

## THE MERCIES OF GOD: Sanctification, Pt 1

**“But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, ‘LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD.’”**  
~ 1 Corinthians 1:30-31

### Introduction

The first “law” of the popular evangelistic tract, “The Four Spiritual Laws,” states that **“God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.”** Unfortunately, the nature of that “wonderful plan” is left to the imagination. Many who have heard this “law” over the years have interpreted it to be happiness, health, prosperity, comfort, a long life, an ideal family, or a host of other temporal and material benefits. Who wouldn’t want such a plan, especially if it was backed by supernatural resources and guarantees?

But the Bible does not leave God’s wonderful plan for the redeemed left to the imagination. It speaks of that plan very clearly, and it is very different from the temporal and material blessings so many yearn for in this life. **This wonderful plan is conformity to the likeness of Jesus Christ:**

- **Romans 8:29** – “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.”
- **2 Corinthians 3:18** – “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.”
- **Ephesians 1:3-4** – “Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him.”

The likeness of Jesus is summarized well by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews:

- **Hebrews 4:15** – “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as *we are, yet without sin.*”
- **Hebrews 7:26** – “For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens.”

The purpose of salvation is to create a people who resemble *Jesus Christ*. Everything that has happened and will happen in human history—from the most monumental events to the smallest circumstances—serves this purpose. More specifically, all that God does in the salvation of the individual believer is part of this grand design. He moves everyone He saves to this ultimate end. The component in salvation that deals specifically with this effort is the component of **sanctification**.

**“Since the redemption that God grants and works out in Christ is meant to accomplish complete deliverance from sin and all its consequences, it includes sanctification and glorification.” —Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4.232**

### A. Key Terms and Definitions

The topic of sanctification is vast, requiring us to split it into two separate studies. For this session, the following four terms are key: (1) sanctification; (2) definitive sanctification; (3) saint; and (4) progressive sanctification.

1. **“Sanctification.”** The basic idea of the verb “to sanctify” is **“to set something apart for a particular purpose.”** This sanctification implies two things: (a) the *separation* of the thing from its ordinary context; and (b) the *consecration* of that thing to a special status or usage.

This same idea is at the heart of the sanctification involved in salvation: (a) it involves the *separation* of the new believer *from sin*; and (b) it involves the dedication of the new believer to a new purpose—that of reflecting the glory of Jesus Christ through their lives.

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* of 1647 describes sanctification as “**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**” (answer to question 35). Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof provides another helpful definition:

**Key idea:**  
The act of separating the believer from sin and consecrating him to Christlikeness.

Sanctification may be defined as that gracious and continuous operation of the Holy Spirit, by which He delivers the justified sinner from the pollution of sin, renews his whole nature in the image of God, and enables him to perform good works. (*Systematic Theology*, 532)

MacArthur and Mayhue define it in greater detail when they write,

The blessing of sanctification is a benefit of the application of redemption that, though it begins at regeneration, is applied throughout the entirety of the Christian’s life. . . . In sanctification, God, working especially by the Holy Spirit, separates the believer unto himself (cf. 1 Cor 1:2) and makes him increasingly holy, progressively transforming him into the image of Christ (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18) by subduing the power of sin in his life and enabling him to bear the fruit of obedience in his life. (*Biblical Doctrine*, 632)

The term “sanctification” can be further defined as having **three distinct but interrelated stages**:

- a) **definitive sanctification**—which occurs at the moment of regeneration;
- b) **progressive sanctification**—which occurs throughout the Christian’s life, from conversion until glorification; and
- c) **perfective sanctification**—which occurs at the moment of glorification.

2. **“Definitive Sanctification.”** This stage of separation and consecration occurs instantaneously, at the moment of regeneration. As Wayne Grudem states, “This initial step in sanctification involves **a definite break from the ruling power and love of sin**, so that the believer is no longer ruled or dominated by sin and no longer loves to sin” (*Systematic Theology*, 747). This particular work of sanctification is a single act, not a process. It is done exclusively by God, not by the believer. It relates to a position or standing in a legal sense, rather than to an experience.

This stage of sanctification is described in **Acts 20:32** (“who are sanctified”); **Acts 26:18** (“who have been sanctified”); and **1 Corinthians 1:2** (“who have been sanctified”). In these three texts, the verbal form of “are sanctified” or “have been sanctified” is in the *perfect tense*, indicating that the action was *completed*, and that it resulted in *a new state*. In other words, it wasn’t an ongoing process or a future expectation. It was already accomplished. Another important text is **1 Corinthians 6:9-11**, where Paul—after describing the former sins of the Corinthians believers—states, “but you were sanctified” (v. 11). Paul describes their sanctification as a completed act—a remarkable statement considering the spiritual immaturity of the church (e.g., 1 Cor 3:1).

3. **“Saint.”** According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a saint is one who is “officially recognized especially through canonization as preeminent for holiness.” Another Catholic dictionary defines “saint” as follows: “In the strict sense saints are those who distinguish themselves by heroic virtue during life and whom the Church honors as saints either by her ordinary universal teaching authority or by a solemn definition called canonization.”

But the biblical teaching about *definitive sanctification* leads to the truth that **all genuine believers are saints because they have already been set apart from sin and to God**. The members of the Roman church are called “saints” (Rom 1:2; cf. 8:27), as are the members of the Ephesian church (Eph 1:1), the Philippian church (Phil 1:1), and the Colossian church (1:2). Even the members of the problem-plagued Corinthian church are called “saints” (1 Cor 1:2) because of the divine work of *definitive sanctification*. As MacArthur and Mayhue explain,

What makes a believer a saint is not his practical righteousness but his positional righteousness. All believers are saints because all believers have been set apart by a holy God and have been united to the holy Lord Jesus. This is precisely the concept of definitive sanctification. (*Biblical Doctrine*, 633)

4. **“Progressive Sanctification.”** This stage of sanctification is like definitive sanctification in that it involves separation and consecration. But its difference rests in the fact that it is not instantaneous. It occurs as a

continuous and intensifying process from the moment of regeneration through to final salvation. It is a **process in the life of the believer whereby the Holy Spirit empowers the believer to obey the rule of God, separating himself more and more from sin and consecrating himself more and more to the example of Jesus Christ.** This stage of sanctification is not merely described as a fact; it is explained as a command: “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” (Phil 2:12-13; see also 2 Cor 7:1).

The specifics of *progressive sanctification* and *perfective sanctification* will be handled in next week’s lesson.

**A Note about the Importance of Defining and Distinguishing “Justification” and “Sanctification”**

**“I am persuaded that one great cause of the darkness and uncomfortable feelings of many well-meaning people in the matter of religion is their habit of confounding, and not distinguishing, justification and sanctification. It can never be too strongly impressed on our minds that they are two separate things. No doubt they cannot be divided, and everyone that is a partaker of either is a partaker of both. But never, never ought they to be confounded, and never ought the distinction between them to be forgotten.” —J. C. Ryle, *Holiness*, 39**

**B. Essential Characteristics**

Five essential characteristics of *definitive* sanctification:

- 1. Definitive sanctification is grounded in the holiness of God.** God’s *holiness* refers to His absolute transcendence and purity. He is absolutely transcendent over the created realm, and He is absolutely pure of anything antithetical to His perfections. Conversely, *sin* can be defined as anything which is contrary to the character and purposes of God. Consequently, God must be “cut apart” or “separate” from anything tainted by sin. Any true work that He does, especially the works related to redemption, will necessarily require and result in a separation from sin.
  - Leviticus 22:32-33; Psalm 11:4-7; Habakkuk 1:13; 1 Peter 1:16
- 2. Definitive sanctification is accomplished at the moment of conversion.** When God regenerates the sinner, He makes him a “new creature” (2 Cor 5:17); He saves him “by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5-6). With this new life comes God’s work of separating the sinner from the domain of sin once and for all, and consecrating him to a life of Christlikeness.
  - 1 Corinthians 6:9-11
- 3. Definitive sanctification liberates the new believer from bondage to sin.** When God sets the believer apart from sin and consecrates him to Christlikeness, the dominion sin has over the believer is once and for all cancelled. This does not mean that sin’s *presence* is eliminated, but it does mean that sin’s *tyranny* is ended. The believer is now “dead to sin.” As Charles Wesley stated in his hymn, “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sin” (1739), “He breaks the power of cancelled sin, he sets the prisoner free!”
  - Romans 6:1-18

This liberation renders the believer a “saint.” Consequently, the believer can never say, “I have no choice but to sin,” or “I cannot help it; to sin is who I am.” The one who adheres to this thinking either misunderstands the nature of salvation, or he is not a true believer. MacArthur and Mayhue explain it well:

All this assures Christians that, though once hopelessly bound to the enslaving power of sin, they are now possessed of Christ’s resurrection power to resist temptation, mortify sin, and pursue increasing holiness. . . . Therefore, though the believer may struggle mightily with sin, he must never adopt a defeatist attitude in which he is resigned to accept the reality of sin in his life. To do so is to make peace with a dethroned enemy—to submit to sin’s dominion that has nevertheless been conquered.” (*Biblical Doctrine*, 634)

**4. Definitive sanctification inaugurates a new conflict with actual sin.** Even though sin's lordship over the sinner ends when the sinner is converted to Christ, sin does not surrender. The emancipation that definitive sanctification brings inaugurates a new reality—that of the believer's conflict with sin's ongoing presence. Because the believer has been freed from sin, he now has the ability to put it to death. Whereas before conversion this conflict was non-existent, or perhaps existed but only as a fear of sin's consequences, after conversion the conflict is real and profound.

- Romans 7:14-25; Galatians 5:16-18

**5. Definitive sanctification is experienced by all genuine believers.** There is no genuine Christian who has not "been sanctified" in this definitive, positional sense. This kind of sanctification is not just for a special class of privileged Christians who found a secret key to Christian living. Neither is it withheld by those who were formerly the worst sinners possible

- 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 – note the phrase, "Such were some of you . . . but you were sanctified"

Sadly, it is increasingly common in our day to hear of Christians claiming that certain sinful attractions or desires (such as same-sex attraction) can never be mortified in this life. They argue that while these desires are not part of God's original design, they nonetheless mark their human condition; these desires are just "who they are." They admit that they must not fulfill such desires, but they claim that they should not be ashamed of such desires (hence the growing trend to use the term "gay Christian").

But the truth of definitive sanctification contradicts such claims. God desires conformity to the image of His Son not only in actions, but in desires. And God has decisively acted—through definitive sanctification—to break the bondage to each and every sin. Such a reality provides incredible hope. As John Murray explains,

It is of paramount concern for the Christian and for the interests of his sanctification that he should know that sin does not have the dominion over him, that the forces of redeeming, regenerative, and sanctifying grace have been brought to bear upon him in that which is central in his moral and spiritual being, that he is the habitation of God through the Spirit, and that Christ has been formed in him the hope of glory. (*Redemption Accomplished & Applied*, 154)

#### D. Practical Implications

Homework (see below).

#### For Further Reflection

**Scripture Memory:** 1 Corinthians 1:30-31

**Recommended Reading:**

- John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, pages 358-59.
- R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God*.

**Homework:**

- As noted above, sanctification is rooted in the holiness of God. Spend time over the next week watching this 4-part video series on "The Holiness of God" by R. C. Sproul: [https://www.ligonier.org/learn/series/holiness\\_of\\_god/](https://www.ligonier.org/learn/series/holiness_of_god/). It is currently available for free online.
- Read and mediate upon the entire chapter of Romans 6 at least five times in the coming week. Find a *MacArthur Study Bible* and review the commentary notes provided for this chapter.
- Review the "Essential Characteristics" listed above and the Scriptures referenced under each point. For each of the five characteristics, provide at least one "practical implication" that this teaching has for the Christian life.

**Hymns:** "Holy, Holy, Holy" (*Hymns of Grace* #48); "Be Thou My Vision" (*Hymns of Grace* #176)

**This Week's Audio:** [gracechurch.org/motw](http://gracechurch.org/motw)

**Next Meeting:** March 25 – Sanctification, Pt. 2