

Understanding Sanctification

Sanctification is the work of God within the believer by which we grow into the image of Jesus Christ and display the fruit of the Spirit. The imputed holiness of Christ becomes ours at the moment of our conversion. Now in our daily behavior, practical holiness is to be lived out.

MODELS OF SANCTIFICATION

THE TEACHING OF CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

John Wesley (1703–91) believed in a state of Christian perfection — a state subsequent to salvation. This teaching of Christian perfection is based on a second blessing being the key to holiness. This second work of God was described as “perfection,” “second blessing,” “holiness,” “perfect love,” or “entire sanctification.”

This view is that through a second experience, followers of Jesus enter an upgraded quality of Christian living. Through this second blessing, we sense God’s love more vividly and our own love for God. The heart is cleansed from sin so that sin ceases to control the believer’s behavior. Full and genuine holiness of life (so it is claimed) comes after this second experience, this second work of grace. This “perfection” happens in a single instant when the believer is raised to the higher level of perfection. But this state of perfection can be lost. The believer then falls away and may be eternally lost.

Critique

Christian perfection is not a biblical view of sanctification. This view confuses Christian *maturity* with Christian *perfection*. In sanctification, we grow in Christian *maturity*, but we never reach Christian perfection until that eternal day when we see Jesus Christ face to face.

The New Testament describes the tensions of the Christian's life and the struggles between the flesh and the Spirit. "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing" (Romans 7:19). The believer is eternally secure (see John 10:28). Those truly saved will never be lost.

THE TEACHING OF CLASSIC PENTECOSTALISM

In Pentecostalism, sanctification is based on the baptism of the Spirit being the key to holiness.

Classic Pentecostalism teaches a two-stage spiritual life. Stage one is conversion. Stage two is a second work of grace for a believer. This second work is a post-conversion work of the Spirit — a second blessing. In Classic Pentecostalism, the "inevitable indispensable evidence" of the second blessing (or second work of grace) is speaking in tongues. This second work of grace is referred to as the "baptism of the Spirit" or baptism into the Spirit. The evidence that the believer has entered into this second work of grace is speaking in tongues, victory over sin, and power for service.

Critique

This teaching is not biblical. The baptism of the Spirit occurs not as a second work of grace but at conversion. Every believer is baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12:13). Not everyone spoke with tongues in the first-century church (see 1 Corinthians 12:30).

The New Testament doesn't speak of a second blessing (second work of grace). Every believer has been blessed with "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Ephesians 1:3).

THE TEACHING OF “LET GO AND LET GOD”

According to this view, “resting in Christ” is the key to holiness. The way of faith is to consciously let Christ do things in and through you, rather than trying to do them yourself. Hand over your sinful urges to Christ. He will defeat them. A perfection of performance will issue from this inner passivity of looking to Christ to do everything. Victory over sin is emphasized. In this teaching, there is a need for a decisive turning point for the believer — a kind of post-conversion crisis experience. This may be called a dedication, where the Christian sometime after conversion dedicates himself or herself in a “complete, crisis commitment of self for all the years of one’s life.”

Critique

This flawed teaching which emphasizes “resting in Christ” is in conflict with Scripture, where there is a continual battle between the flesh and the Spirit. The New Testament urges the need for vigilance, discipline, labor, and striving. J. I. Packer says that the Christian life is not so much “Let go and let God” but “Trust God and get going.”

Dedication to Christ is important, but it is not the “once and for all” key to holy living. In this teaching, there can also be a focus on the “victory” of Christian living (very subjective), rather than on obeying God and living a holy life for God’s glory.

A BIBLICAL VIEW OF SANCTIFICATION

The life of holiness for the Christian begins not at a post-conversion experience but at the moment of conversion. At conversion, the believer is a new creation (see 2 Corinthians 5:17). The true believer is sanctified from the moment of conversion (see 1 Corinthians 6:11).

Sanctification has three aspects:

- **Positional Sanctification:** At the moment of conversion
- **Progressive Sanctification:** The process of sanctification
- **Prospective Sanctification:** Our final glorification (see 1 John 3:2)

PRACTICAL BIBLICAL SANCTIFICATION

Consider Peter's teaching on holiness:

“Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy for I am holy” (1 Peter 1:13–16).

1. PREPARE YOUR MIND FOR ACTION (v.13). There is the constant need for mental alertness. A godly mental resolve is critical to holy living. Doing God's will involves being transformed by the renewing of our minds (See Romans 12:2). Are you thinking spiritually? Is your mind daily being renewed? What do you think about? What do you daydream about? Before there is an unholy action or word, there is always an unholy thought. Holiness demands mental alertness. Unholiness begins in the mind. “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Philippians 4:8).

2. BE SELF-DISCIPLINED (v. 13). This is also translated “sober-minded” (ESV), “keep sober” (NASB), and “self-controlled” (NIV). Unholy people are not self-controlled. The fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:23 includes self control. Holy people are disciplined people. Their lives are well-balanced.

This command to keep sober rules out all excess in our lives. Is there any excess in your life? What about your eating habits? What about your finances? Your spending habits? Your sexuality? Your thoughts and your speech? What about the use of your time? Many believers say that they are busy, but many are busy with the wrong things. We say we are too busy to read our Bibles or attend a Sunday worship service, but we spend hours at a ballgame, in front of a television, pursuing a hobby, or socializing with our friends. Holy living demands discipline.

3. SET YOUR HOPE (v. 13). One of the greatest incentives to holy living is to realize that as pilgrims and strangers we are to live in the light of eternity. If your hope is fixed on God's grace, you will see very clearly what is holy and what is unholy. Heaven is our home. The values of the kingdom which is to come impact how we live today. Evaluate your life in the light of eternity. Jesus is coming back soon.

4. BE OBEDIENT (v. 14). We belong to the family of God. One of the characteristics of being part of God's family is that we obey our heavenly Father. If you love Jesus, you will obey Him. "Whoever has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me" (John 14:21).

Holy living is obeying Christ. Scripture doesn't describe holiness in mystical or emotional terms, but rather as obeying the Lord. Too many Christians have self-fulfillment, happiness, or feeling good about themselves as their goal rather than obeying the Lord. Obey the Word of God. "Long for the pure spiritual milk" (1 Peter 2:2) of the Word of God.

5. BE CHRIST-LIKE (vv. 15–16). Simply put: holiness is being like Jesus. God the Father is holy. God the Son is holy. God the Spirit is holy. We are to be like God, who is holy. "But as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:15–16).

Begin each day by setting apart everything to the Lord. Have holy thoughts, holy eyes, holy attitudes, holy words, holy actions, holy relationships — set apart everything for Jesus. In our study of Romans 5–8, we learn what it means to consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (see Romans 6:11). God calls us to walk "not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:4).

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8).

"But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh" (Galatians 5:16).

"Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). ❀

APPLICATION

Scripture & Our Sanctification

THE TEACHING OF JESUS

Without Scripture there is no salvation, and without Scripture there is no sanctification. God's Word sanctifies us with its supernatural power of cleansing and transformation. Jesus said to the disciples:

“Sanctify them in the truth; your word in truth.” — John 17:17

THE TEACHING OF PETER

Peter reminds us of the essential role of the Word of God in our spiritual regeneration and spiritual growth.

“Since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for ‘All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.’ And this word is the good news that was preached to you. So put away malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation — if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.” — 1 Peter 1:23–2:3

THE TEACHING OF PAUL

The Holy Scriptures make us “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” Also, without the Scriptures we will never be “equipped for every good work.”

“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

— 2 Timothy 3:14–17

THE TEACHING OF THE PSALMIST

“How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word.” — Psalm 119:9

“I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.” — Psalm 119:11

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” — Psalm 119:105

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night.” — Psalm 1:1–2

“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.” — Psalm 19:7–11 ❧