

Sanctification

1 Corinthians 1:1-3, 26-31

There are few doctrines so misunderstood as the one that we will study tonight - the doctrine of sanctification. The average believer has no doubt heard many preachers and/or teachers allude to the doctrine of sanctification as it relates to everything from sinless perfection to excessive spiritual bragging, which has led to some measure of misunderstanding. But I submit to you tonight that there are few doctrines in the Bible that are more precious to the child of God than the doctrine of sanctification when it is properly understood.

As we get started in our study, there are some basic errors that I want to call to your attention at the very beginning of our study. Sanctification, in its primary usage in the Scripture does not refer to improvement in practical holiness. If this were the meaning, it would be impossible for God to sanctify Himself, for God does not improve in holiness. **Yet the Bible says that both God the Father and God the Son sanctify themselves.** Therefore, we thus must conclude that it is an error to teach that sanctification deals, primarily, with improvement in holiness.

A second error that we need to deal with is that sanctification implies a state of holiness in which it is impossible for the child of God to sin. Sanctification itself does not imply a state of holiness, as seen in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, a church beset by every form of doctrinal and practical and moral error and yet a church that Paul referred to as having been sanctified. If sanctification referred to a state of holiness, then it could never be said that the Corinthians were saints and had been sanctified.

When we examine the Word of God, we find three words in our English text that are pertinent to our study of this important doctrine: "sanctify," "holy," and "saint." It seems as though all three of these words have been misinterpreted and misunderstood, and much of the error concerning this doctrine has arisen through a failure to understand these three words. The word "sanctify" occurs more than one hundred times in the Old Testament, and more than thirty times in the New Testament. **The word, in its basic usage, means, "to set apart."** It does *not* mean, "to make holy" and it does *not* mean "to be holy" or "to progress in holiness."

This truth is seen in John 17:18-19 when Jesus was praying to the Father, "As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world."

And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth.” **Our Lord was referring to the fact that He was set apart by the Father to do a work.** He was *sanctified*, or set apart, to go into the world; and because *He had been set apart, in perfect obedience He fulfilled the will of the Father.* Now Christ was about to depart to be with the Father, and it was His desire to set apart others who would reveal the Father to the world as He had revealed the Father to the world. **The disciples were set apart by Christ to go as His representatives, as His ambassadors, to reveal the Son, so that the Son might continue to reveal the Father.** Now this “setting apart” Christ called “sanctification” when He said, “...and for their sakes I sanctify myself (or, I set myself apart).” He set Himself apart to the *cross*; He set Himself apart to *physical death*; He set Himself apart to *separation from the Father*; He set Himself apart totally and completely to *the will of God* so that He could say in Hebrews 10:9, “I come to do thy will, O God.” This passage reveals what the word “sanctify” basically means: “to set apart.”

The second word, “holy,” is used over 400 times in the Old Testament, and some twelve times in the New Testament. The word “holy” means, “to be set apart from what is unholy.” The root word is related to the word “sanctification.” In Hebrews 7:26 this statement is made concerning Christ, “For such a high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens.” **Jesus Christ, our High Priest, is holy!** Now what did it mean for Christ to be holy? Notice the words that follow, which explain the holiness of Christ: He was *harmless*, He was *undefiled*, and He was *separate from sinners*. **Notice the word “separate,” or “separated from sinners.”** That simply means that Christ was not guilty of any sin; He did no sin, and yet He made sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. Christ is said to be “holy” because He was “set apart,” or “set off,” or “divided from that which is unholy” In other words, that word “holy” has the same basic meaning as the word “sanctify,” that is, “set apart.”

The third word is “saint,” which is used sixty-two times in the New Testament in reference to believers. It is the commonest word used in the New Testament to refer to a child of God. The children of God are called “saints.” This truth is made very clear in 1 Corinthians 1:2, “Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified (or, set apart) in Christ Jesus, called (to be) saints...” The King James Version says, “...called to be saints...” and many have misunderstood this because they have concluded that we were “called” in order that eventually we might become saints. **That is not what Paul is saying at all, because he is writing to all those who are “in” Christ Jesus.** He says they have been sanctified - that is, set apart unto God in Christ Jesus – and because they

have been set apart, they are called “saints” by God. The word “saint” in the original text comes from the same Greek root as the word “holy.” The word “saint” means simply “one who has been set apart to God.”

Therefore, you will notice that the three words have a common connotation, and they all signify that which has been “set apart,” or “the one who has been set apart to God.” We notice further that the words “sanctify,” “holy” and “saint” have to do with God’s viewpoint of an individual’s *position*, and not with one’s *experience* or one’s *practice*. In other words, when God looks at the believer, He sees that believer as *set apart to Himself*; He sees that believer as having been *set apart from sin*; He sees that believer as one *who is a saint, beloved of the Father*. The word “saint,” then is our position “in Christ Jesus.”

As one studies the Bible is pretty soon becomes clear that there are three aspects of the believer’s sanctification, three aspects of the believer’s holiness, three aspects of the believer’s sainthood. First of all, the Bible teaches what I refer to as *positional sanctification*. This is seen in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, “Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.” Paul in that list of dastardly deeds, revealed the life that characterized the citizens of Corinth. Given over to a licentious religious system, they practiced all manner of excesses. But Paul wanted to show that those who had received Christ as the Savior had been separated from that kind of life. And to make sure that believers did not develop a “holier-than-thou” attitude, he reminds them in verse 11, “And such were some of you; but you are washed, but you are sanctified, but you are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.” Therefore, Paul is revealing the position which the believers, in spite of their past failures, now hold in the sight of God. And that position is *sanctification*, or set apart to God. Because of their faith in the finished work of Christ, they had become *saints*, holy ones in the family of God. Now listen very carefully right here, although that was their *position*, it was not yet their *experience*. In fact, Corinth was a church marked by strife, discord, and division; it was marked by immorality, and doctrinal heresies. Yet, in spite of their *behavior*, they still, by the grace of God, maintained their *position*.

You see, these Corinthians, like all believers, had been redeemed by the blood of Christ; they had been cleansed by the blood of Christ; they had been forgiven from all their sins; they had been made righteous through Christ; they had been justified through God's legal declaration that they were

acceptable to God; and therefore, set apart to God. This sanctification was the result of the whole saving work of God that gave to them the righteousness of Christ, and set them apart as God's possession. This is affirmed in Paul's introduction, when he says in 1 Corinthians 1:2, "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus..." Therefore, *positional sanctification* is a completed work, a work that needs no repetition, because God has put His name of every believer, He has imputed the righteousness of Christ to them; He had poured out His grace to them, and their position is *sanctification*.

We come to the second aspect, that I call *progressive sanctification*. The child of God who has been *sanctified*, or set apart to God, is instructed to let his *experience* conform to his *position*. You see, one of the problems with the Christian life is that we seem to have some major difficulties in getting our *living* to match what we say we are *believing*. **Therefore, Paul had a great deal to say about the child of God setting himself apart, experientially, unto God.** For example, he says in Romans 12:1, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice..." The child of God who presents his body a living sacrifice is *sanctifying* or setting himself apart to God. We find this same truth in Romans 6:13 when Paul writes, "Neither yield your (or present your) members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin; but yield yourselves (or present your members) to God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God." The verb "yield" in this verse is the same verb used in Romans 12:1 and is translated "present." It means, "to set oneself apart unto God." **This is practical or progressive sanctification.** When the Christian life is lived in its fullest, it is lived *being* (present tense) conformed to the image of Christ. Therefore, the Christ life is a life that is *controlled* by the *Spirit of God*; no longer to live under the control of sin, nor to live under the control of the law, nor to live under the control of the flesh, but to live under the control of the Spirit of God. **Progressive sanctification, then, begins with the act of receiving Jesus Christ as personal Savior, and then continuing to allow the Holy Spirit to control your life as you continue to conform to the image of Christ.** Therefore, *progressive sanctification* is just what it says it is – *progressive*.

Therefore, the result of this progression is a life that is free from the bondage of sin. Look again at Romans 6:14-16, "...sin shall not have dominion over you; for you are not under the law, but under grace. What then? Shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid. Know you not, that to whom you yield (or present) yourselves servants to obey, his servants you are to whom you obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?"

In the passage of scripture, Paul is simply saying that when the child of God who presents himself as a living sacrifice to Christ, to be controlled by the Spirit of God, will not live in bondage to sin. That does not mean that we will be sinless? The truth of the matter is that as long as we are in this body we stumble and fall in thought, word and deed, but sin no longer has dominion over us. That is why Paul could say in 2 Corinthians 3:18, "...we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed (or literally, are being changed) into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord." Paul is saying that the child of God who is controlled by the Spirit of God is progressively changing, going from glory to glory. Our position before God is that we are sanctified, set apart to God; our *experience* is that we are being sanctified in daily life, as we allow the Holy Spirit to conform us to the image of Christ.

And that brings us to the third aspect, that I call *ultimate sanctification*. It is to this aspect that John referred to in 1 John 3:2, "Beloved, now are we the sons (children) of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is." Notice that John says that we will be like Christ. But what does that mean? It means that we will be *sinless*, we will be *deathless*, and we will be brought to *maturity* in spiritual things.

But when are we going to be like Him? Jude, in his benediction, puts it this way in verse 25, when he says that Christ "is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy." In Ephesians 5 Paul talks about our *positional* sanctification and our *ultimate* sanctification. He gives the work of Christ in verse 26, "That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word." And what is the ultimate purpose? Verse 27 says, "That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy (sanctified, set apart) and without blemish."

Child of God, may the truth of your sanctification burn deep in the inner-most recesses of your heart until you realize that you truly have been set apart for the glory of God. This is your present position. You are called by God, a saint. You have been made *holy and righteous*. May God the Holy Spirit continue to work in your life until your experience will match your profession, as you continue to be conformed to the image of Christ. And, then, one day we shall see Him as He is, and we shall be like Him.