



Talmid תלמיד a Hebrew word that means “a true disciple who desires to be what the Rabbi Jesus is.”

Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did. 1 John 2:6 (NIV)

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STUDY TO SHEW THYSELF APPROVED UNTO GOD, A WORKMAN THAT NEEDETH NOT TO BE ASHAMED, RIGHTLY
DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH. 2 TIMOTHY 2:15



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Doctrine of Sanctification

Sanctification

Term meaning *being made holy*, or *purified*, it is used broadly of the whole Christian experience, though most theologians prefer to use it in a restricted sense to distinguish it from related terms, such as regeneration, justification, and glorification.

Definition

A comprehensive definition of sanctification by the **New Hampshire Baptist Confession (1833)** states: “We believe that Sanctification is the process by which, according to the will of God, we are made partakers of his holiness; that it is a progressive work; that it is begun in regeneration; and that it is carried on in the hearts of believers by the presence and power of

the Holy Spirit, the Sealer and Comforter, in the continual use of the appointed means—especially the Word of God, self-examination, self-denial, watchfulness, and prayer” (**Article X**).¹

This definition helps us to distinguish sanctification from regeneration in that the latter speaks of the *inception* of the Christian life; but sanctification is thus also distinguished from glorification which focuses on the *consummation* of God’s work in the believer. Put quite simply, then, regeneration refers to the beginning, sanctification to the middle, and glorification to the end in the “**order of salvation**.”

The distinction between sanctification and justification, on the other hand, calls for more detailed attention, both because it is somewhat subtle and even more fundamental. In the first place, justification, like regeneration, refers (though not exclusively) to the beginning of the Christian experience, whereas the above definition emphasizes the *progressive character of sanctification*. Second, justification refers to a *judicial act of God* whereby believers are at once absolved of all their guilt and accounted legally righteous, whereas sanctification, like regeneration and glorification, calls attention to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit upon the character of God’s children.

This distinction played an important role at the time of the Reformation. The Roman Catholic Church, in the opinion of the Reformers, confused these two doctrines by insisting that justification “is not

remission of sins merely, but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man” (**Decrees of the Council of Trent, Sixth Session, 1547, ch VII.**)²

In contrast, the Reformers emphasized that the two doctrines, although inseparable, must be distinguished. Calvin argued that, to be sure, these two elements of God’s saving act cannot be torn into parts any more than Christ can be torn. “Whomever, therefore, God receives into grace; on them he at the same time bestows the spirit of adoption, by whose power he remakes them to his own image. But if the brightness of the sun cannot be separated from its heat, shall we therefore say that the earth is warmed by its light, or lighted by its heat?” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.11.6, tr. F. L. Battles).³

In short, then, justification is a once-for-all, declarative act of God as Judge, whereas sanctification is a progressive change in the character of the person justified (this distinction, too, is qualified below).

One more element in the definition requires comment, namely, the statement that “we are made partakers of his holiness.”⁴ A complete survey of what the Bible has to say about sanctification is not possible here, since practically the whole of Scripture addresses this issue in one way or another. One central theme in that teaching, however, must be emphasized: “**You shall be holy as I am holy**” (**Leviticus 11:45; 1 Peter 1:16; cf. Matthew 5:48**).

Leviticus 11:45 (NASB)

⁴⁵ **For I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God; thus you shall be holy, for I am holy.”**

1 Peter 1:16 (NASB)

¹⁶ **because it is written, “YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY.”**

Matthew 5:48 (NASB)

⁴⁸ **“Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**

According to the **Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647)**, by sanctification “we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God” (**Question 34; see Colossians 3:10**).⁵

Colossians 3:10 (NASB)

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.

Nothing can be more crucial to our view of sanctification than this truth. The standard of holiness is complete conformity to Christ’s image **Romans 8:29 (NASB)** “**FOR THOSE whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren**”; anything less than that is a lowering of the scriptural standard and thus a dilution of the doctrine. The definition above, however, implies that Christ is more than our pattern: he himself provides his holiness for those united with him—he *is* our sanctification “**But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption**” **1 Corinthians 1:30 (NASB)**

Definitive Sanctification

The *progressive* nature of our sanctification is explicit in many passages, particularly Paul’s statement that Christians are transformed “**from glory to glory**” into the Lord’s image (**2 Corinthians 3:18**; see also **Romans 12:1-2; Philippians 3:14; Hebrews 6:1; 2 Peter 3:18**). Moreover, the numerous commands found in Scripture imply that the Christian experiences growth.

At the same time, however, a number of expressions in Scripture force qualification of the previous statements. For example, Paul frequently refers to Christians as “**saints**,” that is, “**holy ones**” (**Romans 1:7; Ephesians 1:1; etc.**), and this language suggests that sanctification is already the possession of believers.

In fact, Paul specifically says that the Corinthian Christians “**have been sanctified**” (**1 Corinthians 1:2**), and he even coordinates sanctification with washing (= regeneration?) and justification as though all three elements had taken place at the same time; “**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.**” **1 Corinthians 6:11 (NASB)**

Perhaps more impressive is the apostle’s declaration that Christians have *died* to sin; “**May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?**” **Romans 6:2 (NASB)**

One can hardly think of a more powerful figure than death, suggesting as it does a permanent, irrevocable

dissolution of the believer's relationship with sin; indeed, Paul goes on to declare that sin will no longer master us; **"For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace."** [Romans 6:14 \(NASB\)](#)

It goes without saying, of course, that these passages do not teach absolute perfection for every Christian upon conversion. Such an interpretation would bring us into conflict with the clear teaching of Scripture as a whole. Furthermore, one should note that the Corinthian **"saints"** were marked by woeful immaturity ([1 Corinthians 3:1–3](#); [6:8](#); [11:17–22](#), etc.).

How then should these passages be interpreted? Some writers have suggested that Paul is speaking of **"potential" sanctification**; that is, although our relationship with sin has not been *actually* severed, God has given us what we need for that to take place. There is an element of truth in this formulation, but it hardly does justice, by itself, to the force of Paul's language. Coming somewhat closer to an adequate explanation is to speak of **"positional" sanctification**.

According to this view, Paul is only speaking in *judicial terms* regarding our status before God. One should certainly recognize a judicial element in Paul's discussion ([Romans 6:7](#) uses the word **"justified"**), but if that is all that is said, then it suggests that [Romans 6](#) simply restates the doctrine of justification—a very doubtful conclusion. Much more satisfactory is the view of **John Murray**, who argues that Paul's teaching contains both a judicial element—God has executed judgment on sin with a view to man's deliverance—and an actual, experiential reference. One may indeed say that for *all* Christians "there is a once-for-all definitive and irreversible breach with the realm in which sin reigns" (*Collected Writings*, vol 2, p 229).⁶

What all of this means is that the earlier statements need modifying by introducing a new distinction between *definitive* and *progressive* sanctification. At first sight the distinction may appear unnecessary or unhelpful. Someone might argue that **"definitive sanctification"** looks too much like justification because of its judicial character (particularly since justification already includes the

imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer) and too much like regeneration, which already seems to account for the initial renewal of the individual's character. Nevertheless, there are good grounds for accepting the distinction, which impresses upon one the multifaceted richness of God's redemptive work on behalf of believers. In particular, to recognize the truth of definitive sanctification provides a fundamentally important perspective on both the relationship of Christ's work to the believer's experience, and the nature of that experience itself.

The first of these two issues relates to Paul's statement that **"man has died with Christ"** ([Romans 6:8](#)). What could that possibly mean? Paul is here making clear reference to a past, objective, non-repeatable event: Christ's own death and resurrection. Further, he writes that Christians (even though not yet born when Christ died) participated in that redemptive-historical event. Whatever intellectual difficulties may arise from such unusual statements, the clarity of Paul's language cannot be compromised: by virtue of man's corporate union with Christ, man was directly involved with him in his death and resurrection.

It seems unnecessary, however, to think exclusively in such historical terms, for Paul is also appealing to the subjective experience of the Christian; what Christ accomplished with his death and resurrection the Holy Spirit applies to believers at their conversion (note [Ephesians 2:4–7](#)(NASB)). **"But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus."**

The significance of this point is that Christ's redemptive work is as clearly linked to man's sanctification as it is to man's justification. People need to become sensitive to the power of this truth. Just as the atonement obtained man's forgiveness, *so did it accomplish man's sanctification*, both of which blessings are appropriated at once through faith.

In the second place, however, it should be noted that to recognize the truth of definitive sanctification is to

apprehend a new and glorious dimension in the believer's experience itself. If it is true that Christians *actually* severed their relationship with sin, that sin *has* been dethroned in their lives, then they may be certain of ultimate victory, no matter how discouraging or even hopeless some of their failures may appear; ***“For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.”*** [Philippians 1:6](#) (NASB)

Indeed, it should be understood that progressive sanctification itself is built on definitive sanctification; in other words, that the *commands* to an obedient walk have their ground on the *fact* that one has been made obedient. Theologians often speak of the Christian tension between the **“already”** and the **“not yet.”** While that tension accounts for much spiritual frustration, it also provides all the necessary encouragement: if Christ has truly destroyed the power of sin over men, then men hardly have an excuse to sin. **“Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God”** ([Colossians 3:2-3 NIV](#)).

Progressive Sanctification

Historical Survey. Although all Christian groups recognize the need to become transformed by the renewing of the mind ([Romans 12:2](#)), considerable differences are found among them regarding specific issues. The Reformers, generally speaking, held to what some call a **“pessimistic”** view of personal sanctification. This perspective is clearly reflected in the **Westminster Confession of Faith (1647)**, which states that sanctification “is imperfect in this life; there abideth still some remnants of corruption in every part, whence ariseth a continual and irreconcilable war” within the believer (XIII.ii).⁷ Although the confession goes on to emphasize the overcoming power of the Spirit, some Christians believe that its basic thrust obscures the need and possibility of spiritual victory.

To some extent, the teachings of **John Wesley (1703–91)** may be viewed as a reaction to the usual Calvinistic and Lutheran formulations. Strongly influenced by the Pietistic movement of his day, Wesley paid much attention to the experiential side

of Christianity and eventually formulated, though not with great consistency, the doctrine that **“entire sanctification”** is possible in this life. During the 19th century, interest in the possibility of perfection (not understood in an absolute sense, however) spread to many Christian circles. According to some, perfection resulted from the eradication of sin; according to others, spiritual victory was gained by counteracting the sin that remains even in the Christian's heart. The latter approach became characteristic of the so-called **Victorious Life Movement**. These various **“perfectionist”** groups were subjected to a searching criticism by the **Princeton theologian, Benjamin B. Warfield (1851–1921)**. The debate has continued, though not as vigorously, during this century.

The Agency in Sanctification. Much of the controversy focuses on the human role in sanctification. While all Christians agree that holiness would be impossible without God's help, it is difficult to define precisely how that truth affects one's own activity. In the Roman Catholic tradition so much stress has been placed on the cleansing power of baptism and on the meritorious character of good works that one may rightly question whether the significance of divine grace is not thereby ignored. (A similar criticism can be leveled at certain strands of Arminian theology.) At the other extreme stand some exponents of the **Victorious Life Movement**, whose stress on **“let go and let God”** (a slogan that has some value if properly used) sometimes suggest that believers remain completely passive in sanctification.

No passage of Scripture is more relevant to this issue than [Philippians 2:12-13](#), where Paul juxtaposes the command for one to work out one's own salvation with the declaration that it is God who provides the spiritual strength necessary for the task. **“So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”** [Philippians 2:12-13](#) (NASB)

It may be tempting to emphasize the first part of the statement so as to ignore the fundamental significance of the second; or else to become so arrested by Paul's stress (here and elsewhere) on divine grace that the weight of personal responsibility is overlooked. The apostle, however, appears to have deliberately and carefully preserved a fine balance between these two truths.

Sanctification requires discipline, concentration, and effort, as is clear by the many exhortations of Scripture, especially those where the Christian life is described with such figures as running and fighting ([1 Corinthians 9:24–27](#); [Ephesians 6:10–17](#)). On the other hand, men must always resist the temptation to assume that they in effect sanctify themselves, that spiritual power comes from within them and that they may therefore rely on their own strength. This is a difficult tension, though no more puzzling than the paradox of prayer (“Why pray when God, who knows our needs and who is all-wise and sovereign, will always do what is best anyway?”). Yet perhaps the real “secret” of holiness consists precisely in learning to keep that balance: relying thoroughly on *God* as the true agent in sanctification while faithfully discharging one’s *personal* responsibility. “**The horse is prepared for the day of battle, But victory belongs to the LORD.**” [Proverbs 21:31](#) (NASB)

The “How” of Sanctification. Even if one agrees that God alone is the author of sanctification and yet that one must remain active in it, many questions remain as to the actual process involved. Only a few of these questions can be treated here.

For example, does God’s work consist only in providing the power to *suppress* one’s evil impulses or does the Holy Spirit actually *eliminate* (by gradual “eradication”) those impulses? The final answer to this question will depend largely on one’s understanding of man’s nature, but some preliminary comments may be in order. One may argue that the notion of suppression or counteraction by itself does not do justice to the strong scriptural statements on the *transformation* which the Christian undergoes ([Romans 12:2](#); [2 Corinthians 3:18](#); [Colossians 3:10](#)).

The doctrine of definitive sanctification suggests instead that the Spirit begins at conversion an actual renewal of the Christian’s nature. Acceptance of this viewpoint, however, does not rule out the need for suppression. To begin with, godly and mature Christians testify to the presence of old desires. Further, one dares not suggest (as might be tempting if the aspect of elimination is overstressed) that one’s evil actions are wholly uncontrollable, on the grounds that the Spirit has not yet sufficiently altered the

source of those actions. It would appear, then, that a judicious balance is needed between these two aspects of the doctrine.

Second, considerable disagreement surrounds the question of the place of *God’s Law* in sanctification, and here again a decision is not possible apart from a detailed study of much broader issues. Briefly, however, some theologians, particularly those in the Lutheran tradition, have been greatly concerned with the danger of confusing law and gospel and thus reintroducing legalism into the Christian life. Now one ought most surely to heed this warning: Christians have been absolutely freed from the enslaving power of the Law ([Galatians 3:13, 23–25](#)), so that obedience to God cannot find its motive in a spirit of terror and servility but must arise from a heart full of confidence, love, and gratitude.

Nevertheless, God’s Law is but an expression of his will, which one is certainly required to perform ([Matthew 7:21](#); [Mark 3:35](#)); further, it must be remembered that the Gospels and the Letters are full of specific commands. Christ’s work was not intended to displace the divine Law but rather to write it within men’s hearts so that men might walk according to God’s statutes ([Jeremiah 31:31–34](#); [Ezekiel 36:26–27](#)). Even the Lutheran standards recognize the so-called “**third use of the Law**,” namely, that although believers have been “set free from the curse and constraint of the Law, they are not, nevertheless, in that account without Law, inasmuch as the Son of God redeemed them for the very reason that they might meditate on the Law of God day and night, and continually exercise themselves in the keeping thereof” (**The Formula of Concord, 1576, Article VI**).⁸

A third issue concerns whether or not sanctification is tied to a *crisis* (or a series of crises) in the Christian experience. It is generally admitted that the Scriptures do *not* explicitly teach the doctrine of a “**second blessing**,” although some passages, it is claimed, do allow for such a teaching or one very similar (**note J. Sidlow Baxter, *His Deeper Work Within Us*, reprinted in *Christian Holiness: Restudied and Restated***).⁹

The testimony of many Christian leaders is used to support this view, but opponents argue that evidence is lacking of a similar experience in the lives of many others. Although the doctrine of a “**second blessing**” raises some serious theological problems, one may gladly rec-

ognize that spiritual crises (and in some cases one major crisis) form an important part in the experience of most, if not all, Christians. It seems unnecessary, however, to affirm that some such crisis is a prerequisite of true sanctification or to suggest that *gradual* growth does not play a fundamental role in it.

Finally, the function of the *church* in the process of sanctification may be briefly noted. It is very easy to think of Christian holiness in exclusively individualistic terms. Yet the preaching of God's Word, baptism, the celebration of the Lord's Supper, the acts of corporate prayer, and the fellowship and exhortation of the Christian community—all of these elements are indispensable to biblical sanctification. According to Paul, the maturity that belongs to the fullness of Christ comes about by the mutual strengthening of each part of the body ([Ephesians 4:11–16 \(NASB\)](#)). **“And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.”**

The Extent and Time of Sanctification.

All Christians agree that the ultimate goal of sanctification is moral perfection ([Philippians 1:6](#); [1 Thessalonians 5:23](#)), but differences exist regarding *when* perfection may be received, whether during this life or at death. Much (but not all) of the discussion centers on [Romans 7:14–25](#). Does that passage describe the frustrations that all Christians should expect in this life? Theologians in the Wesleyan tradition affirm that [Romans 8](#), not [Romans 7](#), constitutes the model, so that “**entire sanc-**

tification” may indeed be experienced before death (see G. A. Turner, *The Vision Which Transforms*).¹⁰ They do not mean by this absolute sinlessness, but rather a genuine deliverance from *conscious* sinning (a theme which is also frequent in the **Victorious Life Movement**). Critics argue that such “**perfection**” can only be had by a lowering of God's absolute standard; and, to be sure, it cannot be forgotten that unqualified conformity to Christ is the goal from which one must never deviate.

The theological disagreement regarding this issue should not be played down as unimportant. Nevertheless, one occasionally receives the impression that the difference between some writers is largely one of semantics. In other words, they agree basically on the extent to which sanctification is possible in the present life but disagree as to whether the expressions “**entire**” and “**perfect**” are appropriate to describe it. Perhaps the disagreement is one of attitude.

One writer feels that Christians are not sufficiently sensitive to the greatness of sin and to the holiness of God and so his basic approach is “**pessimistic**.” Another writer feels burdened by the dangers of spiritual defeatism and so he presents an “**optimistic**” picture. More than likely both kinds of emphases are needed to prevent imbalance. It may even be worth considering whether Paul himself intended to describe every Christian's experience from two different perspectives in [Romans 7](#) and [8](#).

Summary.

It seems significant that most of this discussion has focused on the tensions present in the doctrine of sanctification. It has been necessary to give due weight both to the objective-historic perspective and to the subjective-experiential, the judicial and the transforming, the definitive and the progressive; it has been necessary to recognize both the divine agency and the human task, the elimination of sin and its suppression, freedom from the Law and submission to it, the individual and the corporate concerns, the pessimistic and the optimistic outlooks.

No doubt these “**paradoxes**” are an important reason why Christians have disagreed on this fundamental doctrine. Is it possible that the whole program of Christian sanctification can be reduced to the goal of learning to keep all these tensions in balance? One may say, without exaggeration that perhaps all perversions of the

doctrine have resulted from a failure to do precisely that.

ENDNOTES:

- ¹ New Hampshire Baptist Confession, (Article X).
- ² Decrees of the Council of Trent, Six Session, 1547, ch VII.
- ³ Battles, F. L., Institutes of the Christian Religion, 3.11.
- ⁴ New Hampshire Baptist Confession, (Article X).
- ⁵ Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647), Question 34.
- ⁶ Collected Writings, Vol 2, 229.
- ⁷ Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647), (XIII.ii).
- ⁸ The Formula of Concord, 1576, Article VI.
- ⁹ J. Sidlow Baxter, His Deeper Work Within Us, reprinted in Christian Holiness: Restudied and Restated.
- ¹⁰ G.A. Turner, The Vision Which Transforms.



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The following is the definition of “**sanctification**” provided in the Westminster Catechism:

“...the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin and live unto righteousness.”

In general terms, “**sanctification**” is thought of as that process by which a believer is gradually and progressively transformed into the image of Christ. It is a process that involves the total person – their heart, their mind, their will, and their conduct. Every aspect of a believer’s life comes under the work of sanctification.

John MacArthur in his commentary on [I Thessalonians](#) defines “**sanctification**” as

“...a broad governing principle...which is the process of being separated from sin and set apart to God’s holiness.”

He further adds this from [I Thessalonians 5:23](#),

“Sanctification is the ongoing spiritual process by which God increasingly sets believers apart from sin and moves them toward holiness.”

It would be correct to define the practical outworking of sanctification in the believer’s life as the pursuit of holiness in order to bear within his life the very image of God. **Millard Erickson** captures the essence of “**sanctification**” when he says,

“Sanctification is a process by which one’s moral condition is brought into conformity with one’s legal status before God....Sanctification is the Holy Spirit’s applying to the life of the believer the work done by Jesus Christ.”

The following is a further definition of the word “**sanctification**” as given by **Martyn Lloyd-Jones**:

“It is that gracious and continuous operation of the Holy Spirit by which He delivers a Christian from the pollution of sin within their life, renews His whole nature in the image of God and enables him to perform good works.”

Anthony Hoekema in his work entitled **Saved by Grace**, adds this,

“We may define sanctification as that gracious operation of the Holy Spirit, involving our responsible participation, by which He delivers us from the pollution of sin, renews our entire nature according the image of God, and enables us to live lives that are pleasing to Him.”

In essence, sanctification is the only biblical means by which someone can become conformed to the image of Christ in this life. The contrast between physical growth and spiritual growth is fairly pronounced. With physical growth, the individual reaches a peak of physical and mental health and maturity, but then deterioration begins to set in. But spiritually, the opposite is true. A Christian is able to grow and mature spiritually throughout their entire life. **II Corinthians 4:16** says,

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day.”

William Evans in his work entitled **The Great Doctrines of the Bible** says this about the work of sanctification in the believer,

“If regeneration has to do with our nature, justification with our standing, and adoption with our position, then sanctification has to do with our character and conduct. In justification we are declared righteous in order that, in sanctification, we may become righteous. Justification is what God does for us, while sanctification is what God does in us. Justification puts us into a right relationship with God, while sanctification exhibits the fruit of that relationship - a life separated from a sinful world and dedicated unto God.”

There are two primary meanings of the word “**sanctification**”. The first is **to set something**

apart for God and for His service, and in this meaning, the word applies not only to persons, but also to inanimate objects. For instance, the temple was said to be “**holy**” or set apart. The vessels in the temple were described as being set apart or made holy. This particular meaning carries the idea of being separated from everything that is profane, unclean, or impure. As an example, once the vessels in the temple were set apart for God’s use, they were never to be used again in an ordinary way. They had been set apart for God’s use, and for God’s use only. **Spiros Zodhiates** says that the word “**sanctification**” means to consecrate, to devote, and to set something apart from a common use to a sacred use. This specific setting apart is what allows the believer to accomplish God’s will in the world. It is evident that “**sanctification**” deals with the believer turning from all that is sinful and unholy before God, as well as that which is defiling to both their soul and body.

So, whatever is sanctified or set apart is devoted entirely to God. It is something that is offered and presented to God so that He may use it however He chooses to use it. It is setting someone or something at God’s disposal so that He can do with it as He chooses. This is often called “**positional**” sanctification and **it involves an immediate transformation**. **W.E. Vine** adds that sanctification also includes the course of life that is befitting of those who have been separated.

The second distinct meaning of the word “**sanctification**” describes the **process** by which a person is actually made holy and **it involves a gradual transformation** of a person’s moral and spiritual character into Christlikeness. **The spiritual goal is for the believer’s practice to mirror their position**. This aspect is often called “**progressive**” sanctification because whereas “positional” sanctification is a one-time act, “progressive” sanctification is an on-going process in the life of a believer. **I Thessalonians 5:23** says,

“²³Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

So, this aspect of sanctification is an internal work. It is a work of cleansing, purging, and purifying that goes on within the believer, and that cleansing work is such that it provides for the believer becoming more and more conformed into the image of Jesus Christ. It is a continual process and a work which goes on constantly in the believer’s life, a work that **ALWAYS** produces God’s fruit in the individual’s life. When the word

“**sanctification**” is used today, this is the meaning that someone generally is talking about and has in mind – this inward work of conforming the believer to the image of Christ. **Kenneth Wuest** further amplifies the meaning of sanctification when he says,

The word “sanctify” in the Greek means “to set apart,” and the word “sanctification” refers to the setting apart process.

Bradford Mullen has made an interesting analogy relative to sanctification when he stated,

To sanctify someone or something is to set that person or thing apart for the use intended by its designer. A pen is “sanctified” when used to write. Eyeglasses are “sanctified” when used to improve sight. In the theological sense, things are sanctified when they are used for the purpose God intends. A human being is sanctified, therefore, when he or she lives according to God’s design and purpose...

It needs to be appreciated that sanctification, like any other aspect of the Christian life, has a beginning, a place where it starts – and that beginning is theologically defined as the moment of “regeneration” when a person is “born from above”, or “born again”. In the application of redemption there is an order and a progression, and sanctification begins after regeneration, justification, and adoption have been applied. The theological impact of this is that once someone has been born again, they cannot continue to sin as a habit or a pattern of life. Every believer will sin, and sometimes more often than at other times in their life. But what Scripture clearly states is that the believer will not continue to sin as a habit or as a practice. **1 John 3:9** clarifies this when it says,

⁹Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.

The **NASB** states it this way,

No one who is born of God practices sin....

The **NIV** says,

No one who is born of God will continue to sin....

The **Amplified Bible** says,

No one born of God (deliberately, knowingly, and habitually) practices sin....

Now, there is a reason for this. It is because the power of God’s spiritual life that is now within the believer keeps them from practicing sin as a continual, non-changing habit of their lives. This is **NOT**

some kind of sinless perfection as some claim can be achieved, but rather the simple and practical outworking of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit within the believer’s life. So, what this initial step in the process of sanctification involves is a definite break from the power of sin ruling over the believer’s life as it previously had. **Romans 6:14** puts it this way,

¹⁴For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

Romans 6:18 adds,

¹⁸And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.

In practical terms it means that the believer now has living inside of them this supernatural power, a God-given strength to overcome their former sinful acts and patterns of sin. When a person is genuinely saved, what immediately happens **to** them and **in** them is a fundamental and foundational change in what they love and what they desire. What they use to love, they now hate. And what they use to hate, they now love. That is why Paul could say in **Romans 6:12-13**,

¹²Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. ¹³And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.

Paul is not saying that there will be not be sin in the believer’s life, for there surely will be. Rather, he is simply telling the believer to not let sin **reign** in their bodies, and to not yield or **present** their members to sin.

It must be appreciated that sanctification is a progressive and ongoing work of God that continues in the life of the believer for his whole life with both God and the believer having distinct roles to play in the process. **Millard Erickson** says that sanctification is a process that requires an entire lifetime in order to complete, but it is still a supernatural work. The aim of the divine outworking is simply conformity to Christ, but it simply is not a static matter in which a person is saved and then just reposes in that knowledge. It is always a process of growth and progress lived not in the Christian’s own personal strength, but in the power and grace provided by the Holy Spirit for the very purpose of sanctifying the believer.

When an individual is saved, God imputes His righteousness to them. He takes the righteousness of Christ and places it on their account. He justifies them in a once for all act. He gives them something that they did not have and could not merit on their own. And this

work of imputing Christ's righteousness to the believer also deals with delivering them from the penalty and guilt of sin to which they were accountable.

[Romans 4:5](#) describes it this way,

⁵But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness....

It can immediately be seen from this verse and others like it that **God does not wait until people are practically holy to make them positionally holy**. Very often people say that they just do not feel good enough to come as they are to Christ, so they want some more time to get "better". Well, it is certainly accurate that they are not good enough to merit salvation, but we would rigorously say that waiting has no value simply because they cannot make themselves any better. God judicially makes them positionally holy in His sight by applying the righteousness of Christ to their life. This is called "imputed righteousness". God gives them something that they simply do not deserve. But after salvation, the spiritual outworking changes from "imputed" righteousness to "imparted" righteousness. The first is judicial, legal, and official. The second is practical. It is an actual righteousness that the Holy Spirit begins to create within the believer. Imputed righteousness is God's way of dealing with sin **before** salvation, and imparted righteousness is God's way of dealing with sin **after** salvation. And there is a great distinction between the two terms.

There are *four general observations* that need to be made relative to the term "sanctification".

First, the Holy Spirit is the agent in the work of sanctification. [I Peter 1:2](#) says,

²elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ:

The only true and biblical comprehension of salvation is that it is God working in the believer. In fact, the believer's only hope of eternal life lies in the simple fact that the whole of salvation is God's work in their life. He was working in their life prior to their salvation, during their salvation, and will work in their life on into eternity. In the overall work of sanctification, the Holy Spirit has a two-fold ministry – one to the saved, and one to the unsaved. For the unbeliever, the Holy Spirit is the One who enlightens and brings him to salvation, and without His regenerating work the unbeliever cannot

be saved. The work in the believer is an ongoing work in conforming them to the image of Christ. This is that work in which the believer is separated from sin by the Holy Spirit and that work in which the believer is called on to cooperate.

Historically the church has affirmed that sanctification is a cooperative work between both God and the believer. It is the one aspect of the Order of Salvation where the believer has a critical function to perform. And even though the actual work of sanctification has been guaranteed by God, it can still be hindered by a believer's unwillingness to cooperate with God in the sanctification process. So, it is what could be called a spiritually cooperative effort between God and the believer. By their union with Christ, the believer has been set apart from the dominion of sin. They have also received the indwelling of the Holy Spirit with His power and resources for living out the Christian life. There are other means of grace provided – the Word of God, prayer, the Church, and fellowship with other Christians. And the expectation is that the believer will yield their life to these means of grace. At times it may be difficult to know how to specifically balance out God's role and the believer's role, but suffice it to say that God leads and believer's follow. God reveals and believer's respond. Sanctification is simply a cooperative effort. The believer is called on to yield their life to the leading of the Word of God and the promptings of the Holy Spirit. They are to be filled with the Spirit, to mortify the deeds of the flesh, to be obedient to the Word of God, and to confess their sin both to God and to others where needed.

Secondly, sanctification is the will of God for every believer. [II Thessalonians 4:3](#) says,

³For this is the will of God, your sanctification....

What God has done in the work of salvation is to give to the believer a new nature and a new disposition towards the things of God. The believer now longs and desires for the things of God to become a living part of his life. But not only does God give the believer the desire for these things, but in His grace He gives the believer the actual power to live out the Christian life. When a believer allows the work of sanctification to take place in their life, then they become a genuine testimony and a powerful apology for the Christian faith.

It must be remembered that in this life that indwelling sin will always be present in the believer's life. So, salvation in and of itself does not permanently deliver the believer from the defilement that sin produces in their daily life, and that is precisely what sanctification

is concerned with – eliminating that indwelling sin from the believer’s life so that they can become more and more conformed to the image of Christ. This is the constant work of the Holy Spirit in aiding the believer to not allow sin to reign in their life. It is one thing for sin to live in the believer, but quite another for the believer to live in sin.

Thirdly, the outworking of sanctification must be learned from God as He teaches it from His Word. [John 17:17](#) says,

¹⁷**Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.**

This is one of the primary methods by which sanctification is accomplished in the life of the believer. A Christian simply cannot grow apart from the truth, and they cannot know the truth apart from the Word. The word “**sanctify**” in this context means to make holy. So, it could be read this way: “**Make them holy through Thy truth.**” It is the truth of God that makes the Christian different and separates them from the world. Holiness of life comes from first knowing, and then acting on the Word of God.

It must be appreciated, however, that sanctification is limited and hindered by a lack of spiritual and biblical knowledge, as well as by a corresponding lack of obedience to that knowledge. The Word of God is specifically designed to sanctify in multiple ways. It reveals sin, it awakens the conscience to what is right or wrong before God’s eyes, and it reveals the character of Christ which is the foundation from which all spiritual life flows. It provides insight into the outworkings of the Holy Spirit on the believer’s behalf. It establishes goals and perspectives that are essential and critical to the entire sanctification process. So, if a believer ignores these spiritual graces in their life, the corresponding result will naturally be a lack of sanctification within their life, and may in some cases call for God’s discipline.

So, spiritual truth is essential for spiritual growth. Christians need the Scriptures to reveal God’s will and they need the Holy Spirit to help them both understand and apply that knowledge to their life. This aspect of sanctification carries with it a two-fold nature. First, the believer must have a consistent intake of the Word of God into their life. But secondly, once that word has been received, it is incumbent on the believer to obey what he has learned. There can never be any growth apart from

the Word of God or apart from obedience. They both are vital and essential to the entire process of sanctification. God’s method of bringing about a sanctifying result in the believer’s life is through the medium of the Word of God. God always works through the truth. He brings the believer into the realm of the truth and into a knowledge of the truth so that the truth can produce a sanctifying work in their life.

There are many Christians who believe that the work of sanctification is encapsulated in an experience, but there is no experience that can make a believer mature and strong. At the very heart of sanctification is the **lifetime** application of truth to the believer’s life. It is not their having some kind of supernatural experience that brings them into a more enlightened state of spirituality – not at all. To the contrary, the work of sanctification occurs when the Word of God and the truth embedded in that word are allowed to have their impact and influence on the believer’s life. The Holy Spirit enlightens the believer as he meditates on and hears the Word of God being taught. And at some point in time the believer comes to a place of understanding relative to that Word and then applies it to his life. The sanctifying approach to the Christian life is simple – study the Word in order to understand the Word and then apply it to our life.

And **fourthly, sanctification is something that every believer must earnestly pursue.** It is the result of obedience to the Word that is learned. [1 Peter 3:15](#) says,

¹⁵**But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear;**

John MacArthur comments on this verse,

“When believers sanctify Christ as Lord in their hearts, they affirm their submission to His control, instruction, and guidance....Believers who sanctify Christ set Him apart from all others as the sole object of their love, reverence, loyalty, and obedience.”

In the life of the believer, sanctification is simply not a passive work. It involves concentration in all areas of their life. Achieving the high calling of God in Christ Jesus ([Philippians 3:14](#)) is not something that just happens quickly or without effort. Rather, sanctification is determining the means that God has initiated for personal growth and engaging one’s life and lifestyle in the pursuit of those things. But it must be continually understood that the outworking of sanctification in the believer’s life has a two-fold dimension. First, it is what

glorifies God, and secondly it is what edifies the believer. **So, it is the process of God working in us and our responding to that work.** There are no short-cuts in the process of sanctification. The various means of grace within the Christian life are factors that mandate effort, struggle, determination, and strength. There is the exercise of personal discipline and self-control. There is Bible study and meditating on Scripture. There is prayer and worship. The list is significant, and in each case requires substantial effort and sacrifice on the part of the believer. It must be remembered that sanctification is not something that happens quickly, but must happen consistently. Men tend to look for quick results and short-cuts. But in the Christian life, maturity is something that takes time. There are no spiritual short-cuts. Progress in sanctification requires steadfastness.

Hebrews 12:1 says,

¹Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

W.E. Vine further states that sanctification is not something that can be transferred or imputed, but is an individual possession that is built up little by little as the result of obedience to the Word of God. It also includes a believer turning away from any and all things that would dishonor God and His gospel. In essence, sanctification is inclusive of all attributes in the life of a believer and is the identifying characteristic of genuine salvation. A professing believer who does not have genuine, God-honoring evidence in their life of this sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in many cases may not actually be saved. Why can that be stated? Well, it is because sanctification is **a divinely ordained work of God** in the believer. It is something that **God is doing** in that individual. God does not save someone and then simply leave them to themselves to grow. To the contrary, there is this mighty process that God starts within the believer through the Holy Spirit, and it is a very **definitive** and **recognizable** work of God in that individual. In other words, the work of sanctification is God's predetermined state into which He calls every believer. That is why believers are called "**saints**", or holy ones. The church is actually called a "**holy temple**". **Ephesians 2:21-22** says,

²¹in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the

Lord,²² in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

The word for "**saints**" and "**sanctification**" both come from the same root word. The root word implies being separated in both a moral and spiritual sense. So, believers are to live holy lives because the One to Whom they have been separated is holy. To be a saint, a holy one, and a separated one demands a certain kind of conduct. That should not be difficult to understand or accept. If someone is a policeman, that job description demands a certain kind of behavior. If someone is a pastor, that job description demands a certain kind of behavior. If someone is a school teacher, that job description demands a certain kind of behavior. And in each case, no less would be expected. In fact, it would be demanded, insisted on, and required. So, it should not be unexpected to a believer that God also demands a certain kind of behavior and lifestyle. **II Corinthians 7:1** says,

¹Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God

By its very definition, sanctification always results in something that honors God because it is a divine work of God in the believer. So, from a very practical standpoint, within the process and work of sanctification is this clear and obvious turning away from things that would dishonor God and the gospel of Christ. **II Timothy 2:20-21** says,

²⁰But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. ²¹Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work.

So, for there to never be any evidence of a sanctifying work in an individual certainly opens the door for wondering whether or not they have actually been saved, and if they only have a superficial salvation that is not real – which probably is more often the case than not. If someone is going to be called a "saint", then it places demands on their life. They are **sacred** demands and they are always associated with God and His holiness. Life, words, and deeds – everything that someone is and does – is to be something that has **Godlikeness** associated with it. It is to be free from defilement and free from spiritual indifference and lethargy. It is to be fervent in its honoring of God. In other words, the quality of God's holiness is to always be reflected in the be-

liever's conduct. Godly character is always in view and is always the issue.

Every believer always needs ways to measure, to evaluate, and to appraise where they are and what they really have. For instance, no one would want to go to a heart specialist whose last ten patients died on the operating table or within a week of their surgery. Or, when an individual goes to buy gas, they want someone to make sure that when it says that they have pumped a gallon that they are actually getting a gallon of gas. In like manner, what good would it do for someone to say that they have a meaningful Christianity, but after an accurate evaluation by God and His Word it was shown to be nothing. In [Matthew 7](#) this very issue is fully amplified. There are many people who call Jesus Lord, but who on that final day will not be allowed to enter into His kingdom. The problem is simple - they did not know how to measure and evaluate where they really were – and the consequences are so frightening that it betrays description.

A fundamental lack of commitment to Christ is generally reflected in a fundamental lack of commitment to the things of Christ – His Word, His Spirit, His church, and His truth. Someone cannot be a committed Christian, yet not be committed to His local church or to His Word. It is spiritually impossible, no matter what they may want to believe. Someone would never say that a believer was a committed Christian, for instance, if they were not committed to their wife. Why? It is because there are standards, principles, and values that are measurable relative to what defines a godly marriage. However, many people are somehow convinced that they do not have to use God's means of measuring themselves, that they do not have to have a commitment to God's Word, or they do not have to have a commitment to God's church.

So what would ever give them the impression that they are a committed Christian, or even a Christian at all? They either do not know how to measure where they are, or they are not willing to be intellectually honest about where they are spiritually. They just want to believe that they are okay, so they make themselves a god after their own image that lets them live how they want to live. But in the final analysis and in the end, there is an enormous possibility that they will be highly disappointed with God's final evaluation of their life. There simply needs to be some tangible and practical means for

measuring, evaluating, and appraising how a believer is progressing in the area of sanctification. Generally it is measured visibly by their commitment to the things of God - His Word, His Spirit, His church, and His truth. Are they obedient to the truth? Are they faithful to God's church? Are they sensitive to God's Spirit? Are they being conformed more and more into the image of Christ? Do they love the brethren? Do they use their resources wisely? These are all legitimate markers of progress simply because they are commanded in Scripture.

Now the problem that seems to exist all too frequently is that people are satisfied to merely **say** that they are committed to Christ – when in reality they have no real commitment to Christ at all. It is an artificial commitment at best. They have convinced themselves that just saying the right words makes everything okay when in reality it does not. All that it does is simply reveal the very lack of commitment that they have to Christ and continues to increase the deadly and lethal illusion under which they are living. Most likely, they would be the individuals that would **not** want to talk very much about their level of commitment. That level of honesty and transparency about where they really are in their spiritual life makes them much too uncomfortable. It is just a spiritual illusion at best, just a fabrication within their own minds, and it can have very serious eternal consequences. [Matthew 7:24-27](#) is the last teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, and it is the great objective and conclusion to which Jesus has been advancing. Listen to what He says,

²⁴“Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: ²⁵and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. ²⁶“But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: ²⁷and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall.”

It is a **great** fall. So, how is **the cause** of the fall defined? It is really very simple - a person **hears** the Word of God, but in reality **does not obey** it. **Obedience to the word of God is always the evidence of genuine, heart-felt commitment.** It is **NEVER** just saying the right things. Saying the right things is easy, uncomplicated, undemanding, painless, and simple, but obedience requires a much deeper level of effort. It re-

quires thought, endurance, and spiritual substance in a believer's life. **A believer not only must know the truth, but they have to be committed to the truth that they know.** The culture that surrounds the church and that is often within the church knows very little about spiritual commitment and endurance. Unfortunately, the present church age has lulled men and women into a sense of false security. Jesus clearly stated in **Revelation 3:17-18** that the last days church would lack discernment and a proper assessment of where it really was. Listen to Jesus' own words,

17Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—**18**I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.

The problem in the last days church is defined in Jesus' words – **you say** and **do not know**. The picture is that what **they say** is not consistent with Jesus' words, yet they believe that it is. Once again, someone cannot be truly and genuinely committed to Christ, but not committed to the things of Christ. What are those things? Well, they are simple things and in all honesty there could be a short list or a long list. But the issue is not just to have a list of principles by which to live. The believer's relationship to Christ is to be a love relationship, and it is because of that love that the believer wants to live for Him. It would be a fairly meaningless relationship if my wife and I had rules on when we kissed and hugged and said "*I love you*". That would not be much of a marriage simply because there have to be things in a marriage (as well as the Christian life) that are measureable, meaningful, and definable.

Spiritually, the obvious things are obedience to and love for God's Word, a genuine and lasting commitment to His church, a deep love for His people and His kingdom, and a placing of ourselves at God's disposal. They are simple things. Is the fruit of God's Spirit from **Galatians 5** evident in the believer's life? Is there kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control? **Galatians 5:19-21** has one very frightening verse in it, and one that should make men spiritually sober.

19Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, **20**idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, **21**envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Obviously, God is not trying to HIDE anything from those who read His Word. To the contrary, He wants there to be no doubt and no uncertainty about those who will inherit His kingdom, and in this passage He is giving clear and unmistakable evidence of the lack of sanctification in a person's life. Unfortunately, much of Christianity today is superficial, spiritually casual, artificial, and as Jesus accurately defined it – **lukewarm**. The word "lukewarm" carries the idea of being casually indifferent, apathetic, and half-hearted towards the things of God. Unfortunately lukewarmness is often the accepted standard and thus places people under the illusion that they are saved when in reality they are not. The tragedy of this spiritual condition is monumental.

The **process** of sanctification is a work of the Holy Spirit within the believer, and it is God's primary way of dealing with sin in the believer's life **after** salvation. It is a divine work of God to which every believer is called to cooperate. So, the question that has to be addressed regarding sanctification is **how does it actually take place** - this process of cleansing someone's life of sin and conforming them more and more to the image of Christ? The role that the believer has in the process of sanctification is both a passive role and an active role. It is one in which the believer depends on God for His sanctifying work in them, as well as one in which the believer strives to obey God and to do those things that will promote their own sanctification. Obviously there are things to embrace and things from which to be detached, and in recognizing those elements within their life the believer is to separate themselves to that which promotes God's honor and their personal growth. **Romans 8:13** expresses the principle this way when Paul declared,

13For 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.

A fundamental principle that must be kept in mind is that **the great doctrines of Scripture cannot be separated from one another**. For example, the doctrine of justification cannot be separated from the doctrine of sanctification. They are both a part of God's divine pur-

pose and His process of salvation. There cannot be one without the other. In other words, **a believer cannot be justified, but not be sanctified.** Why? Because both aspects are divine works of God within the believer. The complete work of salvation is one process. It has a beginning, a continuation, and a completion, and all aspects of that salvific work are guaranteed by God. Now, obviously, when someone is regenerated, justified, or adopted into God's kingdom, each is a one-time event, a one-time judicial act of God on their behalf. However, sanctification, or growing in Christ, is not a one-time event, but rather a life-time process in which God continually works in the believer's life for His glory and for their spiritual benefit. He uses various means of grace in that work such as preaching, teaching, prayer, fellowship, serving, confession of sin, and the like, but it is always God who is at work. It is God who sanctifies. **Hebrews 2:11** says,

"For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified *are* all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren,

Obviously, even with God's sanctifying work in the believer's life, sin still remains in the believer's life and must be effectively addressed. **Wayne Grudem** accurately states that after salvation that sin remains in the believer's life, or Paul would never have had to tell believers to not let sin reign in their life or not to yield to it (**Romans 6:12-13**). In reality, this simple understanding of the "process" of sanctification stands in direct contradistinction to what is known as "entire sanctification" or "sinless perfection". What is actually taking place is that the believer is **progressively** becoming conformed to the image of Christ throughout the course of his life.

That is certainly why in **Philippians 3:13-14** Paul encouraged the believers to "**press on**" toward the goal of the high and upward calling of God in Christ Jesus. The believer is to continue throughout their entire life to press forward into what they are divinely ordained to become. The process of sanctification does not provide periods of respite, but is an ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.

Unfortunately, many people often make a "profession" of faith, but they never seem to go beyond that profession. They never seem to grow or to mature. Rather they seem satisfied with doing nothing spiritually and with simply being satisfied

with the benefits of salvation without a meaningful work of salvation and sanctification taking place within them. They desire forgiveness, but they are not interested in faithfulness.

Honestly, these individuals are on very questionable spiritual ground. There is no Scriptural basis that affirms that a person who lives in that condition over an extended period of time is actually saved. Immediately someone will say, "*But what about once saved, always saved.*" Well, what about it? If someone has been truly saved, then they are eternally secure. They have been called, justified, and glorified, and **are being sanctified.** It is an actual divine work that is visibly transpiring in their life. Regeneration and final glorification cannot be separated from the process of sanctification. They are all part and parcel of the overall work of salvation in the believer and cannot be separated from the redemptive process.

So, someone who is truly born again, who has been genuinely saved, and who has been supernaturally brought into the kingdom of God and transformed by the power of God, that person **will grow** and **will mature** in their Christian life. Why? Because sanctification is first and foremost a **divine** work of God in that believer. Does everyone grow at the same rate? No. Does everyone readily accept and understand the sanctifying process in the same way? No. Does everyone fully appropriate the work of the Holy Spirit in the same way? No. But they do grow, and they do mature, and they do show evidence of that divine work of God in their life. It is inevitable simply because it is a work that God has started in them, and one that He brings to completion. If they are going to be glorified, then they will be sanctified. So, the practical outworking of this in everyday life is that someone who has no evidence of this **ongoing** work of God in their life in all likelihood may not be saved.

The problem in many churches is that they know how to get decisions, but unfortunately they do not get conversions. And the difference in the two has grave eternal consequences.

Several simple but rhetorical questions can help clarify the issue. If someone says that they are a doctor, should not there be some verifiable and legitimate evidence of that claim? If someone says that they are an engineer, should not there be some qualitative evidence of that claim? And in like manner, if someone says that they are a Christian, should not there be some verifying **evidence** of that testimony as well? Absolutely! Just saying the right things without a corresponding evidence of

the right things in a person's life is a spiritual tragedy of the greatest proportions.

The issue is not being comfortable with Christ, but being conformed to Christ. And because of that overriding goal, biblical preaching and teaching must make demands on people's lives. Pastors have no choice before God but to press upon their congregations the critical nature and importance of this thing called "**sanctification**" and of being separated from sin and being separated to God. **I Corinthians 6:19-20** states the issue this way,

¹⁹Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? ²⁰For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.

That is God's clear calling on every believer's life – and there is no escaping that personal and sanctifying responsibility. Every believer has been bought at a great and significant price, and Christians therefore are to glorify God in their body and spirit – which are Gods. Those are God's divine demands on every believer's life – and they are undeniable and unavoidable. The ultimate work of evangelism is not just to reconcile men and women to God (which is a great thing), but ultimately to **separate** them unto Him. **There really is no value in someone professing faith in Christ, but never demonstrating faith in Christ.** **I Peter 1:13-16** puts it this way,

¹³Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; ¹⁴as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; ¹⁵but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, ¹⁶because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy."

Holy conduct is an unavoidable and inescapable Christian mandate. The one reason why believers should be sanctified and made holy in their conduct is not that they may be happy, or that they may eliminate their problems, but simply because God is holy, and they are God's children. As Christians, we do not belong to ourselves. **Christians have no right to live a sinful or God dishonoring life.** That right and option does not exist for the Christian. So, if someone consistently and habitually lives that

way, the odds well exist that they may not be a Christian at all.

If someone is not committed to Christ, to His Word, and to His church, it is because they do not want to be committed to Christ, His Word, or His church. People much prefer being committed to something else of their own choosing. It could be their job, their lifestyle, their personal recreation and leisure, their hobby – anything really. People are committed to what they want to be committed to. Men do what they choose to do and they live how they choose to live. It is always a personal choice as to what people do with their time, with their resources, and with their life. Men decide to do things that they want to do – and much too often without any regards for the holiness of God or the will of God for their life. Living a sanctifying and God honoring life is all about making godly choices that reflect Christ and is an undeniable aspect of the sanctifying process.

Salvation is something started by God, sustained by God, and perfected by God. There are no large "spiritual gaps" in God's process of sanctification. It is an on-going work and will always be evident in a person's life. Will there be struggles? Yes. Will there be failures? Absolutely. Will there be times of spiritual disappointment? Sure. But be assured that in the failures and the struggles that God will not stop His sanctifying work. He is much greater than a believer's weakness, and He is more than able to complete His sovereign work in their life – and will. Sanctification is guaranteed.

It needs to be recognized that in sanctification that the believer shares **an active participation** in the process.

Philippians 2:12-13 says,

¹²Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, (YOU) work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. (emphases added)

First and foremost, sanctification is God the Father working in the believer to will and to do as He pleases.

I Thessalonians 5:23 says,

²³Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 13:20-21 says,

²⁰Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting

covenant,²¹ make you complete in every good work to do His will, (HIM) working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (emphases added)

[Ephesians 5:25-27](#) describes sanctification as a work of Christ within the believer,

²⁵**Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her,** ²⁶**that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word,** ²⁷**that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.**

Sanctification is also a work of the Holy Spirit within the believer. [I Corinthians 6:11](#) says,

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 and by the Spirit of our God.**

So, the work of sanctification is what could be called a Trinitarian work that involves God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who actually applies the work of Christ to the believer. So, sanctification is first and foremost a work of God in His people. It is the unchanging and sovereign purpose of God that every Christian be sanctified, made more and more holy, and made more and more into the image of Christ. That is God's purpose for every believer's life, and He will complete that divine purpose for His glory.

However, the second part of Paul's statement in [Philippians 2:12](#) says that the Christian has a definite part to play in the process. It says that the believer is "**to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling**". Put another way, **there is a sovereign work of God to which the Christian is to respond.** And that response **requires effort.** It is never "just let go and let God". To the contrary, God commands that the believer is responsible to do certain things. For instance, [II Peter 1:5-10](#) says,

⁵**But also for this very reason,** (what reason – v3, **His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness) (YOU) giving all diligence, (YOU) add to your faith virtue, to virtue (YOU ADD) knowledge,** ⁶**to knowledge (YOU ADD) self-control, to self-control (YOU ADD) perseverance, to perseverance (YOU ADD) godliness,** ⁷**to godliness (YOU ADD)**

brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness (YOU ADD) love. ⁸**For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.** ⁹**For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins.** ¹⁰**Therefore, brethren, (YOU) be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble;** (emphases added)

Sanctification is a gradual process in the sense that it continues throughout the whole of a believer's life, but it still depends at each advance on a decision of the will on their part. Holiness of life rarely, if ever, progresses apart from deliberate acts of the will. **GOD WILL NOT LIVE THE CHRISTIAN LIFE FOR THE BELIEVER.** The Christian has to live the Christian life. The believer has to make decisions, has to do what is right, has to make the right choices, has to study the Word, has to pray, and has to be faithful. This principle is fully illustrated throughout the New Testament, but especially in [Romans 12:1-2](#),

¹**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.** ²**And (YOU) do not be conformed to this world, but (YOU) be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.** (emphases added)

When Paul uses the word "beseech", he is urging and exhorting the believer relative to what he wants him to do. It is a word that just compels the believer to do something, that just constrains them to completely surrender their life to God. When a believer offers their life to God, it involves consciously being set apart from those things that are profane, irreverent, or ungodly, and being dedicated at every level all of the time for the glory of God. God is not interested in a Christian being committed to Him 95% of the time any more than we are interested in our marriage partners being faithful to us 95% of the time. A husband and wife's relationship to each other DEMANDS their total commitment to one another – and nothing less is acceptable. It is no different in the believer's relationship to God. This is the practical essence and goal of sanctification and it cannot be casually overlooked or theologically dismissed.

It must be recognized that Scripture is filled with commands to obey. They are commands from God, and they are given to obey. Most all of the commands are in

the imperative mood and therefore are not optional. Several Scriptural examples of this would be as follows (author's emphases added):

Romans 6:12-13 says,

¹²**Therefore (YOU) do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts.** ¹³**And (YOU) do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but (YOU) present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.**

Romans 8:13 says,

¹³**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.**

II Corinthians 7:1 says,

¹**Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, (US) perfecting holiness in the fear of God.**

I Peter 2:11 says,

¹¹**Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, (YOU) abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul,**

The erroneous teaching of just “*letting go and letting God*” is in error simply because much of what is in Scripture are things that God has commanded **the believer** to do. Obviously, there are things that any believer cannot do, things that only God can do. But the majority of the Christian life is **responding in obedience** to the Word of God and simply doing what God has already revealed is His will. And that is the essence of sanctification - **God working, our responding**. God reveals His will for the believer's life in His Word, and then the believer lives in obedience to that will. Hopefully, it should be clear that in the issue of sanctification that Scripture does not say “*Let go and let God*”. To the contrary, God says “*This is my will for your life, and what I want you to do.*”

A fundamental and crucial principle of Scripture is that whatever God commands the believer to do is empowered by His sovereign grace and power acting on their behalf. Everything meaningful that someone does in their life – everything – requires effort. It takes energy to walk, to eat, to study, to work, to cook, to cut the grass, to wash the car, to go to school, to raise kids, to be successfully married, or to go to church. And it takes effort, both physical and spiritual, to obey God and to follow Christ. The

actual word for “**work out**” in **Philippians 2:12** is the Greek word “*katergazomai*” and because it is in the present middle imperative tense, it is a command that is to be continually addressed. The idea is that the believer is to keep on working out the details of their salvation. It involves their being faithful and obedient to God's Word. And it requires an ongoing and continuous personal commitment for that to happen. As an example, I have been faithfully committed to my wife for 41 years of marriage. I made the commitment in a marriage ceremony, but I have had to work the commitment out in my daily life, and am continuing to work it out each day. In other words, it was not just a one-time commitment made in a ceremony, but rather it is a life-long commitment that has to be worked out each day.

Anything that someone is committed to takes substantial effort and personal discipline. And in like manner, a believer cannot be committed to Christ without great effort and personal discipline on their part. It is the essence and heart of the Christian life – striving to be Christlike. True believers understand what God desires and they work diligently to that end, yet always looking to Him for the strength and grace to do what He wants them to do. In Paul's words, **continually work it out and keep working at it**. No matter how long someone has been a Christian, the Christian life still has to be worked out. **Colossians 3** is filled with these exhortations (author's emphases added).

¹**If then you were raised with Christ, (YOU) seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.** ²**(YOU) Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.** ⁵**Therefore (YOU) put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.**

⁸**But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth.** ⁹**(YOU) Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds,** ¹⁰**and (YOU) have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him,**

¹²**Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, (YOU) put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering;** ¹³**(YOU) bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.** ¹⁴**But above all these things (YOU) put on love, which is the bond**

of perfection. ¹⁵And (YOU) let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. ¹⁶(YOU) Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. ¹⁷And whatever you do in word or deed, (YOU) do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, (YOU) giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

I Timothy 6:11-12 says,

¹¹But you, O man of God, (YOU) flee these things and (YOU) pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness. ¹²(YOU) Fight the good fight of faith, (YOU) lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

These commands are replete throughout the New Testament. It is more than someone just saying that they are surrendered to Christ. Rather, it is ACTIVELY surrendering. It is the actual surrender that is in view, the actual doing, the actual obedience, the act itself. God calls the believer to a personal responsibility and spiritual activity in their life – and the believer must recognize that calling and pursue it. For instance, the believer is called to persevere in the faith, called to be obedient to the faith, and called to faithfulness. The believer is told to “stand fast” and to “fight the good fight of faith”. None of that is passive or just let go and let God. In Romans 6:11, Paul says,

¹¹Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It is clearly something that God tells the believer to do – “reckon” themselves to be dead to sin and alive to God. The Holy Spirit leads to this recognition, and then the believer does the reckoning. God works and reveals, and then the believer responds in obedience. That is the heart of sanctification - God working and revealing, and the believer responding. Sanctification is much more than just the dealing with the problem of a particular sin or ungodly habit in a believer’s life. Rather, it is a question of a Christian’s total relationship to God. There may have been a time in someone’s life when they were delivered from some particular sin in their life – and that is great. It may have been drugs, an-

ger, cursing, drunkenness, greed, slothfulness, infidelity, immorality – anything really. But even though they were delivered from anyone of those things, their personal growth in Christ may be still be very small and immature. Why? It is because they do not have a meaningful commitment to personal spiritual growth. A believer can just ignore the graces of the faith – Bible study, church, personal discipline, prayer, repentance, or faith. They know the right words, know how to speak the Christian dialect, but they neglect those graces and eventually become comfortable with being shallow, indifferent, and immature. And so they really are not growing even though they may at one time have been delivered from some particular sin or difficult area within their life.

Sanctification is ALWAYS a growing, a developing, and a going forward in the Christian life. Sanctification is not an experience someone has, rather it is a choice, a deliberate choice to do what is right because God says it is right. Sanctification is the actual growth and development within the Christian life. And if sanctification is not happening in a person’s life, it is most likely because of one of three reasons. (1) They have fallen away from God, (2) they are living in sin and rebellion to God’s Word, or (3) they simply have not been saved.

In I John 2 there is a definitive progression of evident growth. It goes from “children” to “young men” to “fathers”. Each one of those terms indicates a progression of growth and maturity. II Peter 3:18 explains it this way when it says,

¹⁸but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

So, in order for sanctification to be effective, there must be spiritual knowledge that is applied to a person’s life. God could have made every believer both sinless and perfect at the moment of salvation, but He did not. Rather, He chose for there to be the process of growing.

One aspect of sanctification that is often overlooked is the believer’s union with Christ. Paul highlighted this in Romans 6:1-4,

¹What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? ²Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? ³Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?

⁴Therefore 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.

Being able to “walk in newness of life” has a direct correlation to having been “baptized into Christ Jesus” and “into His death”. This is a clear example of the believer’s union with Christ, and because of that union the believer is able to share in the resurrection life of Christ. This union is masterfully summed up in [I Corinthians 1:30](#) which says,

³⁰But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God - and righteousness and sanctification and redemption...

In other words, Christ is not only the One who has brought about the believer’s sanctification, but He is their sanctification. John Calvin in his [Institutes of the Christian Religion](#) explains it this way,

“As long as we are without Christ and separated from Him, nothing which He suffered and did for the salvation of the human race is of the least benefit to us. To communicate to us the blessings which He received from the Father, He must become ours and dwell in us.”

And then lastly, the believer is sanctified by means of faith. It is by faith that the believer actually grasps their union with Christ. Obviously, the believer is made one with Christ in the act of regeneration, but they continue to live in that union through the exercise of God-endowed faith. [Ephesians 3:17](#) expresses the truth this way when it says,

¹⁷that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith....

[Galatians 2:20](#) declares,

²⁰I 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.

What is it that the believer accepts by faith? He accepts the fact that because he is in Christ that sin no longer has dominion over his life, and therefore he can live above sin. [Romans 6:6-7](#) explains this,

⁶knowing 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. ⁷For he who has died has been freed from sin.

It is through faith that the believer appropriates the sanctifying work of Christ and the Holy Spirit within his life. Faith consists not in ignorance, but in the position of biblical knowledge.

Obviously the Christian life has as one of its primary goals the pursuit of holiness. For many, this

effort often seems excessive and demanding, but it is important to understand how things actually become holy. The place of the burning bush on which Moses stood was called holy because God was there. The temple was called holy because God was there. And Christians only become holy as they are near the One who is holy. The simple fact that the believer can easily become defiled by the allurements of a sinful world imposes on them the ever increasing sensitivity to sin that dishonors God. The sensitivity to that sin calls for a continual growth and development in the graces and virtues of the Christian life. It is what [II Corinthians 7:1](#) calls “perfecting holiness”.

¹Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

What a calling, what a challenge, what a marvelous privilege is the believer’s – “perfecting holiness in the fear of God”. This is the work of sanctification and it is brought about in the believer’s life when he deliberately, knowingly, and willingly separates himself from all that is unclean and unholy in his life. And in a reciprocal movement of his life, he presents himself to God as a “living sacrifice”, with all of the members of his body presented to God as instruments of holiness so that the will of God and the glory of God may be fully displayed in the his life. May the work of sanctification forever be enthroned in the heart of every believer.

ENDNOTES:

- ¹ Hodge, 213.
- ² Murray, Collected, 277.
- ³ MacArthur, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 103.
- ⁴ MacArthur, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 202.
- ⁵ Erickson, 980.
- ⁶ Lloyd-Jones, God, 195.
- ⁷ Hoekema, 192.
- ⁸ Swindoll, 947.
- ⁹ Evans, 164.
- ¹⁰ Lloyd-Jones, Sanctified, 8.
- ¹¹ Lloyd-Jones, God, 192-193.
- ¹² Zodhiates, 69.
- ¹³ Evans, 165.
- ¹⁴ Vines, 989.
- ¹⁵ Lloyd-Jones, God, 194.
- ¹⁶ Lloyd-Jones, Sanctified, 10.
- ¹⁷ Wuest, 93.
- ¹⁸ Mullen.
- ¹⁹ Murray, Redemption, 141.
- ²⁰ Grudem, 747.
- ²¹ Grudem, 747.

- ²² Grudem, 747.
²³ Erickson, 982, 995.
²⁴ Lloyd-Jones, God, 195.
²⁵ Vines, 989. Each of these four attributes are identified in Mr. Vine's definition of the word "sanctification".
²⁶ Lloyd-Jones, Sanctified, 49.
²⁷ Wuest, 93-96.
²⁸ Allison, 520-521.
²⁹ Lloyd-Jones, Sanctified, 53.
³⁰ Allison, 522.
³¹ Murray, 143-145.
³² Evans, 169-170.
³³ Swindoll, 991.
³⁴ Lloyd-Jones, Sanctified, 51.
³⁵ Lloyd-Jones, Sanctified, 71-72.
³⁶ MacArthur, 1 Peter, 200.
³⁷ Murray, Redemption, 149-150.
³⁸ Grudem, 755
³⁹ Lloyd-Jones, Sanctified, 61.
⁴⁰ Swindoll, 989.
⁴¹ Vines, 990.
⁴² Lloyd-Jones, God, 195.
⁴³ Grudem, 754.
⁴⁴ Grudem, 748.
⁴⁵ Grudem, 749.
⁴⁶ Lloyd-Jones, God, 204.
⁴⁷ Lloyd-Jones, God, 218.
⁴⁸ Lloyd-Jones, God, 220.
⁴⁹ Hoekema, 194.
⁵⁰ Hoekema, 194.
 Hoekema, 194-195.
⁵¹ Calvin, 349.
⁵² Hoekema, 195-196.
⁵³ Calvin, 356.
⁵⁴ Furness, 62.
⁵⁵ Evans, 166.
⁵⁶ Evans, 170.

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