

THE DOCTRINES OF THE BIBLE: SANCTIFICATION



According to Thiessen (Thiessen, 1949), sanctification is the Biblical doctrine of the pursuit of holiness that follows the various processes of rebirth as discussed in the previous lessons.

DEFINITION

Sanctification is the pursuit of holiness in the life of the believer and it is ongoing.

The processes involved in the life of believer are the following:

1. First, we have the life of the unbeliever, they who live for the world and satisfies the needs of the unsaved world. Try as they may, the unbeliever cannot attain any form of holiness:

¹⁴**But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God:** for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. – **1 Corinthians 2:14**

2. Second, the unbeliever is regenerated through the working of the Holy Spirit, the preaching of the gospel, and then salvation follows. Now that the previously unsaved person has accepted the saving grace of Jesus Christ, they start on a journey that requires constant evaluation. This is the process of sanctification. Whereas the processes of election, regeneration, conversion, and justification once-off acts, sanctification prepares the believer for the third step, life in heaven. In this stage of the believer's life, they strive towards perfect holiness, although they fall short.

²⁰For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness.

²¹What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed? for the end of those things is death. ²²**But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life.** ²³For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. – **Romans 6:20-23**

3. Third, after death, whether natural/unnatural or the rapture of the Church, the believer attains perfect holiness, along with an incorruptible body, and enters heaven:

⁵⁰Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption. ⁵¹Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵²**In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.** ⁵³For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. ⁵⁴So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. ⁵⁵O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? ⁵⁶The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. ⁵⁷But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. – **1 Corinthians 15:50-17**

Once the unbeliever has been reborn (regenerated), the process of sanctification starts, and it will last for as long as the person is alive. What happens in the process of sanctification?

THE PROCESS OF SANCTIFICATION

There are a few things that take place as a result of our regeneration, and the work that the Holy Spirit has started in us, continues for the rest of our lives. It is important to know that even once we have been regenerated, we are not complete and there is still a lot of work to be done:

⁶Being confident of this very thing, that **he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.** – **Philippians 1:6**

As can be seen from the quoted text, the Holy Spirit started a good work in us, and this will continue until the return of Jesus Christ. Once we have seen Him, our sanctification is complete.

What are the things the Holy Spirit does in the life of the believer?

WE ARE SEPARATED TO GOD

Sanctification implies holiness, and in order for God's will for our lives to be realised, the old has to make way for the new. Thus, all sin and filth that filled our lives before our regeneration must be removed. We have to be separated **from** those things that caused us to live the way we did, and be separated **to** God.

While the Holy Spirit does a lot of the work, there is also a lot that we must do. A new believer may feel compelled to stop doing certain things, associate with certain people and so on. There is no harm in doing some serious house cleaning. Let us see what the Word teaches about it:

⁵And said unto them, Hear me, ye Levites, sanctify now yourselves, and **sanctify** the house of the LORD God of your fathers, and carry forth the filthiness out of the holy place. – **2 Chronicles 29:5**

Hezekiah gave an order to the Levites to clean the House of the Lord and remove unclean things.

In the same way, for us as believers there is the start of a process. Does it mean that once the house has been cleaned it will stay that way? Indeed not. Your own home needs constant maintenance and cleansing as things that are unclean enter it, innocent as they may seem. These have to be removed. In the same way, the devil will always try to infiltrate your life with filth, and it is this that the Holy Spirit wants you to remove, and works with you to do it.

WE ARE IMPUTED WITH CHRIST

Imputation in its strictest sense means that we are guilty of something. Since we have been regenerated, we have now been declared righteous and since we did have been forgiven, **in Christ**. Paul explains it this way:

³⁰But of him are ye **in Christ Jesus**, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption: ³¹That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord. – **1 Corinthians 1:30-31** (See also 1 Corinthians 1:2)

Note that Paul says we are **in** Christ, and He has provided wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.

WE ARE PURIFIED FROM MORAL EVIL

To be purified means to be made clean, with impure matter removed from our lives. In the Old Testament, the priests were required to purify themselves before they could draw near to God:

²²And let the priests also, which come near to the LORD, sanctify themselves, lest the LORD break forth upon them. – **Exodus 19:22**

In our time, the believer is required to purify himself by separating himself from the ungodly:

¹⁷Wherefore **come out from among them**, and **be ye separate**, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, ¹⁸And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty. – **2 Corinthians 6:17-18**

As we can see, this cannot only be a once-off action, but something that is repeated. While it may look as if it is only the believer who has to act, and it is true, the Holy Spirit is the One who convicts us of our sins. On a very practical level, I have experienced, either in my own life or that of others, that what I may deem necessary to remove from my life, someone else may not. While I have the responsibility to assist those around me to remove something from their lives, it is the Holy Spirit who will convict them.

WE ARE CONFORMED TO THE IMAGE OF CHRIST

As believers, we should strive to be conformed to the image of Christ, in other words to become more like Him. John the Baptist states it this way:

³⁰He must increase, but I must decrease. – **John 3:30**

If you read the entire piece, you will see that John says that Jesus must become more in our lives, and we become less by getting rid of those things in our lives that do not reflect the glory of Christ in us. This is not a wish; it is an imperative. Notice the use of the word **must** twice in the verse.

Conformation means to become like, and we should often ask ourselves whether in what we say or do, would Jesus, who is in us, have said or done the same. This is the acid test of the process of sanctification. At first, we may fail horribly, but as we grow, the old human nature must make way for the Godly nature.

THE TIME OF SANCTIFICATION

As mentioned earlier, sanctification is an act and a process. At the time of regeneration, the new believer is sanctified so that they can be in Christ. The process continues thereafter.

THE INITIAL ACT

The exact moment a person puts his trust in Jesus Christ, they are sanctified. Thus, at the time of regeneration, the old man makes way for the new man in Christ:

¹⁷Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. – **2 Corinthians 5:17**

Once regenerated, the new believer is called a saint:

²Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, **called to be saints**, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours: ³Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. – **1 Corinthians 1:2-3**

This applied to the church in Corinth despite their lack of ongoing sanctification! Paul addresses their problems in this letter. He calls them saints but at the same time rebukes them for the things they do, and their seeming unwillingness to be conformed and sanctified. This continues in the second letter where he urges them to continue their holiness and efforts to root out the old traditions and things they do.

Were it not for the suffering of Jesus Christ, there would be no sanctification for believers:

¹²Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people **with his own blood**, suffered without the gate. – **Hebrews 13:12**

Jesus had to die outside the city of Jerusalem (without the gate) so that believers would be sanctified with His blood. It is important to understand that the process is not Jesus **and** sanctification, but that Jesus **is** our sanctification as we are complete in Him:

⁶As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: ⁷Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving. ⁸Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. ⁹For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. ¹⁰**And ye are complete in him**, which is the head of all principality and power. – **Colossians 2:6-10**

THE PROCESS

Sanctification continues throughout the life of the believer. In this regard, the believer himself has a responsibility to evaluate their life, look at what surrounds them and then get rid of those things that do not honour God. Paul's instruction to the church in Colosse is to dress themselves with sanctification:

⁷In the which ye also walked some time, when ye lived in them. ⁸**But now ye also put off all these;** anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth. ⁹Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; ¹⁰And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him: ¹¹Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all. ¹²**Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved,** bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; ¹³Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. ¹⁴And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness. – **Colossians 3:7-14**

Note how he tells them to take off the dirty cloak as it were (verse 8) and then mentions the things that make up the old cloak. He then tells them to put on the new cloak (verse 12) and tells them what the things are that assist in the process of sanctification.

Does our sanctification mean that we become absolutely sinless? While we would like to see it this way, it is not. We are sanctified in Christ, but we will not attain full sanctification until our work on Earth is done and we see Him as He is:

²Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, **when he shall appear, we shall be like him;** for we shall see him as he is. – **1 John 3:2**

Despite our best efforts in this life, we fall short every day, and this is the reason why sanctification is an ongoing process. At the same time, we should not accept that because we cannot attain absolute sanctification and holiness in this life, we are defeated. We have to overcome and defeat sin in our lives.

THE FINAL SANCTIFICATION

When will our sanctification be complete? When we see Christ as He is, at His coming, whether He comes to take single believers to heaven at the time we die, or when He comes to take the Church out of this dispensation.

Just as we have been saved from the guilt, penalty, and power of sin, we will ultimately be saved from the presence of sin altogether:

¹⁰But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. – **1 Corinthians 13:10**

That which is perfect is the final revelation of Jesus Christ to the believer and represents the heavenly state where sin is not present anymore. That which is in part is what we live now, where we are surrounded by sin every day and are constantly fighting temptation.

CONCLUSION

If you are struggling with sin and those things you know are not part of you are a regenerated person in Jesus Christ, pray that the Holy Spirit will reveal to you what should be cut out and then you will experience growth and bear fruit:

²Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. – **John 15:2**

You are a tree and God nurtures you. Things you do that do not please Him, He will take away if you allow Him, and in the place of these things, new fruit is grown, which is not for your nourishment, but for those around you.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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