

CHAPTER ONE

CAUGHT IN THE GAP TRAP

ROBIN BOISVERT

“All those who are struggling with anger, please come forward. We’d like to pray for you.”

It was Sunday morning. I had just finished teaching about anger, and wanted to give the Holy Spirit opportunity to work in the hearts of those present. But I could not have anticipated the response.

About twenty humble saints came down to the front of the auditorium—a large group for a church our size. And yet it wasn’t the number that caught my attention. It was the people themselves. Nineteen of the twenty were mothers of young children! (Anger is an occupational hazard, according to most mothers I’ve ever known.)

As their pastor, I knew all of these women to be serious and dedicated Christians. What caused them to come forward was their intense frustration at being caught in the gap—a gap between the biblical standard of self-control and their own failure to live up to that standard.

Whether the problem is anger, fear, worry, or something as common as laziness, we’ve all experienced that gap between what we are and what we should be. The Bible says we’re new creations, victors, overcomers. And we’re not just conquerors—we’re *more* than conquerors (Ro 8:37). Sometimes we even feel that way. More often than not, however, we have a hard time seeing beyond our limitations and perpetual failures. And it always seems to be during these seasons of life that Matthew 5:48 surfaces in our Bible reading plan: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Quietly we sigh and think to ourselves, *It will never happen.*

I call this state of mind the “gap trap.” Here’s how it works: As Christians, we all have a certain amount of knowledge regarding what God expects from us. But we achieve less than we know we should be achieving. There

For Further Study:

Even Paul the apostle got caught in the gap trap (Romans 7:21-25). Can you identify with his frustration?

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exists then a gap between what we know is required and our actual performance. If the distance between what we know and what we're living becomes too great, we can rightly be called hypocrites.

This gap is a fact of Christian life. For most of us, no one need tell us of our inconsistencies—we're all too aware of them. Such awareness should serve to keep us

“ The Christian life is a matter of becoming in intrinsic character what we already are in Christ...The purpose of these passages (e.g. Romans 6, Colossians 3:5-14, Ephesians 4:22-32) is to show us the great gap between what we are counted or reckoned to be in Christ (justification) and what we are actually in ourselves in daily living (sanctification) in order to urge us to *close the gap*...Paul's purpose is to urge us to become in everyday living what we already are counted to be in Christ.¹ ”

— Jay Adams

humble and dependent upon God for success. But the trap is often sprung by our ignorance of the doctrine of sanctification. Rather than recognizing that the gap exists to urge us onward in fervent reliance upon Christ, we allow it to condemn us and halt our forward progress. We get trapped into thinking we're just losers, failures, good-for-nothings...and maybe not even Christians. Some even lapse into inaction or disobedience. Those

caught in this trap (and, to a certain extent, we all are) suffer unnecessarily from discouragement.

As a pastor, one of my main responsibilities is helping individuals out of the gap trap. I often find myself telling people, “It will not be instant, and it's bound to require serious effort, but getting out of the gap trap is not complicated. And believe me, it will be well worth it.”

Perhaps you've found yourself in the gap trap. Maybe you're there right now. If so, we're confident this book can help you close the gap between who you *should* be in Christ and who you *are* in actual practice.

Can you imagine a life in which you are breaking sinful habits and making real progress in godliness? Such a life is possible. And this book is written to assist and encourage you as you make that life your own.

Between the “Now” and the “Not Yet”

Without question, one of the most frustrating things about the Christian life is the apparent contradiction between what God reckons us to be and what we, by experience, know ourselves to be. Take the Corinthians, for example. At one point Paul assured them, “You were

1 Are there any areas of your life in which you know you aren't living up to God's expectations? (Briefly describe one area in the space below.)

washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1Co 6:11). Sounds like an open-and-shut case, doesn't it? Until you read Paul's second letter to this church, in which he seems to say almost the opposite: "Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God" (2Co 7:1).

I expect the Corinthians were somewhat confused. Were they sanctified...or contaminated? Actually, they

were both, and so are we. In order to explain that, let me take you on a brief tangent.

God's kingdom is both "now" and "not yet." It is present in certain respects and future in others. Our Lord came proclaiming and demonstrating that the kingdom (or rule) of God had intersected human history: "If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you" (Lk 11:20). However, God's kingdom has not yet come in its fullness. That won't happen until Jesus returns again in power, when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that he is Lord. Until then, without denying the present reality of God's kingdom, we fervently pray, "May your kingdom *come*" (Mt 6:10).

In this respect, God's kingdom closely parallels our individual lives. God, through the wonderful work of justification, has declared us righteous. Our legal standing before him has changed. That issue has been settled once and for all in the high court of heaven. On this side of heaven, though, our internal transformation is an ongoing project. The process of sanctification keeps me busy as a Christian personally, and also provides me with plenty of work as a pastor.

So do we have victory in Jesus or not? Are we overcomers, or are we overcome? Oscar Cullmann suggests an analogy from World War II which I believe can help us grasp this apparent contradiction.²

History records two important days toward the end of World War II: D-Day and VE-Day. D-Day took place June 6, 1944 when the Allied forces landed on the beaches of Normandy, France. This was the turning point in the war; once this landing was successfully completed, Hitler's fate was sealed. The war was essentially over. Yet total victory in Europe (VE-Day) did not occur until May 7, 1945 when

Meditate on 1 John

3:2-3. What impact should our thoughts about the "not yet" have on the "now"?

“ Divine election is the guarantee that God will undertake to complete by sanctifying grace what his electing grace has begun. This is the meaning of the new covenant: God does not merely command obedience, he gives it.³

— John Piper

German forces surrendered in Berlin. This eleven-month interval is remembered as one of the bloodiest periods of the war. Pitched battles were fought throughout France, Belgium, and Germany. Although the enemy had been mortally wounded, he did not imme-

diately succumb.

The cross was our D-Day. There the Lord Jesus Christ died to break the chains of sin from his people. On the basis of his death and resurrection, we are justified. Yet the final victory awaits Christ's return. There is no doubt as to the outcome of things. But we will still find ourselves involved in skirmishes and battles until the Lord appears in glory to vanquish forever the forces of darkness.

This distinction, if kept in mind, can spare us a lot of discouragement. The battle still rages, but the war has been won. An awareness of Christ's finished work on our behalf is essential for morale as we pursue sanctification. We must study and meditate on the great doctrine of justification until it sinks deeply into our consciousness.

For Further Study:

Read 1 Peter 5:8-9.

Though God's ultimate triumph is inevitable, we should fight with a healthy respect for our adversary.

Listerine, Anyone?

Though we are fully justified in Christ (D-Day), we are by no means fully sanctified (VE-Day). Some have failed to understand this.

Bible teacher Ern Baxter tells of an incident that occurred during the Latter Rain Revival of the late 1940s. A heretical teaching had emerged called "the manifest sons of God." It was essentially a doctrine promising total sanctification in this life. In its extreme form, it included the belief that a spiritual elite would receive glorified bodies before Christ's return.

At the close of a meeting where Baxter was preaching, several manifest sons (and daughters) appeared at the rear of the auditorium clad in white robes. When he finished speaking they swept down the aisle to the front of the church and began trying to make disciples to their doctrine of absolute perfection. As he relates the story, "The lady who was their leader was in serious need of Listerine. That's not the kind of perfection I'm looking forward to."⁴

More common than Ern Baxter's scenario are situations

2 If you were seeking total perfection in this life, which of the following would be hardest for you to do?

- Never drive even one mile above the speed limit
- Speak with warmth and kindness to every telemarketer who calls
- Avoid all unnecessary calories
- Never hit the snooze button on your alarm clock
- Always pay your income taxes cheerfully

For Further Study:

Read Matthew 26:41.

When is it safe to assume we've "arrived" at sanctification?

resulting from a shallow, simplistic view of sanctification.

When I was a new believer, I met a young man named Greg, a self-confessed burglar and drug addict who was apparently converted while in prison. Greg's grip on living the Christian life impressed me. He carried himself with a bold certainty and walked with a slight swagger. He talked as if sin were not really a problem for him any longer. More than once he told me how he'd been "saved, sanctified, and filled with the Holy Ghost."

To hear him describe it made it seem so simple. As a new Christian, he'd boarded a train one day, and when he got off hours later he'd had what he termed a "sanctification experience." He assured me that such an experience was a necessary prelude to receiving the baptism in the Holy Spirit, and once that happened, you were all set.

I must admit, there were some things about Greg that didn't seem too sanctified. He had a judgmental streak and a Pharisaical attitude. He could be both overbearing and petty. I recall his indignant remarks when a friend inadvertently set something on top of his Bible: "I beg your pardon—that happens to be the Word of God!" Still, he sure could quote the Bible, and he seemed to understand this business of sanctification.

What a shock when he turned back to selling and using hard drugs.

Greg's problems included an incomplete and therefore incorrect understanding of the Bible's teaching on sanctification. He had done what so many do by focusing only on those favorite Scripture texts which seemed to validate his personal experience.

Sanctification is both *definite* (occurring at conversion) and *progressive*. It didn't all happen in one experience in the past, nor is it to be thought of as only happening by degrees. *We were changed* and *we are changing*. Without

dampening the enthusiasm of our successful landing at Normandy, let's be sober and realistic as we assess the opposition lying between us and Berlin. We don't have the option of boarding a

“ Holiness is not the way to Christ. Christ is the way to holiness.⁵ ”

— Adrian Rogers

sanctification train, like Greg claimed to have done. It's going to be a fight every step of the way.

Worth the Work

For many, “sanctification” is another of those long, theological words often heard but rarely understood. It sounds scholarly and impractical. Yet it is *intensely* practical. The doctrine of sanctification answers questions asked by almost every Christian in Church history:

How do I change?

How do I grow?

How do I become like Christ?

How do I get out of the gap trap?

Anything that can answer those questions is worth some effort. Appendix A (page 93) shows how various branches of the Church have handled this issue in the past, but let's see what we can learn about this essential doctrine as it applies to us today.

The biblical meaning of the word *sanctify* is “to set apart;

consecrate.” (*Holiness* comes from the same Greek root.) It may be applied to a person, place, occasion, or object. When something is sanctified, it is separated from common use and devoted to special use. For instance, in Moses' time, the Day of Atonement was set apart (sanctified) to a holy God. That day became a holy day. A thing sanctified is not made holy simply by being set apart; it derives its holiness from that to which it has been devoted. Because only God is holy, he alone can impart holiness.

Theologically the term “sanctification” has been used to describe the *process* a believer undergoes as the Spirit of God works in him to make him like Christ. The process begins at the

““ Can holiness save us? Can holiness put away sin, make satisfaction for transgressions, pay our debt to God? No, not a whit. God forbid that I should ever say so. Holiness can do none of these things. The brightest saints are all ‘unprofitable servants.’ Our purest works are not better than filthy rags, when tried by the light of God's holy law. The white robe, which Jesus offers and faith puts on, must be our only righteousness, the name of Christ our only confidence, the Lamb's book of life our only title to heaven. With all our holiness we are no better than sinners. Our best things are stained and tainted with imperfection. They are all more or less incomplete, wrong in the motive or defective in the performance. ‘By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast’ (Eph 2:8,9).⁶

— J.C. Ryle

moment we are born again and continues as long as we live. It is marked by daily conflict as we appropriate the grace and strength of God to overcome indwelling sin.

Keep in mind that the *guilt* of sin has already been removed through justification, as Anthony Hoekema explains; sanctification removes the *pollution* of sin:

By *guilt* we mean the state of deserving condemnation or of being liable to punishment because God's law has been violated. In justification, which is a declarative act of God, the guilt of our sin is removed on the basis of the atoning work of Jesus Christ. By *pollution*, however, we mean the corruption of our nature which is the result of sin and which, in turn, produces further sin. As a result of the Fall of our first parents, we are all born in a state of corruption; the sins which we commit are not only products of that corruption but also add to it. In *sanctification* the pollution of sin is in the process of being removed (though it will not be totally removed until the life to come).⁷

The Bible also describes sanctification as growth in godliness. By godliness I'm referring to a devotion to God and the character that springs from such devotion. Godliness includes a love of God and desire for God.⁸ It also includes the fear of God, which John Murray has called the "soul of godliness."⁹ Having been delivered from the fear of eternal torment, the Christian fears God by focusing not on his wrath but on his "majesty, holiness and transcendent glory..."¹⁰ The fear of the Lord has a purifying effect on the heart and is a precondition for intimacy with God.

Godliness involves more than morality or zeal. It springs from a union with Christ and a passion to honor him. A godly person wants to be like his Lord so as to give him pleasure. He wants to feel what God feels, think his thoughts after him, and do his will. In short, he wishes to take upon himself the character of God so that God might be glorified. No endeavor is more worthy of our life-long effort: "For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come" (1Ti 4:8).

Both God and man play key roles in the gracious work of sanctification. He, by his amazing grace, initiates our salvation and imparts the desire and power to overcome sin. Responding to and relying on his grace, we then obey the biblical command to "work out your salvation with fear

For Further Study:

Do you realize how important and beneficial it is to fear the Lord? (See Psalm 19:9 and 25:14, Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10, and 1 Peter 1:17.)

“ Sanctification, says the Westminster Shorter Catechism (Q.35), is ‘the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.’ The concept is not of sin being totally eradicated (that is to claim too much) or merely counteracted (that is to say too little), but of a divinely wrought character change freeing us from sinful habits and forming in us Christlike affections, dispositions, and virtues.¹¹

”
— J.I. Packer

and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Php 2:12-13).

The New Testament charts a course for holy living which is a middle ground (actually a higher ground) between legalism on one side and license on the other. Those church traditions that have placed the accent too heavily on God’s work within us *without* expecting that work to result in a growing desire for godliness, veer off the path

toward license. “For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things” (Php 3:18-19). On the other hand, there are those who have so emphasized man’s part that they elevate technique above God’s truth and end in legalism. (There are, of course, varying degrees of these driftings.)

**Meditate on
1 Timothy 6:11-16.**

Paul would have been a very motivating drill sergeant.

3 Take this short True/False quiz to see how well you’ve understood this material so far:

(Answers printed upside down at bottom of page 9)

- The word “sanctify” means “to tear apart; desecrate.” **T** **F**
- Sanctification begins the moment you are born again and continues as long as you live. **T** **F**
- The guilt of our sin has been removed by justification. **T** **F**
- Godliness refers exclusively to a person’s morality and zeal. **T** **F**
- God has sole responsibility for our sanctification. **T** **F**

How to Attain Perfection

One common question I hear Christians raise is, “How far can I expect this process of sanctification to go? Will I ever be completely free from sin?” It’s a question that becomes especially relevant when you read a statement like Paul’s to the Philippian church: “Let us therefore, *as many as are perfect*, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you” (Php 3:15 NAS). Jesus said it even more pointedly in a verse quoted earlier: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48).

Does God really expect us to attain perfection?

A yearning for perfection has inspired many to pursue God. Throughout human history poets and philosophers have expressed the desire to regain a lost innocence and purity. Contemporary songwriters Crosby, Stills, and Nash celebrated the Woodstock experience with a song that said, “We are star dust, we are golden, we are caught in the devil’s bargain. And we’ve got to get ourselves back to the Garden.”

The trouble is, we’re anything but perfect and we know it. In the make-believe world of movies, Mary Poppins may cheerfully refer to herself as “practically perfect in every way,” but it doesn’t work like that in real life. And we certainly won’t reach perfection via Woodstock.

R.A. Muller points out that Scripture clearly tells us to be perfect, while at the same time giving evidence that perfection is unattainable in this life.¹² This presents us

with a dilemma. We are not free to throw up our hands and admit defeat. But neither may we adopt a “can-do” mentality toward perfection which has more in common with positive thinking than with the Bible. The only way to solve this dilemma is by realizing the New Testament views perfection two ways.¹³

Paul’s vision for the Philippians was *maturity*, not faultlessness. Note how the New International Version translates his comment to the Philippian

church: “All of us who are *mature* should take such a view of things” (Php 3:15). The “perfect” in this sense may best be described as “those who have made reasonable progress in spiritual growth and stability.”

It’s a natural thing for every child to want to be big, to be full-grown. This is no less true of the believer. Rather than take a casual or haphazard approach to growth, we should let the call to perfection urge us onward in a serious quest to be like Jesus. Paul’s own example should be the model for us all:

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take

““ When the dawn of...God’s holiness breaks upon our spirits, we are delivered from all superficial and inadequate thoughts about our own sanctification. We are also preserved from any cheap teaching that encourages us to think that there are shortcuts by which we may more easily obtain holiness. Holiness is not an experience; it is the re-integration of our character, the rebuilding of a ruin. It is skilled labor, a long-term project, demanding everything God has given us for life and godliness.¹⁴

— Sinclair Ferguson

Meditate on 1 Peter 1:14-16. Does this command seem unrealistic? Would God ask you to do the impossible?

Answers: F, T, T, F, F

“ We must first be made good before we can do good.¹⁶ ”

— Hugh Latimer

hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I

do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Php 3:12-14)

4 A once-popular bumper sticker read, “Christians Aren’t Perfect—Just Forgiven.” What kind of attitude might this reflect? (Especially if the car is speeding.)

We see a second use of the word perfection in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. “When perfection comes,” he says, “the imperfect disappears” (1Co 13:10). In this sense, perfection is a term rightly restricted to the Godhead—a perfection that will not be seen until Christ returns. Theologian Louis Berkhof prefers to speak of God’s *perfections* rather than his attributes.¹⁵ God alone is faultless. No matter how much we mature in this life, we will never reach perfection until that day when God perfects us in glory.

Seven Reasons to Close the Gap

Generally speaking, the world has a negative impression of holiness. Many equate it with a glum, cross-carrying existence devoid of joy. It is seen more as a “holier-than-thou” self-righteousness than as the joyful experience it really is. As we close, let’s refute that idea by looking at some of the many benefits and blessings we gain from following Christ. Here are seven fruits of sanctification:

God is glorified. When we are holy, we give weight to our claim that God is as real and wonderful as we say he is. Paul tells us the good works of Christians adorn the doctrine of Christ (Tit 2:10 NAS). Even those who deny God are forced to admit his reality when his people walk in his ways.

Ongoing fellowship in this life with the Godhead. “If anyone loves me,” said Jesus, “he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (Jn 14:23). It’s a tremendous joy and comfort to have the abiding presence of the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit. And Jesus

indicates that this presence is a loving presence, not indifferent or impersonal. Of course, along with his presence

“ There is no abiding joy without holiness...How important then is the truth that sanctifies! How crucial is the Word that breaks the power of counterfeit pleasures! And how vigilant we should be to light our paths and load our hearts with the Word of God!¹⁷”

— John Piper

comes his power, which enables us to overcome the obstacles of life.

Fellowship with other Christians. If we walk in darkness, we can't enjoy authentic relationships with other believers. "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1Jn 1:7).

fies us from all sin" (1Jn 1:7).

The Lord promises to provide us with companions, fellow travelers on the road of sanctification. For my part, I've found that God's truth combined with the example of God's people is absolutely necessary for my spiritual growth. And when I've walked in his ways I've never lacked for either. We need one another in the context of the church in order to succeed. Holiness and Christian community go hand in hand.

Assurance of salvation. Though our salvation is not based upon our pursuit of holiness, assurance of salvation is most certainly connected with it. In his second letter, Peter exhorts his readers to make every effort to pile up spiritual virtues, adding goodness to faith and knowledge to goodness until self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love are had in abundant measure (2Pe 1:5-9). He warns that when these are lacking, a person may forget...

...that he has been cleansed from his past sins.

Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (2Pe 1:9-11)

Evangelism. As a young man under conviction of sin, I tried my best to find fault with Christians so that I might reject their message and dismiss them as hypocrites. But though they weren't perfect, I could find no major inconsistencies. The large family who reached out to me with the gospel made more of an impact on me with their lifestyle than with their words. The husband loved his wife, the wife respected her husband, the children obeyed

Meditate on 1 Peter

2:12. Though non-Christians may mock your lifestyle now, what effect will it ultimately have on them?

their parents, and they were all joyful. I had never seen anything like it.

It has been said that while the world may not read its Bible, it certainly does read its Christians. God uses holy people to reach others. Not perfect, but holy.

Understanding, wisdom, and knowledge. These treasures are laid up for those who seek God wholeheartedly (Pr 2:1-11). They are withheld from the scorner, the rebel, and the fool.

Seeing God. Scripture tells us, “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14). While the full meaning of this passage is shrouded in mystery, Scripture does have much to say about “the beatific vision,” or seeing God. It will occur following our Lord’s return when every enemy has been vanquished and we have been totally sanctified. At that time our vision of God will be

continual and intense, without distraction or the self-consciousness caused by sin. Then we shall know even as we are known. Not that our knowledge of God will be complete, for he will be ever

revealing more and more of his infinite and wonderful self to us.

“Blessed are the pure in heart,” Jesus said, “for they will see God” (Mt 5:8). This ongoing illumination of his greatness and goodness is by far the most outstanding wonder to result from a life of holiness.

As you can see, there are plenty of good reasons to close the gap between God’s expectations of us and our own experience. We were made to share in his holiness—not just in heaven, but here on earth. Step by step, we can learn to overcome sin and live in a way that increasingly reflects the glory and character of God.

In this first chapter, we have attempted to whet your appetite for godliness. Beginning with Chapter Two, we’ll start building the biblical framework necessary to support a holy—and happy—life. ■

“Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.”

— Jesus (Matthew 5:8)

- GROUP DISCUSSION**
1. What kind of symptoms indicate that one is caught in the “gap trap”?
 2. A certain gap between God’s standards and our performance is unavoidable; too much, though, and we qualify as hypocrites. Where do we draw the line?
 3. How is our sanctification both past history and future hope?
 4. The fear of the Lord, says the author, is a “precondition for intimacy with God.” (Page 7) What does he mean?
 5. To what extent should a mature Christian be free of sin?
 6. Now that you have finished this chapter, how would you explain Matthew 5:48 to a brand-new Christian?

RECOMMENDED READING *How to Help People Change* by Jay E. Adams (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986)

Saved by Grace by Anthony A. Hoekema (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989)

NOTES

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5. Quoted in *Gathered Gold*, John Blanchard, ed. (Welwyn, Hertfordshire, England: Evangelical Press, 1984), p.146.
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12. R.A. Muller, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Volume Four* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), p. 324.
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16. Quoted in *Gathered Gold*, p.148.