

Living a Holy Life

Called to be Holy

There is a larger purpose of salvation beyond giving the saved an endless life with God. Matthew 1:21 declares that *you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins*. The very name *Jesus* means *Savior*. Note that Jesus is to save us *from* our sins, not *in* our sins. This implies that we can and should live a life apart from sin as much as is humanly possible given our sinful nature. Ephesians 2:10 is more explicit regarding this larger purpose of salvation. *For by grace you have been saved through faith...For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works*. This text says that the saved were created to do good works. Therefore, salvation's larger purpose beyond a perfect, endless life with God is to change people's character in this life into a character more like God's. That is only logical because if Jesus came to earth to live a perfectly righteous life on our behalf, then we ought to live more like Him even though we cannot equal His performance because of our sinful nature.

This desire of God that we become more like Him in character is called sanctification: Paul stated that *this is the will of God, your sanctification* (I Thessalonians 4:3). The apostle Peter put it this way: *but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy* (I Peter 1:15). So God wants us to be sanctified or holy. The Greek words for *sanctified*, *sanctification*, *saint*, and *holy* all stem from the same root, which means *to be set apart* from the world and to God. This means that saints are not super-good Christians who have more righteousness than they need so that they can mediate some of it for you with Jesus. Saints include all who are committed to Jesus.

Two Aspects of Sanctification

There are two aspects to sanctification: (1) positional sanctification—being set apart in order to act in a different way; and (2) progressive sanctification—the work of becoming more like Jesus in your character. We know that *positional* sanctification is to be set apart in order to act differently because in the Scriptures both objects and persons are said to be set apart for holy use or service (Genesis 2:3; Exodus 13:2; 40:10-13). According to the New Testament, all believers *have been sanctified* (Acts 20:32; I Corinthians 1:2; 6:11; II Timothy 2:21; Hebrews 2:11). Believers are said to be (1) *in Christ*, that is, in a relationship with Him (Romans 8:1; 12:5; I Corinthians 1:2; II Corinthians 1:21; 5:17; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:6) and (2) to have been *adopted* by God (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:5; Ephesians 1:5).

This new position is symbolized by baptism, for Jesus declared that *unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God* (John 3:5). And the apostle Peter stated we should *Repent, and let everyone of you be baptized...and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit* (Acts 2:38). Thus, we become *adopted* into God's kingdom—receive a new position—by

being baptized with the Holy Spirit at our water baptism. There is one caveat, however. Acts 5:32 tells us that the Holy Spirit is given to those who *obey* Him. Not that our obedience earns us the right to the Spirit, but that our willful disobedience will cause us to forfeit the Holy Spirit. This implies that we cannot be saved while willfully and habitually doing wrong.

Progressive sanctification is necessary because if we are *set apart (sanctified)* for service to God, then we certainly need to *act* in service toward Him. In other words, progressive sanctification naturally follows from positional sanctification. Moreover, the New Testament uses words derived from the Greek words for *growth* (I Peter 2:2; II Peter 3:18), *sanctification* (I Thessalonians 4:3; 5:23), and *holiness* (Romans 6:19; II Corinthians 7:1; Hebrews 12:10, 14; I Peter 1:15-16; II Peter 3:11) to describe the believer's way of life.

We must be careful not to regard progressive sanctification as becoming increasingly righteous or perfect internally, for the only righteousness that brings salvation is the perfect righteousness of Jesus that is imputed to us (put to our account). Note that Romans 4:6 says that *God imputes righteousness apart from works*. Verses 11, 22-25 tell us that even the Old Testament person of Abraham had righteousness *imputed* to him (v. 11), or that he was *accounted* righteous because of his faith (vv. 22-23). Finally, the parallelism in verses 24-25 calls this *imputed* righteousness *justification*. Therefore, justification by faith is the result of having the imputed righteousness of Jesus. Theologians speak of justification as the result of the *imputed* righteousness of Jesus and progressive sanctification as receiving the progressively *imparted* righteousness of Jesus. But this imparted righteousness does not make us more and more perfectly righteous because Isaiah 64:6 even calls God's people's righteousnesses (our righteous acts) *filthy rags*. The Hebrew term for *filthy rags* refers to a woman's menstrual cloth. In other words, just as the blood issuing from a woman has no ability to be used to sustain a fetus, so even our sanctified good works do not have the ability to give us eternal life. They are never good enough. Therefore, the imparted righteousness of Jesus in progressive sanctification does not actually make us more righteous, but it does make us more like God in character—defined as the spiritual direction or trend of our life.

Necessity of Progressive Sanctification

Can a person be saved while willfully disobeying God's Word? In other words, is progressive sanctification actually necessary? The apostle James commanded us to *be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving ourselves* (James 1:22). And Jesus Himself declared that many will cast out demons and do other wonderful works in His name, but that He would reject them because they practiced lawlessness (Matthew 7:21-23). Those who hear the word but do not practice it are only deceiving themselves into thinking they are saved when they are actually lost. Even the working of miracles in Jesus' name means nothing if one is practicing lawlessness, that is, if one is living apart from God's Law.

The necessity of progressive sanctification can also be seen in light of several points the New Testament makes as follows:

- *New Birth is Necessary*—Scripture tells us that we must be born again (John 3:3, 5), which makes a person a new creature (II Corinthians 5:17) and ready to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:1-6).
- *Position in Christ Leads to Holy Living*—A Christian's position in Christ is compared to that of a branch on a grape vine (John 15:1-5). The purpose of each branch is specifically said to bear much fruit, which spiritually means to live a holy life.
- *Believers Created for Good Works*—Ephesians 2:10 and II Peter 1:3-7 tell us that the believer was created for good works or to live a life exhibiting a righteous character.
- *Jesus is Our Example*—Jesus is our Example as well as our Substitute, according to I Peter 2:21-22, which means that His followers will *keep His commandments* (I John 2:3-6).
- *No Salvation Without Sanctification*—Hebrews 12:10-14 teaches that without holiness *no one will see the Lord* (v. 14). The Greek word for *holiness* in verse 14 comes from the same word for *sanctification*.
- *The Cross Proves Necessity of Progressive Sanctification*—Because Jesus became our Substitute we know that God's Law demands 100 percent perfect righteousness and cannot be altered. Otherwise, Jesus did not have to come and live and die for us. Since Jesus had to do this for us to receive salvation, we know that God's Law is still in effect as instructions on how to live.

New Attitude Toward Sin and Righteousness

Paul declares that when we belong to Jesus, our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 6:19) and that we become a new creation (I Corinthians 5:17). Moreover, we become adopted as children of God (Romans 8:14-15), are joint heirs with Christ (Romans 8:17), and have been made to sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:6). In turn, we ought to consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God (Romans 6:11). In other words, when we realize our new position in Jesus, it gives us great psychological power to actually act on that new position. Practically speaking, it means we should expect God to successfully help us live a holy life. Even in secular pursuits, the right attitude takes a person most of the way to his or her goals. Therefore, positional sanctification helps mentally prepare the Christian to walk a life of progressive sanctification.

How Progressive Sanctification Works

First, we should acknowledge up front that Jesus is the key to living a holy life of progressive sanctification. Jesus said that *without Me you can do nothing* (John 15:5). Yet the apostle Paul added that *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me* (Philippians 4:13). So, not surprisingly, Jesus is the key to a holy life. In the following subsections we will break the process of progressive sanctification down into its constituent parts.

The Power to Live a Holy Life

In addition to the words of Jesus and Paul quoted above, the apostle Paul also more explicitly teaches that a Christian is *to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man* (Ephesians 3:16). Not only does Divinity provide the power to live a holy life, He also gives us the desire to do so, *for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure* (Philippians 2:13).

Feeding our Spiritual Nature

We have previously learned that as a result of our sinful nature the believer is a kind of walking civil war in which our sinful nature battles against our spiritual nature represented by the Holy Spirit living in us as in our body-temple (Romans 7:15-23; I Corinthians 6:19; Galatians 5:17). While we should expect that God will have to supply us the power to live a successful holy life of sanctification, we must learn to starve our sinful nature and feed our spiritual nature. This is part of the work that a believer must do in order to live the sanctified life.

How does the believer feed his spiritual nature? In other words, how does the believer make it more possible to be influenced and empowered by the Holy Spirit living within him or her? First, we must recognize that the mind is the real spiritual battlefield. Therefore, we must *be transformed by the renewing of your mind* (Romans 12:2), which is the opposite of being conformed to this world (Romans 12:1). In practical terms, we should focus on spiritual things as often as we can while not neglecting our secular duties to ourselves, our families, and our workplaces. In fact, it greatly helps to view our secular duties in life as being done with, to, and for the Lord.

Second, this also means these things must replace our natural, sinful focus on music, reading material, visual material, conversations, and environments that unduly expose us to worldly influences. Third, we should spend some time each day focused on the character of Jesus, for it is a human, as well as spiritual principle, that we gradually become what we habitually behold (II Corinthians 3:18). Finally, we must study the Scriptures at least a few minutes each day because the Psalmist testified that *Your word I have hidden in my heart, That I might not sin against You*

(Psalms 119:11), and Jesus prayed for His apostles, *Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth* (John 17:17).

Resisting Temptation and Overcoming Sinful Habits

In practical terms, what must the believer actually do to successfully resist temptation and overcome a sinful habit? First, we must be in a state of submission to God in order to resist the devil (James 4:7), which was described above by our feeding the spiritual nature. While we must exercise our free will, it is not our own willpower but God's power that brings spiritual success.

Second, according to I Timothy 6:9, 11-12, we must exercise our free will (1) to flee from temptation as soon as we recognize it and (2) to pursue the righteous course of action. When we exercise our free will, God supplies the power to do the right thing. This exercise of free will is an act of faith that God's power will supply our success. In Joshua 3:13-17, when the priests believed God and put their faith into action by stepping into the Jordan River, only then did God part the raging river so that His people could cross into Canaan.

Finally, we should implement the Replacement Principle--that overcoming a bad habit is much more successful when a person replaces it with a good habit. We know this from our own experience and from Jesus' parable of the woman who swept her house clean, representing the sweeping of the mind and thus allowing for more demons to later occupy it (Luke 11:24-26).

These steps in resisting temptation and overcoming a sinful habit can be mostly summarized from two New Testament texts. James 4:7 tells us, *Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.* In other words, submission to God and resisting the devil in that condition results in victory. The apostle Paul also admonishes us to *work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure* (Philippians 2:12-13). The context in this latter passage is sanctification, not how one is actually saved (vv. 5-16). The believer is here told to work out what God works in. That is, He works in us to give us the desire (*will*) and power (*do*), but we exercise that will and power that actually results in obedience to His will.

More Evidence of the Christian's Responsibility in Progressive Sanctification

The New Testament describes the Christian life by using at least five metaphors, as listed and described below:

- *Growth Metaphor*—John 15:1-5 and Matthew 6:28 compare a believer to a branch on a grape vine (John 15:1-5) and to lilies of the field (Matthew 6:28). Some have used this metaphor to teach a passive view of sanctification by saying that grape vines and lilies do

not try to produce fruit or themselves. They naturally do this without effort (Matthew 6:28). However, the plant growth metaphor suggests more than mere passivity. Plants need sunshine, air, food, and water in order to grow in healthy ways. Jesus is the Sun of Righteousness (Malachi 4:2; cf. Luke 1:78; II Peter 1:19; Revelation 22:16). The Holy Spirit is the air (John 3:5-8); the word for *Spirit* essentially means *moving air*. Jesus is also our spiritual food as the Bread of Life (John 6:35; cf. I Peter 2:2-3). Finally, Jesus is the living water (John 4:14). A gardener who wants healthy, productive plants will make certain that they receive all of these things. Likewise, the Christian needs to work to acquire these spiritual things in order to grow successfully and produce fruit.

- *Walking Metaphor*—Several passages describe the Christian life as a walk with the Lord: (1) Romans 6:4; (2) Romans 8:1; (3) II Corinthians 5:7; (4) Galatians 5:16; (5) Ephesians 4:1; (6) I John 1:7; and (7) I John 2:6. Persistent or continual walking requires real effort.
- *Running Metaphor*—Several passages speak of the Christian life by using the running metaphor: (1) I Corinthians 9:24-27; (2) Galatians 2:2; (3) Galatians 5:7; (4) Philippians 2:16; and (5) Philippians 3:14. A runner needs physical conditioning and exercises many muscles in order to run successfully,
- *Boxing Metaphor*—In I Corinthians 9:26-27 Paul describes the fact that a boxer requires training or discipline in order to be successful.
- *Fighting/Warfare Metaphor*—Several passages describe the Christian life in terms of a soldier who fights in a war: (1) I Corinthians 9:25-27; (2) II Corinthians 10:4; (3) Ephesians 6:11-17; (4) I Timothy 1:18; and (5) I Timothy 6:12. A soldier requires much training and discipline in order to survive and fight well.

The five metaphors that the New Testament uses to describe the Christian life all indicate that the believer has an active role to play in the process of progressive sanctification. Unlike justification, which is received as a finished declaration of perfect righteousness, progressive sanctification requires the believer to work together with the Holy Spirit to work out what He works in us.

Two Major Errors Concerning Progressive Sanctification

There have been at least two major errors in the teaching of progressive sanctification: (1) Entire Sanctification and (2) Passive Sanctification. We now examine each of them in this section.

Entire Sanctification

The roots of this doctrine were prepared by the rise of pietism, a movement in Germany that began in the late seventeenth century among some Lutheran Christians. Pietism emphasized a transformed life through spiritual renewal. During the next century (the eighteenth) in England, John Wesley created a movement with the same emphasis. As a cleric in the Church of England (Anglican Church), Wesley was very disappointed in the lack of piety and personal growth among Christians. By about 1740 he had created the Methodist movement, so-called because he and his followers methodically lived a life of personal devotion. As part of this emphasis, Wesley posited a doctrine of *entire sanctification*. Later this teaching became an integral part of the Second Great Awakening, which was an American revival movement among several Protestant churches from about 1795 to about 1830. Charles G. Finney was the foremost theologian of the Second Great Awakening.

The idea of *entire sanctification* was based on the concept of the *second blessing* of the Holy Spirit. Wesley and Finney each believed that, as did all Christians, the Holy Spirit came to believers at their baptism. But at some later point in the believers' walk, they received the *second blessing* of the Spirit. Some, like Wesley himself, thought of this *second blessing* as coming gradually, while some in the Second Great Awakening taught that it came in one specific and ecstatic moment. In either case, this *second blessing* of the Holy Spirit brought *entire sanctification* to the believer, defined as perfection or near perfection. This theological understanding contributed significantly to the popular notion among American Protestant Christians in the nineteenth century that believers would eventually bring a perfect millennium of peace and prosperity on the earth. Following that millennium Jesus would return in glory to establish His literal kingdom on earth. This view of the millennium is called post-millennialism because it taught that Jesus' Second Coming would come after (*post*) the millennium.

The entire sanctification theology within the Second Great Awakening led indirectly to the development of two different wings essentially of Methodist origins, the Holiness movement in the middle of the nineteenth century and the Pentecostal movement in the late nineteenth century. The difference in emphasis was that the Holiness movement focused on personal devotion and a life of holiness, while the Pentecostal movement focused on spiritual gifts, especially the gift of tongues.

We reject the theology of *entire sanctification* as an extreme view of progressive sanctification that ignores the impact that the sinful nature has on the believer. First, as already noted, even the believer's good works do not constitute perfection because they are tainted with sin from the sinful nature and are thus *filthy rags* (Isaiah 64:6). Second, the sinful nature makes even outward perfect performance impossible because we are prone to mistakes. While the power of sin to *enslave* us can and should be gone (Romans 6:12, 14, 18, 22), the *presence* of sin remains in the believer and

prevents reaching the level of perfect performance. Finally, the apostle Paul himself admitted that he had not achieved the level of moral perfection: *Not that I have already attained, or am already perfect* (Philippians 3:12). Then in that context of spiritual perfection, he implies that this will not happen until the completed transformation of our bodies at the Second Coming of Jesus (Philippians 3:20-21).

Passive Sanctification

In some Protestant Christian circles around the turn of the twentieth century, a doctrine of passive sanctification emerged. This view teaches that the fight of faith is only to fight against the sinful tendency to put ourselves in charge and then allow the Holy Spirit to obey in and for us. Moreover, since God makes no mistakes, this theology states that it is possible to reach perfection of performance by keeping God in charge.

This passive sanctification view is often defended with Galatians 2:20: *I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.* But first, the point of this text is that the believer lives a holy life by faith in focusing on the cross of Jesus as His greatest demonstration of love for us. That is *how* Jesus lives in us.

Second, passive sanctification makes Jesus, or more precisely the Holy Spirit, our puppeteer and us His puppets, an idea that violates both the character of God as the lover and giver of free will *and* the Christian experience with temptation that tells us this never works. If one waits for Jesus or His Spirit to do one's obeying for him, then he will yield to temptation every time. Third, this view ignores the plain teaching of the New Testament that the Christian is to work out what God works in us (Philippians 2:12-13) and to resist the devil within the context of being submitted to God (James 4:7). Moreover, it also violates the several different metaphors of the Christian life presented in the New Testament, each of which requires the understanding that the believer plays a much more active part in progressive sanctification than merely making certain that God is in charge of our lives. Passive sanctification, therefore, confuses the work of God *for* us with His work *in* us.

Relationship Between Justification and Progressive Sanctification

Three major errors have been taught concerning the relationship between justification and progressive sanctification.

Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox View

The first one is the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox view that justification is the process by which God makes a believer intrinsically and literally perfectly righteous in order to then declare him to be righteous. Of course, we have learned that justification is God's declaration of the believer's faith in Jesus as his Substitute as constituting the possession of Jesus' perfect righteousness through a relationship with Him (*imputed* righteousness). And progressive sanctification is the process resulting from justification of becoming more like God in one's character, or spiritual direction and trend of his life. Therefore, justification is the *root* of one's salvation, and progressive sanctification is the *fruit* of that salvation. This is further illustrated by God's own statement at the beginning of the presentation of His Ten Commandments in Exodus 20. I have saved you (20:2); now here is how I want you to act like it (20:3-17).

Therefore, this Catholic and Eastern Orthodox view so confuses justification and sanctification that the two actually become the same thing. This was the very understanding of justification that all of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers protested against. While progressive sanctification must take place in the life of the believer, it is not the same thing as justification. Like a train track, they are two "rails" that are in close relationship to each other but are two separate "rails." This is the principle of "unity with distinction," but the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions have destroyed that by eliminating the distinction between the two.

Liberal Protestant View

A second major error regarding the relationship between justification and progressive sanctification represents the thinking of more liberal Protestant Christians. This understanding so minimizes the importance of living a holy life apart from worldly influences that it has destroyed the unity between justification and progressive sanctification. In doing so it destroys the unity portion of the "unity with distinction" principle. But like the two rails of a train track, if you jump one rail you have jumped the entire track.

Some Conservative Protestants' View

Finally, a third major error concerning the relationship between justification and progressive sanctification reflects the thinking of *some* more conservative Protestant traditions. Apparently in order to reflect the Bible's teaching that salvation is a three-fold process of (1) having been saved (past tense), (2) are being saved (present tense), and (3) will be saved (future tense), this view relegates justification to the covering of past sins, progressive sanctification as dealing with the current Christian life (present tense), and glorification pertaining to the Second Coming of Jesus (future tense). [Note: The New Testament does teach that salvation pertains to the past tense, the present tense, and the future tense—have been saved, are being saved, and will be saved. See (1)

Ephesians 2:5, 8, II Timothy 1:9, and Titus 3:5 for salvation as past tense; (2) I Corinthians 1:18, 15:2, and II Corinthians 2:15 for salvation as present tense; and (3) Acts 15:11, Romans 5:9, I Corinthians 3:15, and 5:5 for salvation as future tense.]

First, however, we have established that progressive sanctification is inadequate to deal with current sins because of the sinful nature. Second, this means that justification must cover the believer until he no longer possesses the sinful nature, which this view correctly teaches will be removed at the Second Coming of Jesus (Philippians 3:20-21). This means that justification is like an umbrella that is used by a person taking a walk. It covers and protects him while he walks. Likewise, justification covers and protects a believer while he walks the spiritual walk of progressive sanctification. Finally, this false view relegates Jesus as Savior only for our past sins and makes the Holy Spirit our Savior for the current spiritual walk. But Jesus, whose very name means *Savior*, is the only active Agent as our Savior (I John 4:14). The Father is Savior only in the sense of having sent the Son to be the active Agent of salvation (I Timothy 1:1; 2:3; 4:10; Titus 1:3; 2:10; 3:4; Jude 25). Finally, the Holy Spirit points us to the Savior and helps produce the fruit of salvation (Galatians 5:22).

Summary of Justification, Progressive Sanctification, and Glorification

Therefore, we may summarize the correct relationship between justification and progressive sanctification in the following ways. First, justification by grace through faith alone is the only means by which the believer obtains the perfect righteousness necessary for salvation. It is a declaration by God that he is righteous because by faith the believer has a positive relationship with Jesus. This is the imputed righteousness of Jesus that the believer is credited with through relational grace.

Second, progressive sanctification is the result of having already been justified (or saved) and represents the imparted righteousness of Jesus in the sense of a character developing like Jesus' character. In this sense, it produces the fruit of salvation but is not in any sense part of the root of one's salvation. It is necessary but inadequate to produce actual righteousness or salvation because of the continued presence of the sinful nature even in the believer. It is the continuous work of a lifetime that is experienced by the active cooperation of the believer with the Holy Spirit by his submission to God and his resistance in that context against Satan.

Both justification and sanctification go together in perfect unity just like two rails of a railroad track must be together in order for the track to be functional. They are distinguished as separate "rails" but are always present together.

Finally, at the Second Coming of Jesus, the sinful nature will be removed along with the transformation of our physical bodies in the instantaneous Divine act of glorification (Philippians

3:20-21). Only then can it be said that a believer is intrinsically and perfectly righteous. But even then, since by beholding we are changed (II Corinthians 3:18), we shall continue to reflect God's character more and more as we behold Him throughout eternity. In that sense, progressive sanctification will continue forever but without the presence of sin.