

## SANCTIFICATION

### 1 Corinthians 1:1-3, 26-31

There are few doctrines so misunderstood as that which we consider now—the doctrine of sanctification. The average child of God instinctively recalls the fanaticism and excesses attached to the doctrine of sanctification, and instinctively withdraws from it, relegating this precious teaching of the Word of God to certain fringe groups. Consequently, we have withdrawn from giving rightful place to the teaching concerning this important truth.

There are certain basic errors which we would do well to call to your attention at the outset so that our minds might be relieved of them. Sanctification, in its primary usage in the Scripture, **does not refer to improvement in practical holiness**. If this were the meaning, it would be impossible for God to sanctify Himself, for God does not improve in holiness. Yet Scripture reveals that both God the Father and God the Son sanctify themselves. We thus must conclude that it is an error to affirm that sanctification deals, primarily, with improvement in holiness.

A second error that must be set aside is that sanctification implies a state of holiness in which it is impossible for the child of God to sin. **Sanctification itself does not imply a state of holiness**; this is witnessed by Paul's Letter to the Corinthians, a church beset by every form of doctrinal and practical and moral error and yet a church spoken of by the Apostle Paul as having been sanctified. If sanctification referred to a state of holiness, then it could never be said that the Corinthians were saints and had been sanctified.

When we examine the Word of God, we find three words in our English text that are pertinent to our study of this important doctrine: "sanctify," "holy," and "saint." It seems as though all three of these words have been misinterpreted and misunderstood, and much of the error concerning this doctrine—and much of the fanaticism in practice arising out of this doctrine—has arisen through a failure to understand these three words. The word "sanctify" occurs more than one hundred times in the Old Testament, and more than thirty times in the New Testament. The word, in its basic usage, means **"to set apart."** **It does not mean "to make holy"; it does not mean "to be holy" or "to progress in holiness."**

I would direct you to John 17:18-19 where in our Lord's prayer to the Father He says, "As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth." Our Lord was referring to the fact that He was set apart by the Father to do a work. He was sanctified, or set apart, to go into the world; and because He had been set apart, in perfect obedience He fulfilled the will of the Father. Jesus Christ was about to depart to be with the Father, and it was His desire to set apart others who would reveal the Father to the world as He had revealed the Father to the world. The disciples were set apart by Christ to go as His representatives, as His ambassadors, to reveal the Son, so that the Son might continue to reveal the Father. Now, this "setting apart" Christ called "sanctification" when He said, ". . . and for their sakes I sanctify myself (or, I set myself apart) . . ." He set Himself apart to the cross; He set Himself apart to physical death; He set Himself apart to separation from the Father; He set Himself apart totally and completely to the will of God so that He could say, "I come to do thy will, O God" (Hebrews 10:9). This passage reveals what the word "sanctify" basically means: "to set apart."

The second word, "holy," is used over 400 times in the Old Testament, and some twelve times in the New Testament. The word "holy" means "to be set apart from what is unholy." The root word is related to the word "sanctification." In Hebrews 7:26 this statement is made concerning Christ: "For such a high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens." Jesus Christ,

our High Priest, is holy! Now, what did it mean for Jesus Christ to be holy? Notice the words that follow, which explain the holiness of Jesus Christ: He was harmless, He was undefiled, He was separate from sinners. Underline the word *separate* or *separated from sinners*. The Lord Jesus Christ was guilty of no sin; He did no sin, and yet He was made sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. Jesus Christ is said to be holy because He is set apart, or set off, or divided from that which is unholy. We would conclude, then, that the word “holy” has the same basic connotation as the word “sanctify”—that is, “set apart.”

The third word is “saint,” which is used sixty-two times in the New Testament in reference to believers. It is the commonest word used in the New Testament to refer to a child of God. The children of God are called “saints.” We observe this fact in 1 Corinthians 1:2: “Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified (or, set apart) in Christ Jesus, called (to be) saints. . . .” You will notice that your English text reads, “. . . called to *be* saints. . . .,” and many have misunderstood this because they have concluded that we were called in order that eventually we might become saints. That is not what the Apostle is writing, for he is writing to all those who are in Christ Jesus. He says that they have been sanctified—that is, set apart unto God in Christ Jesus—and because they have been set apart, they are called “saints” by God. The word “saint” in the original text comes from the same Greek root as the word “holy.” The word “saint” means simply “one who has been set apart unto God.”

We observe then that the three words have a common connotation, and they all signify *that which has been set apart*, or the one who has been set apart unto God. **We observe further that the words “sanctify,” “holy” and “saint” primarily have to do with one’s position, not with one’s experience or one’s practice.** This has to do with the divine viewpoint. When God looks at His child, He sees His child as set apart unto Himself; He sees His child having been set apart from sin; He sees His child as one who is a saint, beloved of the Father. This then is our position.

We want to present now three aspects of the believer’s sanctification, three aspects of the believer’s holiness, three aspects of the believer’s sainthood. First of all, Scripture teaches what we refer to as *positional sanctification*. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 we read, “Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolators, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind. Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.” The Apostle, in that heinous catalogue of sins, revealed the life that characterized the citizens of the city of Corinth. Given over to a licentious religious system, they practiced all manner of excesses. But the Apostle wanted to show that those who once practiced Corinthianism had been separated unto God from that kind of life. And Paul proceeds, in verse 11: “And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.” The Apostle was revealing the position which the Corinthian believers held in the sight of God. They had been sanctified, that is, set apart unto God. They had been made holy, that is, separated from the practices that once characterized them. They had become saints, holy ones in the family of God. This was not yet their experience, for as you read through the Corinthian Epistle, you will see that they lacked practical holiness, and they lacked practical godliness and righteousness. The church was marked by strife, discord, and division; it was marked by immorality; it was marked by doctrinal heresies. All of these the Apostle had to correct, and yet, in the sight of God, they had been sanctified and justified.

When these Corinthians were said to be sanctified, the Apostle was emphasizing that which logically is the result of the saving grace of God. They had been redeemed by the blood of Christ; they had been cleansed by the blood of Christ; they had been forgiven all sins; they had been made righteous through Christ; they had been

justified through God's legal declaration that they were acceptable to God; they had been set apart unto God. **This sanctification was the result of the whole saving work of God** that gave to them the righteousness of Christ and set those apart unto God as God's possession. This is affirmed in 1 Corinthians 1:2 when Paul says, "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus. . . ." **Here is a completed work, a work that needs no repetition, for they have been set apart as God's possession.** God has put His name upon them, has imputed the righteousness of Christ to them, they stand as recipients of God's grace, and they can be said to have been sanctified.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews we have this same truth reaffirmed, for the Apostle says, "By the which will **we are sanctified** through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ **once for all**" (10:10). The phrase "once for all" grammatically may refer back to the offering of the body of Christ, which was done once for all, or it may refer back to the word "sanctify"—"by the which will we are sanctified once and for all." And the Apostle was affirming the truth that, when God called us and redeemed us and made us righteous in Christ and justified us through the blood of Christ, **God set us apart to Himself, and this work was done with a finality.** Positionally, it **need never be repeated and can never be repeated**, for we are His own. Then again, in verse 14 of the same chapter, the Apostle says, "For by one offering (that is, the offering up of Jesus Christ) he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified." Those that have been set aside are mature, adult sons in the family of the Father. **I submit to you, child of God, that this is one of the most precious truths that you can get hold of.** In the sight of God you have been set apart as His possession. You belong to Him by right of purchase. You have been declared acceptable by His legal act of justifying you through Christ. You have been set apart unto God. This is true of the weakest and the youngest believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. **This does not depend upon your maturity, upon your knowledge, upon your practice of godliness, or your own righteousness. This is a divine work in which God sets us apart to Himself.**

The writer to the Ephesians emphasizes this truth: "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it: That He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word" (5:25-26). We were redeemed! We were cleansed! We were washed, so that we might be set apart unto God. It is as though a shepherd were to go into a fold to separate his sheep, and, as the sheep file out the door, he would have said to a fellow shepherd, "This one is yours, this one is mine, this one is yours, this one is mine," and so on, until each sheep had passed out of that fold. There were certain sheep that were set apart unto the shepherd. They were sanctified to the shepherd. And child of God, you have been set apart for God. God has placed His name and His identifying seal, the Holy Spirit, upon you. Such is your position in Jesus Christ.

We come to the second aspect: the experiential side of sanctification. The child of God who has been sanctified, or set apart unto God, is exhorted to let his experience conform to his position; and the problem in the Christian life is to bring experience up to a position. The Apostle has a good deal to say about the child of God setting himself apart, experientially, unto God. We are familiar with Romans 12:1: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice. . . ." The child of God who presents his body a living sacrifice is sanctifying or setting himself apart unto God. We find this same truth in Romans 6:13 where the Apostle writes, "Neither yield ye (or present ye) your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves (or present your members) unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God." The verb "yield" in this verse is the same verb used in Romans 12:1 and translated "present." It means "to set oneself apart unto God." This is practical or experiential sanctification. The Christian life depends upon the believer setting himself apart by an act of his will so that he is controlled by the Spirit of God; no longer to live under the control of sin, nor to live

under the control of law, nor to live under the control of the flesh, but to live under the control of the Spirit of God. Experiential sanctification, then, begins with the act of presenting oneself unto the Lord Jesus Christ, and presenting oneself to control by the Spirit of God.

The result of this presentation to the Holy Spirit's empowerment is freedom from sin in daily life. Read again several verses from Romans 6. Verses 14-16 read, ". . . sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace. What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid. Know ye not, that to whom ye yield (or present) yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?" The Apostle emphasizes the truth that the child of God who presents himself as a living sacrifice to Jesus Christ, to be controlled by the Spirit of God, will not live in sin. The Apostle John, writing in 1 John 2:1, says, ". . . these things write I unto you, that ye sin not." God's purpose for His child is that he should live in Jesus Christ. God desires to reproduce Himself in His children so that He might be glorified through His children. And when we present ourselves, or sanctify ourselves, or yield ourselves to the Spirit's control, the Spirit will reproduce in us His own fruit, that we might live to the glory of God.

The child of God recognizes that no day is lived in practical righteousness and holiness. We stumble and fall, in thought, word, and deed. There is a sin of omission, and sin of commission, and we stand convicted before a holy and righteous God. The Apostle John has given us a solution to this problem in 1 John 1:9: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Jesus Christ can be reproduced in the life of the child of God because the Spirit of God can convict the child of God of his unholiness and can bring him to the place of confession so that sin might be forgiven and the believer might be restored, and that the Spirit might continue His work of reproducing Jesus Christ in the life of the child of God.

But is there no termination to this struggle? Must we always be subject to Satan's snare? We recognize that as long as we are in the flesh, we are living in an unredeemed body. We are living with an unredeemed sin-nature within us which may manifest its fruit unless we live by the Spirit's power. But the Word of God reveals a third precious truth concerning sanctification, and that is *our ultimate sanctification*. The Apostle John so clearly presents this truth in 1 John 3:2: "Beloved, 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." Observe carefully what John wrote. We will be like Christ in that we will be sinless, we will be deathless, and we will be brought to maturity in spiritual things. We will be like Him. But when? When we are old, and gray-haired? *No!* When He shall appear. It is the coming of Jesus Christ to gather His own to Himself that will bring us, God's saints, to a realization of the position which is ours. At the coming of Christ—when the body of Christ has been completed, when the last redeemed one has been brought into God's family—we will be translated out of this sphere of sin and into His glory, and we shall be like Him. Then our experience will conform to our position throughout the unending ages of eternity.

Jude, in his benediction (v. 25), gives us this same precious expectation, for he extols Christ who "is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy." Jude was anticipating our ultimate sanctification when our experience will conform to our position through the transforming work of the coming Son of God. The Apostle Paul, in Ephesians 5, speaks concerning our positional sanctification and our ultimate sanctification. Paul gives us the work of Christ in verse 26: "That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word." And what is the ultimate purpose? "That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should

be holy (sanctified, set apart) and without blemish” (v. 27). This is our position, praise God, in the sight of God. But we have to confess that this is not our practice; for we, as a people, as a church, and as individuals, could not say of ourselves that we do not have spot or wrinkle or any such thing, or that we are holy and without blemish in our daily practice. But the Apostle is anticipating that glorious time which will come when God’s purpose to sanctify unto Himself a set-apart people will be realized. When He transforms us into His presence, into the likeness of Christ, we shall attain that for which we were called.

On what does this full-orbed sanctification rest? How can we be sanctified? May I mention to you that sanctification is the work of the triune God. In 1 Thessalonians 5:23 God the Father is the One who sanctifies us. In Ephesians 5:26 it is the Son who sanctifies us. In Romans 15:16, Paul says the Holy Spirit is the One who sanctifies. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit—all are active agents in our redemption. God the Father planned, chose, and called; God the Son gave His life for our redemption; God the Holy Spirit applies the benefits of Christ’s redemption to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus.

Child of God, I would that the truth of your sanctification could be burned indelibly upon your consciousness, that you should realize that you *have been* set apart unto God. This is your present position. In this you may glory and revel, for you have been sanctified. You are called by God, a saint. You have been made holy and righteous. Would to God that you could realize that one who has been set apart unto God is expected to live a new kind of life to the glory of God. May God the Holy Spirit conform your daily practice to your present position as a sanctified one, so that you might live a sanctified life, or a life set apart unto God. May God give you the hope of your ultimate conformity to Christ, when your experience shall conform to your position, and you shall be like Him, for you shall see Him as He is. Only a holy and righteous God could work so marvelously on behalf of sinners to bring them to sanctification in Christ Jesus.

By Dwight Pentecost