

## The Christian Life: Sanctification

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### Are There Two Kinds of Sanctification?

By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

**A reader writes that he has heard this preached in his church, and wonders if it is correct. The Bible does teach that the believer in Christ possesses two kinds or aspects of sanctification — one that is complete at our conversion, and another that is a progressive work of the Holy Spirit until the day we see Christ face to face.**

#### **Definitive, or Positional, Sanctification**

The first aspect, the one that is complete at our conversion, is often referred to as *definitive* or *positional* sanctification. Believers have a new standing before God in Christ, and a new relationship to sin comes with that new standing. The Scriptures speak of this aspect of sanctification in terms of our being dead to sin, and liberated from the slavery of sin, because of Christ's finished work. The verb tenses that are used to describe this in the Greek indicate a once-for-all action, never to be repeated. Therefore the believer is spoken of in New Testament Greek as *ho hagios*, a "saint" or "holy one" —

"What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His

resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin" (Romans 6:1-6).

"And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness" (Romans 6:18).

"Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to the saints [holy ones] who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 1:1).

"Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints [holy ones] in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons" (Philippians 1:1).

"To the saints [holy ones] and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colosse: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Colossians 1:2).

### **Progressive Sanctification**

The second aspect, which is the Spirit's work in progress throughout believers' lives, is often referred to as *progressive* sanctification. This is God's work of conforming each and every true believer more and more to the image of Christ, and it continues until the day we see Christ face to face. On that day we shall be completely sanctified, freed not only from the power of sin but also the presence of sin, and "we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (John 3:1-3). Numerous passages speak of this aspect of sanctification, and how God accomplishes it in us. The Greek verbs that are used indicate not a once-for-all action, but something that is ongoing —

"Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth" (John 17:17). [The Greek verb here is an inceptive aorist, indicating action that begins at a particular point in time and then continues.]

"For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Romans 8:13).

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Romans 12:1-2).

"Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Corinthians 7:1).

"And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head — Christ — from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love" (Ephesians 4:11-16).

"And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment" (Philippians 1:9).

"Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things

which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13-14).

"Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Colossians 3:5).

"And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you, so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints" (1 Thessalonians 3:12-13).

"For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified. For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness" (1 Thessalonians 4:3-7).

"Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14).

"As He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy' " (1 Peter 1:15-16).

"As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby" (1 Peter 2:2).

"Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen" (2 Peter 3:18).

"Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:1-3).

### **We Must Not Confuse Justification and Sanctification**

Today many people, even some well-known preachers, are confused about the Biblical distinction between justification and sanctification. They teach, in essence, that progressive sanctification makes us more holy *positionally* in the sight of God. This is not the case at all. The false teaching of the Roman Catholic church (and others) that people are justified by faith plus works, has its roots in this kind of confusion.

But as Martyn Lloyd-Jones once put it, those who seek to please God by moral improvement are trying to have sanctification without first having justification. In contrast to this wrong view, the Bible clearly teaches that full and final justification comes first, and that it is justified believers who are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God ordained before the foundation of the world for them to do (Ephesians 2:10).

We must always remember that those good works result from God's righteousness operating in us, not a righteousness of our own. We must first have the righteousness of Another, the Lord Jesus Christ, because we do not — indeed we cannot — have a righteousness of our own. We are, and always will be, sinners saved by grace.

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