ, and dead to sin, yet still having the presence of sin within us, we fight and strive, we grow and improve, we see progress but not perfection, we use the God given means of the church, prayer, the word, fellowship, the sacraments, we do not look for easy answers, quick fixes and silver bullets.