

Expository Essay: Sanctification (NIV based)

INTRODUCTION:

The doctrine of sanctification is a broad topic addressed extensively throughout the entire Bible. However, for the purposes of this paper, sanctification will be studied in relation to the Book of Romans. The definition and three aspects of sanctification will be explored and thus, will aid in the drawing of applicable lessons for the believer today.

DEFINITION:

The doctrine of sanctification can be generally described as "separation or setting apart" and it includes the dominant idea of "separation from the secular and sinful" or the "setting apart for a sacred purpose" (Unger p.1124). Webster's Dictionary defines 'sanctify' as: "to consecrate; to free from sin; to purify; or to make productive of holiness or piety" (p.1022).

Sanctification can also be described as "making holy or being made holy" (Wainwright p.521). The word 'holy' carries the idea of "bearing an actual likeness to God" in that "the being, character, and action of God determine holiness, and creatures become holy when they reflect or participate in God" (Erickson p.968; Wainwright p.521). Sanctification begins when participation in God occurs at the moment a person places his/her faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. Essentially, God purposes to set apart the believer to produce in the believer a life of holiness, with holiness having its source solely in God. Therefore, God brings about sanctification as a process of character transformation and change in the condition of the inner person to conform to the likeness of Christ (Erickson p.969).

POSITIONAL SANCTIFICATION:

Sanctification can be described in terms of 3 aspects. The first aspect of sanctification initiates at the moment of salvation and can be called 'positional' sanctification. This is when the newly-reborn believer is "placed in Christ with a perfect position before God" by saving grace and is called by God to be a 'saint' or sanctified one (E. James p.6/2; Romans 1:7). Romans 3:22 reveals that positional sanctification is equally applicable for everyone who has saving faith in Christ. Positional sanctification is totally contingent upon the believer's position of being 'in Christ' and is automatically given by God to everyone who is 'in Christ' (Unger p.1125). There are no variations or degrees of positional sanctification. Either a person is a believer who has salvation with a perfect position before God, or the person is an unbeliever who has no salvation with only condemnation before God.

PROGRESSIVE EXPERIENTIAL SANCTIFICATION:

In variation to positional sanctification which places the believer in perfect position before God at the moment of salvation in the past, there is a second aspect of sanctification, called 'progressive experiential' sanctification, in which the believer is presently being set apart in a 'progressive' way from the power of sin in his Christian life (E. James p.6/2). This progressive sanctification is a continuation of what was begun at the moment of salvation in that it is applied to the believer's daily life experiences (Erickson p.968). Romans 8:29-30 says that progressive sanctification is the process of development by which the believer's moral condition is brought into conformity to the

likeness of Christ and to his/her legal, perfect position before God (Erickson p.968; White p.970).

The process of progressive sanctification is conditional in that it is affected by faith and knowledge. Romans 6:1-11 show that the believer must know, believe, and act upon his position of which he has died to sin and is alive to God. The believer is to "live a life he already has and become what he is" (E. James p.6/5). Thus, progressive sanctification becomes "experientially real only in proportion as one reckons it to be true" (Unger p.1125; Romans 6:11).

Sanctification is of the Holy Spirit, as Romans 15:16 states, and the ongoing process of progressive sanctification is the supernatural, special, volitional work or series of works by the Holy Spirit to produce fruit in the believer's life (Erickson p.970; Wainwright p.521). As evidenced in Romans 8:4,9, the Holy Spirit is given to the believer to "help him walk by the law of God" (E. James p.7/4). Also in Romans 8, the activities of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life are listed as: setting his mind on the things of the Spirit (v.5); putting him in the Spirit (v.9); dwelling in him (v.9); putting to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit (v.13); leading him by the Spirit (v.14); bearing witness with his spirit that he is a child of God (v.16); and interceding for him (vv.26-27). Obviously, the power to live a sanctified life comes from the Holy Spirit and not from the believer himself.

THE SIN NATURE:

In opposition to the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work in the believer's life is the capacity to sin called the 'sin nature' (e.g. Romans 7:5 - Strong's #4561, #0266). The believer's sin nature, with its desire to serve sin, is in direct, continual conflict with the believer's new, divinely-given nature with its desire to serve God (E. James p.6/3). Romans 6:8-11 assert that Christ broke the power of sin through his death and resurrection and that believers should consider themselves to be "dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (v.11). Romans 6:12 goes on to exhort the believer not to let "sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires". Thus in a sense, the power of the sin nature has been broken, but the sin nature remains alive and actively seeks to be served and to manifest itself as sin in the believer's life (E. James pp.6/4, 6/7). But, the believer is no longer obligated to be subservient to his sin nature - as stated in Romans 6:14. Believers have been set free from sin and are now slaves to righteousness - as declared in Romans 6:18. Yet, to the end of this lifetime, the warfare continues between the believer's old sin nature and his new, Holy Spirit-empowered, divinely-given, regenerated nature (Romans 8:11).

Although the battle between natures persists daily, the believer has access to God's power through the Holy Spirit to be victorious over sin and its forms of bondage. Access to the Holy Spirit's power is gained through progressive sanctification, which is linked with yielding daily to the control of the Holy Spirit for righteous living and service. Romans 12:1-2 joins with Romans 8:6-9 to state that the believer must daily present himself to the Spirit's control in order to be empowered by and pleasing to God. This sanctification process is contrary to the world's flow, but enables the believer to discern, know, and live within God's will (Romans 12:2). But, the degree to which progressive sanctification takes place in the believer's life is dependent upon the extent to which he yields to the Holy Spirit's control and God's will.

Progressive sanctification and empowering through yielded-ness will not reach a state of sinless perfection in this life, however, because the believer's sin nature is not dead, but rather broken of power. The Apostle Paul makes this evident in Romans 7:14-25 where he describes his battle with his sin nature. It should be observed that perfection is "an ideal or standard toward which we press, but which will never be attained within this life" (Erickson p.972). [Note: For a detailed description on how to 'yield to the control of the Holy Spirit', see the document "Session 10 - Mandates Relating To 'Godliness' And 'Empowering' ", in the 'Elder Training Series', which is located near the top of the 'Home Page - Ministry' web page on this website, www.BelieverAssist.com.]

ULTIMATE PERFECT SANCTIFICATION:

Whereas positional sanctification pertains to the past and progressive sanctification concerns the present, the third aspect of sanctification, called 'ultimate perfect' sanctification, will be manifest in the future. As the believer struggles daily to live in holiness, purity, and goodness, he/she presses on to the day of meeting the Lord in person. On that day, the believer's sanctification will be made perfect by the Lord "in both position and condition through deliverance from the very presence of sin" (E. James p.6/2). Romans 8:29-30 proclaims that this future meeting will bring glorification with complete conformity to Christ - which is the ultimate perfect sanctification.

VALUES FOR THE BELIEVER TODAY:

As the believer considers the positional sanctification automatically bestowed upon him, thoughts of thankfulness and confidence to approach God in prayer should immediately surface. The fact that God sees the sin-filled believer as positionally perfect through Christ is difficult to fully comprehend when the absolute holiness of God is thoroughly examined. Reverence for God's holiness and grace should be the out-growth of such meditation.

The aspect of progressive sanctification should motivate the believer to strive for personal holiness and sanctification in thoughts, words, and actions while staying alert against the activities of the sin nature. This means that the believer needs to take every aspect of his very being into captivity and submit them to Christ in a daily, moment-by-moment attitude of yielded-ness and obedience. Then, the believer should continue to walk by faith, being empowered by the Holy Spirit to love and serve both God and mankind.

The aspect of ultimate perfect sanctification should encourage the believer not to grow tired and give up the daily conflict of resisting the sin nature and its desires. Keeping one's eyes fixed upon Christ, and the future glory that awaits, helps retain present trials and tribulations in proper perspective (cf. 1 Peter 1:3-6).

Sanctification, with all its aspects, should encourage the believer to subdue feelings of defeat, despair, and guilt when he/she does sin (Erickson p.974). Conversely, the believer should not be overly pleased when he/she is victorious over sin, nor should he/she be indifferent to the presence of sin in his/her life. A good request to add to one's prayer list is for God to "overcome completely the tendency toward evil which the believer finds so prevalent within him" (Erickson p.974).

CLOSURE:

Through this study of the doctrine of sanctification, greater understanding has been gained of positional, progressive, and ultimate sanctifications as well as of the sin nature. Valuable lessons have been derived from this study of sanctification. This obtained knowledge should better equip the believer to live a holy life set apart for God.

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