

## THE MERCIES OF GOD: Sanctification, Pt 2

“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*

### Introduction

The importance of a correct understanding of sanctification cannot be overstated. What one believes about it will determine to a large degree how one lives out the span of his Christian life. One misunderstanding common in our day—especially among evangelical Christians—is that of *detaching sanctification from justification*. This error is often found as a reaction against the opposite error—that of *blurring the distinction between justification and sanctification*. In order to maintain the necessary distinction between these two doctrines, some go too far by separating sanctification from justification altogether. They raise justification to such a level of importance that sanctification fades into irrelevance. While justification by faith is affirmed as an essential, separation from sin and consecration to God is seen as optional. Any emphasis on the Christian’s need to obey is branded as legalism.

But this raises an important question: Why does God justify the sinner in the first place? Does God’s work in the Christian life essentially end when the sinner is declared righteous in the sight of God? Is God more intent on legal declarations than with moral transformation? Michael Allen answers this question well:

God justifies us so that God can and will sanctify us. Justification is not meant to be a final or ultimate blessing, but it is an entryway blessing that brings one into a journey that terminates in a still greater benefit: the transforming presence of the glorious God of the gospel. (*Sanctification*, 183)

God’s grand purpose is redemption does not end with justification, or adoption, or sealing. His purpose is to create a people who reflect the glory of Jesus Christ, who are “conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom 8:29). This purpose is not put on hold until heaven. It begins already in this life, from the very moment of regeneration itself. The outworking of this purpose is called *sanctification*.

As was discussed last week, the verb “to sanctify” means “to set something apart for a special purpose.” When used with reference to salvation, this *setting apart* refers to *separation from sin and the world* and *consecration to God and His purposes*. Scripture defines this further, pointing to three particular phases: (1) definitive sanctification; (2) progressive sanctification; and (3) perfective sanctification.

“**Definitive sanctification**” is that instantaneous act accomplished by God at the moment of regeneration. It is a unilateral act of God whereby He frees the new believer from the tyranny of sin and consecrates the believer to Himself. This phase is also called “positional sanctification.” It renders the believer *dead to or freed from sin* and *alive to righteousness* (Rom 6). As Michael Horton states, “Before we can speak of our being put to holy use and growing in grace, we must see that sanctification is first of all God’s act of setting us apart from the world for himself” (*Pilgrim Theology*, 313).

But while definitive sanctification cancels the *dominion of sin* over the believer, it does not eliminate the *presence of sin* in the believer. This reality is illustrated by the Apostle Paul himself, who three decades after his own conversion still confessed, “Not that I have already obtained *it* or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:12). This struggle with the remaining presence of sin and the pursuit of Christlikeness is what is called *progressive sanctification*.

### A. Key Terms and Definitions

For this session, the following four terms are key: (1) progressive sanctification; (2) mortification; (3) vivification; and (4) perfective sanctification.

1. “**Progressive Sanctification.**” This second phase of sanctification maintains its emphasis on two actions: (a) *separation* from sin; and (b) *consecration* to God. But rather than being definitive or instantaneous in nature,

progressive sanctification is a **lifelong process of increasing intensity**. It pertains not to a legal status, but to real moral transformation. Moreover, whereas definitive sanctification was achieved unilaterally by God, the process of progressive sanctification involves the participation by the believer as well. Theologian Louis Berkhof provides a helpful definition:

**Key idea:**  
**A lifelong process of increasing separation from sin and consecration to God.**

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)

With progressive sanctification we introduce for the first time **the importance and necessity of a believer's works and his ability to please God through acts of righteousness**. Certainly, these *works* are not intended for the purpose of being declared "righteous" in the sight of God. Only the works of Christ could achieve that for the believer. But because the believer has been made alive in Christ (regeneration) and has been declared righteous in God's sight (justification), he can now begin to practice righteousness for God's pleasure. Thus, progressive sanctification is that process whereby the believer *becomes*—in the practical sense—what he already *is*—in the legal sense.

**"Those who are born of God increasingly *become* the children of God and hear his image and likeness, because in principle they already *are* his children. The rule of organic life applies to them: Become what you are!"**

—Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4.255

2. **"Mortification."** Progressive sanctification is comprised of two features. Mortification, the first of these two, can be defined as **the discipline of *killing sin*—the believer's active *warfare* against the presence of sin in his life, waged by the power of the Holy Spirit**. This language originates in the writings of the Apostle Paul, particularly in Romans 8:12-13 where he writes, "So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live." A synonym to the concept of mortification is Paul's language of "putting off" or "putting away" (see Colossians 3:5-11, ESV).

**"Be killing sin, or it will be killing you."**

**"Let not that man think he makes any progress in holiness who walks not over the bellies of his lusts."**

—John Owen

3. **"Vivification."** The second feature of progressive sanctification, vivification refers to **the discipline of *enlivening virtue*—the believer's conscious effort to produce *good works* by the power of the Holy Spirit and out of adoration for Jesus Christ**. It is the opposite of mortification, and thus also includes the synonymous language of "putting on." As Paul writes, "Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to *its* lusts" (Rom 13:13-14; see also Col 3:12-17).

Thus, the biblical approach to progressive sanctification includes both disciplines: (1) *mortification* (separation from sin and the world); and (2) *vivification* (consecration to God and His purposes). It includes *putting off* that which is contrary to God and *putting on* that which accords to the standard of Jesus Christ. Whatever vice is removed must be replaced with virtue.

4. **"Perfective Sanctification."** This final phase of sanctification, like the first, is instantaneous and unilateral in nature. Perfective sanctification refers to **God's final and ultimate act of sanctification whereby He separates believers once and for all from the presence of sin, and consecrates them entirely for His eternal purposes**. This is what Paul had in mind when he prayed, "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass" (1 Thess 5:23).

The specifics of *perfective sanctification* will be handled in the future study of "glorification."

## B. Essential Characteristics

Seven essential characteristics of *progressive* sanctification:

- 1. Progressive sanctification is grounded in definitive sanctification.** The believer's mortification of sin and vivification of virtue is possible because God definitively ended sin's dominion at the moment of regeneration. This leads to two important implications: (1) There is no sinful attitude, desire, or action that is to be left untargeted by the believer's effort of mortification. (2) There can be no progressive sanctification if definitive sanctification—and hence, regeneration—never occurred.
- 2. Progressive sanctification is aimed at producing Christlikeness.** Genuine sanctification is not interested in lists of rules pertaining to external behaviors. It focuses on something much more profound. It aims at conformity to the character of Jesus Christ. It takes the question seriously, "What would Jesus do?" It seeks the answer in God's Word, and strives to imitate it in real life.
  - Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:17-18; Hebrews 12:1-2; 1 John 2:6; 1 Corinthians 11:1; Philippians 2:5; etc.
- 3. Progressive sanctification is authored and empowered by God.** It is unbiblical to think that sanctification is man's responsibility alone, or that God contributes 50% and the believer the other 50%. God is the primary agent in sanctification, and the believer must remain entirely dependent upon him in the process. This is why Jesus prayed to the Father for the sanctification of believers (John 17:17). By prayer Paul also sought divine agency in the work of sanctification (Eph 3:14-17). Jesus taught that apart from dependency upon Him there could be no spiritual fruitfulness (John 15:4-5).

In particular, progressive sanctification is a ministry of the Holy Spirit as He applies the achievements of Christ's atonement in the life of the believer.

- 2 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 Peter 1:2; Galatians 5:16, 22-23

As John Owen noted,

All other ways of mortification are vain, all helps leave us helpless; it must be done by the Spirit. Men . . . may attempt this work on other principles, by means and advantages administered on other accounts, as they always have done, and do: but, saith he, "This is the work of the Spirit; by him alone is it to be wrought, and by no other power is it to be brought about."

- 4. Progressive sanctification is a responsibility laid on the shoulders of the believer.** Even though God is the primary agent in progressive sanctification, the believer is wholly responsible for his own deliberate and vigorous participation in it. This is observed in the *indicative-imperative* structure of the gospel. Salvation is founded upon what God has done in Christ Jesus for the sinner (the indicative, or fact). But it does not end there. Privileges bring with them responsibilities (the imperative, or command). As Bavinck states, "Scripture always holds on to both facets: God's all-encompassing activity and our responsibility" (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 4.243).
  - 2 Corinthians 7:1; 1 Thessalonians 4:3; Hebrews 12:14; Philippians 2:12-13; Romans 12:1-2; Ephesians 4:1.

"Sanctification . . . is a thing for which every believer is responsible. . . . Whose fault is it if they are not holy, but their own? On whom can they throw blame if they are not sanctified, but themselves? God, who has given them grace and a new heart, and a new nature, has deprived them of all excuse if they do not live for His praise." —Ryle, *Holiness*, 19-20

- 5. Progressive sanctification is realized through the application of right means.** Since God is the primary agent in sanctification, the believer must use the *means* of sanctification which He prescribes. Feeling- and intuition-based approaches to sanctification lead the believer away from Christlikeness—however sincere those approaches may appear. Thus, each and every means that the believer employs in his mortification of sin and his vivification of righteousness must be derived directly from the teaching of Scripture.
  - 2 Timothy 3:16-17

The key means of sanctification include: the study of God's Word (Col 3:16; etc.); the practice of prayer (1 Thess 5:17; etc.); the discipline of obedience (John 14:21; etc.); the exercise of worship (Eph 5:18-20; etc.); the partaking of fellowship (Heb 10:24-25; etc.); the work of evangelism (Matt 28:19-20; etc.); the endurance of trials (James 1:2-4; etc.); and the act of giving (2 Cor 9:6-7; etc.).

**6. Progressive sanctification is wholistic in nature.** In other words, the process of mortification and vivification must be aimed at all aspects of the believer's existence. No realm is to be left untouched. This includes the intellect, will, emotions, and body. Since these things are the object of ultimate/perfective sanctification (1 Thess 5:23), the must already be the focus of progressive sanctification.

**7. Progressive sanctification is cultivated by appropriate motives.** The believer's efforts at mortification and vivification must be undergirded by the right motivations. This includes the motivation to grow in Christlikeness because: it is simply the right thing to do simply because God commanded it; it leads to a clean conscience (e.g., 1 Pet 3:16); it makes one more useful in ministry (2 Tim 2:20-21); it assists in the spread of the gospel (Titus 2); it avoids grieving the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:30); it averts the discipline of God (Heb 12:3-11); it prevents disqualification from ministry (1 Cor 9:24-27); it increases our heavenly reward (1 Cor 3:12-15); and it brings pleasure to our Father (2 Cor 5:9). This last motive is the ultimate one. That we can now do good works which will bring the smile of our heavenly Father upon us is the most joyous reality we can fathom. This provides the greatest motivation of progressive sanctification.

#### D. Practical Implications

Homework (see below).

#### For Further Reflection

**Scripture Memory:** Philippians 2:12-13

**Recommended Reading:**

- John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, pages 638-644.
- J. C. Ryle, *Holiness*.
- Mike Riccardi, *Sanctification*.

**Homework:**

- Can you see a distinct pattern of growth over the past year of your Christian life? How would you describe this growth?
- Explain why this principle of sanctification so important: "Each and every means that the believer employs in his mortification of sin and his vivification of righteousness must be derived directly from the teaching of Scripture."
- Which of the *means* of sanctification do you readily employ? Which of the *means* are not as frequent in your life as they should be? What will you do to continue what is strong and strengthen what is weak?
- Why is it so important to recognize that the principle actor in the process of sanctification is God, not the believer? Why is it also important to recognize that the believer is not a passive by-stander in the process?
- Review the "Essential Characteristics" listed above and the Scriptures referenced under each point. For each of the seven characteristics, provide at least one "practical implication" that this teaching has for your life.
- Study Colossians 3. Make a list of the current sins that need mortification in your life. Also compile a list of the specific virtues you need to cultivate in the place of these vices.

**Hymns:** "Adoration" (*Hymns of Grace* #50); "I Asked the Lord That I Might Grow" (*Hymns of Grace* #63)

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

**Next Meeting:** April 1 – Sanctification, Pt 3