

SANCTIFICATION

1 Corinthians 1:1-3, 26-31

There are few doctrines so misunderstood as that which we consider now—the doctrine of sanctification. The average child of God instinctively recalls the fanaticism and excesses attached to the doctrine of sanctification, and instinctively withdraws from it, relegating this precious teaching of the Word of God to certain fringe groups. Consequently, we have withdrawn from giving rightful place to the teaching concerning this important truth.

There are certain basic errors which we would do well to call to your attention at the outset so that our minds might be relieved of them. 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 Scripture reveals that both God the Father and God the Son sanctify themselves. We thus must conclude that it is an error to affirm that sanctification deals, primarily, with improvement in holiness.

A second error that must be set aside 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**; this is witnessed by Paul's Letter to the Corinthians, a church beset by every form of doctrinal and practical and moral error and yet a church spoken of by the Apostle Paul 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—and much of the fanaticism in practice arising out of 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"; it does not mean "to be holy" or "to progress in holiness."**

I would direct you to John 17:18-19 where in our Lord's prayer to the Father He says, "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. Jesus 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, "I come to do thy will, O God" (Hebrews 10:9). 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 an 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 Jesus Christ to be holy? Notice the words that follow, which explain the holiness of Jesus Christ: He was harmless, He was undefiled, He was separate from sinners. Underline the word *separate* or *separated from sinners*. The Lord Jesus Christ was guilty of no sin; He did no sin, and yet He was made sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. Jesus Christ is said to be holy because He is set apart, or set off, or divided from that which is unholy. We would conclude, then, that the word “holy” has the same basic connotation 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.” We observe this fact 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. . . .” You will notice that your English text reads, “. . . 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 the Apostle is writing, for he is writing to all those who are in Christ Jesus. He says that 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 unto God.”

We observe then 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 unto God. **We observe further that the words “sanctify,” “holy” and “saint” primarily have to do with one’s position, not with one’s experience or one’s practice.** This has to do with the divine viewpoint. When God looks at His child, He sees His child as set apart unto Himself; He sees His child having been set apart from sin; He sees His child as one who is a saint, beloved of the Father. This then is our position.

We want to present now three aspects of the believer’s sanctification, three aspects of the believer’s holiness, three aspects of the believer’s sainthood. First of all, Scripture teaches what we refer to as *positional sanctification*. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 we read, “Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolators, 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.” The Apostle, in that heinous catalogue of sins, revealed the life that characterized the citizens of the city of Corinth. Given over to a licentious religious system, they practiced all manner of excesses. But the Apostle wanted to show that those who once practiced Corinthianism had been separated unto God from that kind of life. And Paul proceeds, in verse 11: “And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.” The Apostle was revealing the position which the Corinthian believers held in the sight of God. They had been sanctified, that is, set apart unto God. They had been made holy, that is, separated from the practices that once characterized them. They had become saints, holy

ones in the family of God. This was not yet their experience, for as you read through the Corinthian Epistle, you will see that they lacked practical holiness, and they lacked practical godliness and righteousness. The church was marked by strife, discord, and division; it was marked by immorality; it was marked by doctrinal heresies. All of these the Apostle had to correct, and yet, in the sight of God, they had been sanctified and justified.

When these Corinthians were said to be sanctified, the Apostle was emphasizing that which logically is the result of the saving grace of God. They had been redeemed by the blood of Christ; they had been cleansed by the blood of Christ; they had been forgiven all sins; they had been made righteous through Christ; they had been justified through God's legal declaration that they were acceptable to God; they had been set apart unto God. **This sanctification was the result of the whole saving work of God** that gave to them the righteousness of Christ and set those apart unto God as God's possession. This is affirmed in 1 Corinthians 1:2 when Paul says, "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus. . . ." **Here is a completed work, a work that needs no repetition, for they have been set apart as God's possession.** God has put His name upon them, has imputed the righteousness of Christ to them, they stand as recipients of God's grace, and they can be said to have been sanctified.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews we have this same truth reaffirmed, for the Apostle says, "By the which will **we are sanctified** through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ **once for all**" (10:10). The phrase "once for all" grammatically may refer back to the offering of the body of Christ, which was done once for all, or it may refer back to the word "sanctify"—"by the which will we are sanctified once and for all." And the Apostle was affirming the truth that, when God called us and redeemed us and made us righteous in Christ and justified us through the blood of Christ, **God set us apart to Himself, and this work was done with a finality.** Positionally, it **need never be repeated and can never be repeated**, for we are His own. Then again, in verse 14 of the same chapter, the Apostle says, "For by one offering (that is, the offering up of Jesus Christ) he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified." Those that have been set aside are mature, adult sons in the family of the Father. **I submit to you, child of God, that this is one of the most precious truths that you can get hold of.** In the sight of God you have been set apart as His possession. You belong to Him by right of purchase. You have been declared acceptable by His legal act of justifying you through Christ. You have been set apart unto God. This is true of the weakest and the youngest believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. **This does not depend upon your maturity, upon your knowledge, upon your practice of godliness, or your own righteousness. This is a divine work in which God sets us apart to Himself.**

By Dwight Pentecost

What is the meaning of sanctification? How are we sanctified?

Answer:

Concerning sanctification, let us notice the following three points. (a) *The meaning of sanctification.* From the Old Testament to the New, from Genesis to Revelation, wherever the word

“sanctify” (or related words) is mentioned, it always denotes “set apart to”, that is, to set apart in order to belong to another.

“Jehovah spake unto Moses, saying, Sanctify unto me all the first-born, whatsoever openeth the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and of beast: it is mine” (Exodus 13:1-2). All the firstborn among the children of Israel are God’s since they are set apart to Him. They are holy, they belong to Him. So the meaning of sanctification is to be set apart to God. Things can also be sanctified to Him (Leviticus 27:14; 2 Samuel 8:11). The Lord Jesus is sanctified by the Father (John 10:36). He is “the holy thing” (Luke 1:35). He is different from all other men in that He is “the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father” (John 1:18) and is holy. We who believe in the Lord are called saints (Acts 9:13), which word means that we are sanctified to be holy to God.

While on earth the Lord Jesus asked the Pharisees, “Which is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift?” (Matthew 23:19) It is not the gift which sanctifies the altar, rather is it that the altar sanctifies the gift. By placing it on the altar a person is declaring that the gift now belongs to God. Before it is offered on the altar it belongs to one’s own self; but after it is offered, it belongs to God. This does not suggest that the thing itself has changed; but it does announce that it has now become God’s entirely. Hence, it is holy. In the Old Testament the tabernacle with all its many objects are anointed so as to be sanctified. This does not mean that these objects have intrinsically been changed; but it does denote that these things now wholly belong to God for His use, and therefore they are holy. The New Testament also declares that an unbelieving husband is sanctified through the believing wife, that an unbelieving wife is sanctified through the believing husband, and that the unbelieving children are made holy through the believing parents (1 Corinthians 7:14). This too shows that though nothing in these persons themselves has changed, yet they are now sanctified through their believing husband, wife, or parents.

Since God has purchased us with the blood of the Lord Jesus we no longer can belong to other people. We are set apart to God, and we belong to Him alone.

(b) *The sanctified position before God.* Every Christian, at the time he receives the Lord, not only has had his sins forgiven and has become justified but also has been sanctified before God. God is holy; without holiness no man can see Him, commune with Him, or pray before Him. As righteousness is God’s way of doing things, so holiness is His nature. Sins are forgiven according to righteousness. Without forgiveness of sins no one can be saved. And without holiness none may see God (Hebrews 12:14). Holiness is not a matter relating to sins, it relates to our being set apart to God. Because every Christian is sanctified in Christ, he therefore may come to God.

Romans deals with justification, but Hebrews deals with sanctification. Roman speaks of righteousness, while Hebrews speaks of holiness. Romans centers on the throne, whereas Hebrews centers on the holiest of all. Romans tells how man is guilty before God; Hebrews tells how man is unclean before Him. Though forgiveness and justification take away a Christian’s guiltiness and enable him to stand before God, still, without holiness he is not able to enjoy His presence and to commune with Him in the holiest.

Romans informs us that we are sinners but that God has forgiven our sins and justified us through the death of His Son. Hebrews instructs us that our body is unclean but that the blood of

the Son of God has washed us so that by His blood we may enter the holiest place and commune with God. We have holiness to enter the holiest by the blood of the Lord Jesus.

How inclusive is sanctification? God's gospel always draws forth hallelujahs. God is holy. And holiness is His highest glory. In Christ we are as holy as He is. This is the highest. Anything less than this will bar us from coming to God. But because in Christ we are as holy as Christ is, therefore we can come before God who looks on us as He would look on Christ. Thank God, how perfect and how everlasting is the redemption of Jesus Christ. Were it not perfect, the righteousness of God would not come upon us. Were it not everlasting, we would not be sanctified forever unto God. The redemption of the Lord Jesus being perfect and everlasting, we may receive eternal forgiveness and be sanctified forever unto God.

"Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, even them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that call upon the name of our Lord Jesus in every place, their Lord and ours" (1 Corinthians 1:2). Paul wrote to the Corinthians, who were sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be saints. Now the phrase translated "called to be saints" is in the original rendered "called saints". We are not called to be saints; we are saints by calling, meaning we are already sanctified to God. As soon as we are called we are saved, sanctified in Christ, and called saints.

May we not legitimately ask, then, what kind of believers the Corinthians were? Some consumed their own food and drink before they partook of the table of the Lord—so that while these were overly filled or even drunk, others in the church went hungry. Yet at the very beginning of his first letter to them Paul conceded that they were sanctified in Christ Jesus and were called saints. Moreover, someone among them even committed the gross sin of having his father's wife; still Paul said they were sanctified in Christ Jesus. And furthermore, they were arrogant and self-important in their bearing, but Paul nonetheless acknowledged them as being sanctified in Christ Jesus. Thus we conclude that sanctification in the Bible does not refer to outside works. It is different from what Romans Chapters 5-8 say, for therein is presented the fruit of sanctification and not sanctification itself; because there it shows how each person should not be a slave to sin but should yield his members as instruments of righteousness so that he may produce the fruit of sanctification.

Our sanctification comes to us through the Lord Jesus Christ joining us to himself at His death. The tree is different from its fruit. The tree is a tree and fruit is fruit. Likewise, sanctification and the fruit of sanctification are different. Sanctification is one thing, its fruit is another. The believers at Corinth had their sanctified position, but they did not bear the fruit of sanctification. And it was for this reason that Paul wrote his letter to reprimand them, showing them how they must bear the fruit of sanctification as well as have their position of sanctification (2 Corinthians 7:1).

"Of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who was made unto us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:30). This verse reveals how Christ Jesus has become our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. As Christ Jesus is righteous and holy before God, so we are righteous and holy in Christ. Our holiness before God is not any less than Christ's. Praise God, our holiness before Him is not based on our doing righteously. Holiness is not experiencing Christ, it *is* Christ. The holiness of Christ is our holiness.

"Such were some of you: but ye were washed, but ye were sanctified, but ye were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11). According to the order given here, it would seem that sanctification is ahead of justification. Paul says to his

readers that they are already sanctified, they are already justified. Have we already been sanctified and justified? If you were to ask a Christian whether he is justified, he would boldly reply yes. You may even ask him if he is a righteous man and he would still dare to answer affirmatively. But suppose you ask him if he is a saint; most likely he will not dare admit himself to being a saint. Nevertheless, the Bible says we are already saints, we are already sanctified. Due to the Lord Jesus Christ, God not only forgives our sins and justifies us, He also reckons us as worthy, as being saints. This worthiness is that which is in the sight of God. Whenever we see ourselves, though, we are unable to enjoy this relationship.

“By which will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Hebrews 10:10). Our sanctification is based on Jesus Christ offering up His own body. He does it once and it is accomplished forever: “By one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified (v. 14). Thank God, our sanctification is solely due to Christ, so ours is eternal and perfect. Some people are afraid to approach God because they always sense their uncleanness. Indeed, we *are* unclean and we can easily be defiled and turn unfaithful; nevertheless, we are holy because of Christ and not because of our own works. By the one offering of Christ we are sanctified forever. Our position before God is holy. Whenever we stand on that position and come to Him through Christ, He will look at us as being holy in Christ and will accept us as He has accepted Christ.

(c) *Bear the fruit of sanctification.* “Like as he who called you is holy, be ye yourselves also holy in all manner of living” (1 Peter 1:15). The Lord is holy, and we are called to a holy position; therefore, we must be holy in all manner of living. How ever can we claim to be holy before God and yet be unholy before men? We should show in our living that we are holy people, that we are set apart to God.

“Now being made free from sin and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto sanctification, and the end eternal life” (Romans 6:22). Praise God, having been made free from sin and sanctified to be servants of God, we should have the fruit of sanctification. We should not yield our members to lawlessness and unrighteousness; instead, we should yield our members to righteousness that we may belong wholly to God and bear the fruit of holiness as His servants.

“Having therefore these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Corinthians 7:1). We should rid ourselves of all the defilement of flesh and spirit—of all the things which are not of God—so as to bear the fruit of sanctification in the fear of God.

“Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth” (John 17:17). To be sanctified by truth is to bear the fruit of sanctification daily. For the truth is God’s word. Daily we should examine our works with God’s truth and rid ourselves of all that is dishonoring to God so that we may be cleansed. This is to be a progressive matter day by day, not something which it is assumed can be accomplished all at once. This is the work of the Holy Spirit who operates in us daily by the truth.

Some set forth the idea that sanctification is instantaneous and that we may be sanctified suddenly. Nothing of the sort. We may experience victory over sin suddenly, but we cannot call that sanctification. Sanctification is to be set apart to God; instant victory over sin is called deliverance. An erroneous interpretation will produce an erroneous effect.

“But he (the Father of spirits) (chastens us) for our profit, that we may be partakers of his holiness” (Hebrews 12:10). Chastening is also a way for us to bear the fruit of sanctification. When our feet go astray we are turned back to God’s way of holiness by His chastisement so that we may be partakers of His holiness and be entirely His.

Finally, let us see that the fruit of sanctification is not only a matter of our conduct but also a matter of our experience in nearness to and communion with God. “Follow after . . . sanctification without which no man shall see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14). No doubt we are sanctified positionally and we may boldly enter the holiest place so as to have intimate fellowship with God, but if we do not stand on the sanctified position with a true heart in fullness of faith, we seemingly will not be able to touch Him. Hence we must seek after holiness, since without it no man can see the Lord.

“And the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved entire, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is he that calleth you, who will also do it” (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).

By Watchman Nee