

Sanctification

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The Scriptures have a good deal to say to us as to sanctification, in the Old Testament as well as in the New; and wherever we find it the word has the fundamental meaning of a **separation**, or a **setting apart**. In the Old Testament the word is freely used of things as well as persons. In the New Testament it is mainly, though not exclusively, used of persons; and as applying to believers it has a double significance — a primary meaning and a secondary. The trouble with so many is that the secondary meaning has obliterated the primary in their minds. Hence the difficulties which they feel in relation to this important subject.

The sanctification of believers means to many people, perhaps to most, a process by which they are made more and more holy and pleasing to God; whereas its primary meaning is that by an act of God they have been set apart for Himself, and according to this their growth in holiness becomes a necessity.

The root idea of the word then, whether we take its Old or New Testament use, is that of setting apart for God. A sanctified person or thing is one set apart from ordinary uses to be for God's own possession and use and enjoyment. In contra-distinction to sanctification stands **profanation**. The priest of Aaron's time was not to "defile himself . . . to profane himself" (Lev. 21: 4). The priests of the coming millennial day are to "teach My people the difference between the holy and profane" (Ezek. 44: 23). The very word used there means "common or polluted," and of course it is just when a thing is put to common use that it does get polluted. That is easily seen in connection with the ordinary affairs of life. When a piece of ground is thrown open freely to the public it becomes a "common," and at once rules must be made to keep it decent. Left to itself it would soon become more or less of a rubbish heap.

In the primary sense of the word, every believer **has been** set apart for God. It is a fact of an absolute nature. We may speak of it as **positional** sanctification.

In the secondary sense, every believer **is to be** set apart for God. It is not positional but **progressive** sanctification.

The primary is an **objective fact**: the secondary is a **subjective experience**, which must always

follow and flow out of the objective fact. Things are bound to get out of place and distorted in our minds, if we allow the subjective experience to eclipse the objective fact, as so many do.

If any of our readers are inclined to doubt what we have just laid down as to the primary meaning of the word, let them consider three facts.

(1) Inanimate things — altar, laver, vessels — were sanctified under the law. There could be no subjective change, no increase in holiness, in them. But they could be put in a separate **position**, wholly devoted to the service of God.

(2) The Lord Jesus Himself was "sanctified, and sent into the world" (John 10: 36); and again leaving the world He said, "I sanctify Myself" (John 17: 19). There could be no subjective change in Him — no sanctification in the progressive sense. Holiness of the most intense order, divine and absolute, was ever His. But He could be set apart by the Father for His mission as Revealer and Redeemer, and then sent into the world. Also, as leaving this world and entering the world of the Father's glory, He could set Himself apart in a new **position** as the pattern and power of the sanctification of His followers.

(3) The instruction comes to us, "Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts" (1 Peter 3: 15). Here too the only possible sense of "sanctify," is to set apart positionally. In our hearts we are to set the Lord God apart in a **position** altogether unique. He is to be exalted without a rival there.

Now as to ourselves we have to begin with this absolute and positional sanctification which is ours by the act of God. If we do not, we are sure to get defective, if not perverted, ideas of the practical and progressive sanctification which is to be ours, since the one flows out of the other. The practical sanctification expected is according to the character of the positional sanctification conferred.

The first mention of sanctification in the Bible is in connection with creation, when God sanctified the seventh day in which He rested (Gen. 2: 3); the second is in connection with redemption, when He brought Israel out of Egypt. Here persons were in question, for He said, "Sanctify unto Me all the firstborn" (Ex. 13: 2). Those who had been redeemed by blood were set apart for God positionally, and because they were, a very special manner of life became them, or rather became the Levites, who later on were substituted for them (see Num. 3: 45; Num. 8: 5-19).

The type, with which the book of Exodus furnishes us, is a very instructive one. In Exodus 12 the children of Israel are sheltered from judgment by the blood of the lamb, which foreshadows the forgiveness and justification which reaches us by the Gospel. In Exodus 15 they are brought right out of Egypt, the power of Pharaoh being broken, which illustrates salvation. Both chapters together foreshadow redemption. But in Exodus 13 we get sanctification. The people justified by blood are set apart for God; and because He claims them for Himself, He will brook no rival claim. He made good His claim against Pharaoh's claim. He broke the might of Egypt and, delivering His people, He brought them to Himself. All their later history had to be governed by this fact.

In all this God showed very plainly that when He intended to bless a people He would set them apart for Himself, instead of allowing them to be common, polluted profaned. They were sanctified to Himself.

How utterly man has been profaned by sin, His mind, his heart, the whole course of nature with him, has been overrun with every kind of evil. If grace sets itself to win him, he must, in the very nature of things, be set apart for God.

We begin then by laying hold of the great fact that we have been sanctified. Scripture is very

definite and plain as to this point, and perhaps the most striking example it furnishes us with is the case of the Corinthians. Of all the Christians of the apostolic age, that we have any knowledge of, they stand out as the least marked by sanctification of a practical sort. Their behaviour was open to much censure, and they got it from the Apostle Paul in very plain language. Yet in his first epistle to them he calls them "saints," as "sanctified in Christ Jesus," (1 Cor. 1: 2). Later in the same epistle, after mentioning many of the abominations that filled the heathen world, he said, "And such were some of you: but . . . ye are sanctified" (1 Cor. 6: 11).

Nothing could be clearer than this. We do not become God's sanctified people by attaining to a certain standard of practical holiness. We are God's sanctified ones, and because of it, holiness, or practical sanctification, is incumbent upon us. If the former were God's way it would be according to the very principle of law. The latter is God's way and it is according to the principle of grace.

This absolute sanctification reaches us in a twofold way. In the first place it is by the work of Christ. "We are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Heb. 10: 10). "Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered without the gate" (Heb. 13: 12). Believing in Him, we stand in the value of His offering and are thereby set apart for God just as fully as we are justified.

In the second place we are sanctified by the Holy Spirit. To the Thessalonians Paul wrote in his second epistle, "God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth" (2 Thess. 2: 13). Peter also wrote in his first epistle, "Elect . . . through sanctification of the Spirit" (1 Peter 1: 2). There are the workings of the Spirit in our hearts, culminating in the new birth of which we read in John 3, when "that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." Then further, when the Gospel is received in faith the Spirit indwells the believer, sealing him until the day of redemption. By that seal the believer is marked off as belonging to God: he is sanctified as set apart for Him.

To the Corinthians Paul wrote in his first epistle, "Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us . . . sanctification" (1 Cor. 1: 30). We are set apart in Him, inasmuch as His was the blood shed for us, and also we have received the Spirit as the fruit of His work. We, as well as the Corinthians, have been, "sanctified . . . in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6: 11).

When once we have laid hold of the fact that we have been sanctified in this absolute sense we are prepared to face our responsibilities as to practical sanctification, which are based upon it. One of the requests for His own, uttered by the Lord, as recorded in John 17 was, "Sanctify them through Thy truth: Thy Word is truth." Hence the importance of giving all due heed to the Word of God, for the more we really know it the more its sanctifying power is exerted in our lives.

"This is the will of God, even your sanctification," is what Paul wrote to the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 4: 3), showing that it is not something that is optional for the Christian, something to be pursued or avoided as fancy dictates. Moreover God Himself works it out for His saints, and it is all-embracing in its scope, for Paul went on to pray for them, "The very God of peace sanctify you wholly" (1 Thess. 5: 23). Everything about us is to come under the sanctifying touch of the God of peace.

But, on the other hand, there is our side of the matter. There are measures which we are to take for the promotion of it. We are to "shun" certain things; we are to "depart from iniquity;" we are to "purge" ourselves from vessels unto dishonour, who teach error of a sort that overthrows faith; then we may be vessels "unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the Master's use" (2 Tim. 2: 21).

In all these ways the practical work of sanctification progresses. Indeed it is the great work which

the Lord is carrying on with His church; His object being to "sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word" (Eph. 5: 26). The work of sanctification and cleansing is taking place to-day in the individuals of whom the church is composed.

Again and again in the Scriptures we are exhorted to holiness. What is the difference between this and the sanctification we have been considering?

There is no real difference. The same Greek word is translated by both English words, and like sanctification holiness is spoken of (1) as positional and absolute, and (2) as practical and progressive. For instance, when we read, "Wherefore holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling . . ." (Heb. 3: 1), we are not to understand this to mean that they were far advanced in practical holiness, but that they were a people set apart for God as partaking in the heavenly calling. Hebrews 5: 11-14, indicate that they were not very far advanced, and presently we find that they are exhorted to "follow peace with all men, and holiness" (Heb. 12: 14), which infers the same thing. The **holy** brethren are **to follow holiness**. In the first epistle of Peter we find just the same thing. He says, "**Be ye holy**," (1 Peter 1: 15) to the very people to whom he says, "**Ye are . . . an holy nation**" (1 Peter 2: 9).

Because we **are** holy we are **to be** holy. The holiness, which is to characterize us practically, is according to the holiness which is ours by the call of God.

Believers in Christ are frequently called "saints" in the New Testament. Is the popular use of this term in keeping with the Scriptural use?

By no means. A "saint" is popularly supposed to be an eminently holy person. The Romish authorities still make saints by a lengthy process called "canonization." If we lived amongst Romanists and spoke of "going to visit the saints" they would probably imagine we are going to visit some local shrine and invoke the aid from the spirit world of some of these canonized people. And many who are not Romanists have not quite shaken off these ideas. A saint is not a person of unusual piety, who after death is entitled to be represented in effigy or picture with a halo round his or her head, but the ordinary, simple believer — each one who has been set apart for God by the blood of Christ, and by the possession of the Holy Spirit.

Every true believer being a saint means that we each are responsible to pursue holiness. Perhaps one reason why the Romish idea lingers so strongly is that it leads people to feel that holiness is no particular concern of theirs, but only of a few. These special ones may pursue holiness; the rest of us can live easy-going lives in the world!

Let us be careful to maintain the scriptural thought.

Do justification and sanctification go together?

They do, as far as positional sanctification is concerned. In 1 Corinthians 6: 11, where the work wrought "in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God," is in question, sanctification is mentioned even in advance of justification. The Corinthians had been cleansed and set apart for God on the same ground and by the same agency as they had been justified, and so also have we.

Seeing that they do go together, are we right in speaking of sanctification by faith, just as we speak of justification by faith?

We have in Scripture the definite statement that we are "justified by faith" (Rom. 5: 1), but we do not anywhere read that we are sanctified by **faith**. Nevertheless, just as, having been justified, we know it by faith and not by our feelings, so too we know that we have been set apart for God by faith and not by feelings. God declares us to be justified as believers in Jesus, and we believe Him. He declares us to be sanctified to Himself as believers in Jesus, and again we believe Him.

If practical sanctification be in question it is another matter. That is progressive, and there should be increase in it to the end. We are to be "perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7: 1), and Paul prayed for the Thessalonians to the end that they might be sanctified "unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." Holiness is not, of course, **apart from** faith, but to speak of holiness by faith, as though faith alone produced it, is to shut out elements of Christian living which ought by no means to be excluded.

What then are these elements? How is practical sanctification or holiness produced?

In the latter part of Romans 6, holiness is presented as being the "fruit" of our being emancipated from the slavery of sin. Now it is "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" which makes us free from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8: 2). The more we are under the law, or control, of the Spirit the more do we enjoy freedom from the control of sin. Evidently therefore **the control of the Holy Spirit** is a very important element in practical sanctification,

Again, when the Lord was praying for His own, as recorded in John 17, He said, "Sanctify them through Thy truth: Thy word is truth" (verse 17). The Spirit of God and the Word of God are intimately connected. **They were in creation, as the first** three verses of Genesis 1 show. They are together also in the new birth, and again in the matter of practical sanctification. We can speak of **holiness by the Word of truth** as well as of **holiness by the Spirit**.

We can also speak of **holiness by love** in the light of 1 Thessalonians 3: 12-13. As love increases so are our hearts established in holiness.

And yet again there is **holiness by separation from all that is unclean**, coupled with cleansing from all filthiness of flesh and spirit. 2 Corinthians 6: 14 - 7: 1 tells us this And 2 Timothy 2: 16-22, tells us the same thing, but in a somewhat different setting.

Here then are four elements in addition to faith by which holiness is produced.

We sometimes meet those who speak of being "wholly sanctified," in a way that suggests a claim to entire freedom from the presence of sin. Is there any support for this in the Bible?

There is 1 Thessalonians 5: 23, to which we have already referred. But the context shows that the word, "wholly" refers to the whole man in his tripartite nature — "spirit and soul and body." There is nothing partial about God's gracious work. Its sanctifying influence reaches every part of us, and is carried on "unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." When He comes the sanctification of the whole man will be carried to its completeness and perfection; but not before.

As long as we inhabit these bodies, derived from Adam, sin is still in us; yet the more we experience God's sanctifying work the less we come under its power. There is no excuse for the

believer when he sins, inasmuch as ample power is at his disposal to preserve him. Yet we all often offend, as James has told us in his Epistle; and we shall all confess it, unless our sense of what is sin is sadly blunted, or we are just deceiving ourselves.

A life of practical holiness is indeed proper and normal Christian life; but the one who most lives it talks least about his holiness. He does not live to himself nor talk about himself. The end of his living and the theme of his tongue is CHRIST.