

Virtue, Vice and the nature of God

Having considered that the purpose of God in salvation and the process of **practical sanctification** is for God to **conform us into His image** by the work of the Holy Spirit, it is important to understand how the image of God and His character is related to how we live our Christian lives in practice, and how that relates to both God's character and ours. In becoming like God, we are taking on His character and "*participating in the divine nature*" and growing evermore in His likeness by the power of the Holy Spirit in us. Let us now consider the important truth that **God is Holy**. That is, He is **set apart** from all other created beings in **moral purity, perfection and self-existence** as the Holy Creator God. The holiness of God is one of God's attributes, and one in fact that characterizes all of God's other attributes. Therefore God's love and mercy are holy, as is His wisdom and justice are holy, that is, they possess a **divine quality** that is **infinite, perfect and complete** in such a way as to be set apart from other kinds of love and mercy, wisdom and justice in the creation. God's majesty and beauty are holy majesty and holy beauty being infinitely and perfectly majestic and beautiful beyond all other things that exist. Moreover, all of God's attributes are **set apart from evil** in every way because of the moral purity of God's holiness. All of God's attributes are completely **pure and untainted** by any kind of impurity of evil. In fact **God's own holiness is the antithesis of evil** and the very standard by which evil is seen and understood. Therefore God hates what is evil and loves what is good, and this is a major theme in the Bible and it is major theme in God's relations with people and His purposes throughout redemptive history. Kevin DeYoung comments... *"There is no question that holiness is one of the central themes in the Bible. The word 'holy' occurs more than 600 times in the Bible, more than 700 when you include derivative words like holiness, sanctify and sanctification. You can't make sense of the Bible without understanding that God is holy and that this holy God is intent on making a holy people to live with Him forever in a holy heaven. The whole system of Israel's worship revolves around holiness. That's why you have a holy people (the priests), with holy clothes, in a holy land (Canaan), at a holy place (tabernacle/temple), using holy utensils and holy objects, celebrating holy days, living by a holy law, so that they might be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."* Make no mistake about it God is holy and He expects His people to be holy as well. This He accomplishes through the holy work of Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit within us!

Now this **holiness of God** has everything to do with our **image bearing** and our **Christian practice** as God seeks to **sanctify us** (make us holy) in our character and in our practice, just like He is and just like He does. Therefore He commands us to be holy, just like Him. He calls us to live a holy life and emulate His holy character. This then becomes a major theme in the New Testament as it was given to us by our Lord Jesus and the Apostles.

Matt 5:48 - 48 "Therefore **you are to be perfect**, as your heavenly Father is perfect. NASB

2 Corinthians 7:1 - Therefore, having these promises, beloved, **let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness** in the fear of God. NASB

Titus 2:11-14 - 11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, 12 **instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly** in the present age, 13 looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus; 14 who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and **purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds**. NASB

1 Peter 1:14-16 - 14 As obedient children, **do not be conformed to the former lusts** which were yours in your ignorance, 15 but like the Holy One who called you, **be holy yourselves also in all your behavior**; 16 because it is written, "**You shall be holy, for I am holy.**" NASB

Now because God is holy, perfectly pure and undefiled in every part of His character, He expects holiness from us, His holy people who He has set apart to reflect His character and bear His image. Jerry Bridges comments; *“God rightfully demands perfect holiness in all of His moral creatures. It cannot be otherwise. He cannot possibly ignore or approve of any evil committed. He cannot for one minute relax His standard of holiness. Rather He must say as He does say, “So be holy in all you do”...1 Pet 1:15...”*

It is important to remember the **glory of the Gospel** when we start to focus on **God’s expectation of our personal holiness**. We have a **positional righteousness** or **positional sanctification** before God on the basis of Christ’s life and death (discussed in detail below). We cannot forget that **we have been cleansed** once for all by the death of our Lord Jesus on the cross, and His perfect life of righteousness has been imputed to us by faith. We stand in the spotless righteousness of Christ, God’s wrath toward our sin has been appeased (**propitiation**), our guilt has been removed (**expiation**), Christ’s righteousness has been imputed to us by faith (**imputation**), and all of this has brought about **reconciliation** with God. God has now **declared us righteous** in His sight on the basis of Christ’s perfect life and death. This is called **Justification by Faith**. We are now in a state of grace having all our sins forgiven and possessing the hope of eternal life. If you have been born again by the Holy Spirit and believed upon the Lord Jesus Christ as a result, all of these wonderful blessings from God are surely yours! But now that we have been saved by the grace of God through faith in our Lord Jesus alone, **God expects us to live in holiness** and prove the reality of our faith and love toward Him in obedience to His holy Word! At the same time that our sins are forgiven, God is commanding us to forsake our sins and behave in a holy way.

Titus 2:11-14 - 11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, 12 **instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly** in the present age, 13 looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus; 14 who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and **purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds**. NASB

1 Peter 1:14-16 - 14 As obedient children, **do not be conformed to the former lusts** which were yours in your ignorance, 15 but like the Holy One who called you, **be holy yourselves also in all your behavior**; 16 because it is written, **“You shall be holy, for I am holy.”** NASB

But **what does holiness look like in our lives?** In short, it is conformity to God’s holy character and also His practice. We are to be holy in our hearts and that in turn produces holiness in our practice, our daily lives. Therefore **God’s Word is very specific** about what **holiness** actually looks like both in our heart and in our life. The Word is filled with instruction and exhortations toward this end. The New Testament therefore calls us to **“put off”** the evil deeds of the flesh, the old nature of sin which still lives in us, and to **“put on”** Christ, or the new nature which has been re-created in us at regeneration.

Romans 13:12-14 - 12 The night is almost gone, and the day is at hand. **Let us therefore lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light**. 13 Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. 14 **But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts**. NASB

Colossians 3:8-11 - 8 But now you also, **put them all aside**: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, **since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices**, 10 and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him NASB

These **deeds** of the **flesh**, or **acts of the sinful nature** are called **vices**. They are thoughts, words and deeds that the Bible identifies as **evil**. One thing is sure, God's Word calls out sin by name and explains that it is deadly, destructive and contrary to God's commanded will and very displeasing to Him. Vice is sin and evil and God hates it and God judges and reproves those who commit it. Therefore God's Word is crystal clear about what sin is, giving whole **lists of vices** and telling us to forsake them. The **vices** are **contrary** to the character and **nature of God**. In contrast to these vices are the **virtues of God**, which give to us a very specific definition of what holiness looks like. **Virtue** manifests itself in thoughts, words and deeds just like vices. **Virtues** are extolled as pleasing to God, beneficial to ourselves and our neighbor, and opposite of vices. Therefore God's Word is crystal clear about what virtue is, giving whole **lists of virtues** and telling us to perform them and allow them to define our character. **Virtue** is **consistent** with the character and **nature of God**. And so we see both virtue and vice described in detail in the New Testament giving us instruction as to how to live and please God, what TO do and what NOT to do in order to live a holy life. Holiness looks like a life lived in virtue instead of vice. Growing in **personal holiness** and **practical sanctification** are effectively the **same thing**. We grow in holiness as we are conformed to the image of Christ by the Holy Spirit. Holiness and wickedness are held in stark contrast in the Christian life, as the below **virtue** and **vice lists** put on display.

Vice lists - Here is a **list** of Scriptures that define **vices** for us and show us what the character of the **evil** and **wicked** people are. These vices do not please God and are the kind of behavior that characterize the wicked and unbelieving people of the world, who do not know God, obey Jesus Christ, and will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

Mark 7:21-23 - 1 "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the **evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, 22 deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness.** 23 "All these **evil things** proceed from within and defile the man." NASB
Romans 1:26-32 - 26 For this reason God gave them over to **degrading passions**; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, 27 and in the same way also the men abandoned **the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts** and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. 28 And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, 29 being filled with all **unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, 30 slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, 31 without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful;** 32 and, although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also **give hearty approval to those who practice them.** NASB

Romans 13:13-14 - 13 Let us behave properly as in the day, not in **carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy.** NASB

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 - 9 Or do you not know that **the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God?** Do not be deceived; **neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, 10 nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God.** 11 And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God. NASB

Galatians 5:19-22 - 19 Now the **deeds of the flesh** are evident, which are: **immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, 21 envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these,** of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that **those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.** NASB
Ephesians 4:31 - 31 Let all **bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.** NASB

Colossians 3:5-9 - 5 Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to **immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry.** 6 For it is on account of these

things that the wrath of God will come, 7 and in them you also once walked, when you were living in them. 8 But now you also, put them all aside: **anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth.** 9 **Do not lie to one another,** since you laid aside the old self with its **evil practices,** NASB
1 Timothy 1:8-10 - 8 But we know that the Law is good, if one uses it lawfully, 9 realizing the fact that law is not made for a righteous man, but for those who are **lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers 10 and immoral men and homosexuals and kidnappers and liars and perjurers,** and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching, NASB
Revelation 21:8 - 8 "But for the **cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars,** their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." NASB

These vices are in fact the wicked deeds that characterized our former life as unregenerate sinners and as Christians we are called to forsake these sins, to make war against them and **"put off"** these acts of the sinful nature, through faith in Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Virtue lists - Here is a list of Scriptures that define **virtues** for us and what the character of **godly** believing born again **Christians** should be like. These virtues are very pleasing to God and are the kind of behavior that should characterize the lives of Christians, who are **image bearers** being conformed to God's image by the power of the Holy Spirit within them.

Romans 12:9-19 - Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; 11 not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; 12 rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, 13 contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. 16 Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. 17 Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. 19 Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. NAS

1 Corinthians 13:4-7 - 4 Love is patient, love is kind, and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, 5 does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, 6 does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. NASB

Galatians 5:22-23 - 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. NASB

Ephesians 4:32 - 32 And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. NASB

Colossians 3:12-15 - 12 And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. 14 And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. NASB
2 Peter 1:5-7 - 5 Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge; 6 and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness; 7 and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. NASB

These virtues are in fact the character and nature of the Holy Spirit who lives in us and the **end goal** of our **growth in holiness** for our daily lives. These **virtues** should now begin to **characterize** our life as Christians with ever **increasing intensity** as we take on the **image of God** more and more by the work of the Holy Spirit in us. In our struggle against the sinful nature we are to renew our minds with the beautiful and wonderful thoughts of the virtues of God, longing for and pursuing His righteousness in our daily life as children of God, born from above.

In his book, "The Hole in our Holiness," Kevin DeYoung gives these virtue and vice lists and goes on to describe a few other important things that define personal holiness. He adds;

- Clean Conscience
- Obedience to God's Commands
- Christlikeness

Surely our **conscience** guides us by the prompting of the Holy Spirit to **obey God's commandments** and be virtuous. And as we have discussed, **becoming like Christ** in our character and practice is what bearing the image of God means. DeYoung makes the contrast of virtue and vice in the Christian life really clear. He writes, *"You can think of holiness, to employ a metaphor, as the sanctification of your body. The mind is filled with the knowledge of God and fixed on what is good. The eyes turn away from sensuality and shudder at the sight of evil. The mouth tells the truth and refuses to gossip, slander, or speak what is coarse or obscene. The spirit is earnest, steadfast, and gentle. The heart is full of joy instead of hopelessness, patience instead of irritability, kindness instead of anger, humility instead of pride, and thankfulness instead of envy. The sexual organs are pure, being reserved for the privacy of marriage between one man and one woman. The feet move toward the lowly and away from senseless conflict, divisions, and wild parties. The hands are quick to help those in need and ready to fold in prayer. This is the anatomy of holiness,"* end quote. This is why the **Bible** is so **specific** about what **virtue** and **vice** really are. This is so we can discern **vice** in our live and **mortify** it or put it to death, or **put it off**. It is also so we can clearly see what **virtue** is and **vivify** or express the life of God which is in us by **putting on** these virtues.

Colossians 3:5-9 - 5 Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to **immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry**. 6 For it is on account of these things that the wrath of God will come, 7 and in them you also once walked, when you were living in them. 8 But now you also, put them all aside: **anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth**. 9 **Do not lie to one another**, since you laid aside the old self with its **evil practices**, NASB **Colossians 3:12-15** - 12 And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of **compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience**; 13 **bearing with one another, and forgiving each other**, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. 14 And beyond all these things **put on love**, which is the perfect bond of unity. 15 And **let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts**, to which indeed you were called in one body; and **be thankful**. NASB

Notice the pattern in these letters to New Covenant Christians concerning the practice of Christian life. **Put off** the **old nature** of vice and sin and **put on** the **new nature** of virtue and righteousness.

Ephesians 4:20-24 - 20 But you did not learn Christ in this way, 21 if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, 22 that, **in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit**, 23 and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24 and **put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth**. NASB

Ephesians 4:25-32 - 25 Therefore, **laying aside falsehood, speak truth**, each one of you, with his neighbor, for we are members of one another. 26 Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27 and do not give the devil an opportunity. 28 **Let him who steals steal no longer; but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has need**. 29 **Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear**. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 **Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice**. 32 **And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you**. NASB

Further, these are **moral** issues. A common word used to describe virtue in our culture is **morality**. **Virtue** is by nature **moral** and **vice** by nature **immoral**. So when we speak of morality we speak of that which is consistent with God, His nature and His holy standard in the Bible. The Bible gives the only **objective truth** concerning morality. The culture may seek to define its own standard of morality, either by emotions, feelings or just what is popular. But the only true and proper **standard** for **morality** is of course God and His nature, which defines what virtue and vice, sin and righteousness, right and wrong are. **Good** and **evil** are **defined** by the *holy character and nature of God* who made the world and governs it by His Providence! People in the culture may think what they will, but ultimately they will give an account of their morality in life to God, who **judges** all people impartially, **according** to His own *holy moral standard*. Therefore God desires our lives to be **holy**, reflecting His **holiness** as His own **holy** people. This is why the sanctification process and the Christian life in general is essentially about **personal holiness**, as we seek to both glorify and enjoy God. We **glorify** Him when we put off sin and put on virtue by the prompting of the Spirit and the Word, and we also **enjoy** Him as we take on His nature and begin to bear His image in greater likeness. Living a life of true virtue is in fact glorifying and enjoying God to the fullest.

1 Peter 1:14-16 - 14 As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, 15 but **like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior;** 16 **because it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."** NASB

Consider then that God has made our ability to discern good from evil, virtue from vice very easy throughout the Bible. The below chart summarizes much of this discussion and clarifies the dichotomy between good and evil and some elements of how it relates to God and to the Christian life.

Virtue	Vice
God's Nature	Violates God's Nature
Good – Moral Righteousness	Sin – Evil – Immoral Wickedness
New Nature	Old Nature
Put on	Put off
Pleases God	God hates it
Vivification	Mortification

As we have learned, **God's great purpose** in **salvation** is to fashion us **in His image**. This He does because He ultimately delights in His own character and nature above all other things and is zealous to see His glory expressed in and through His creation, of whom mankind is the pinnacle. The salvation of mankind from the fall into sin is God's chief way in which He makes His glory known in the course of History, including the eternal state in the New Heavens and Earth. Therefore we are said to be His **"New Creations"** in Christ and **"predestined to be conformed into His image"** and likeness. As God will ultimately accomplish this at **Glorification** finally for us, He has told us to pursue it with our whole heart as we love Him and serve Him because of Christ. This **sanctification** pursuit is the main goal of the Christian life.