

Sanctification

Described

Sanctification refers to the state of being separated from the rule of sin, Satan and the world and to being dedicated or devoted to God and Jesus Christ for His use, purposes and glory. Sanctification also means being purified or cleansed by the Presence of the Holy Spirit on the basis of Jesus' death.

We are sanctified on the basis of Jesus' death

Hebrews 10:10, 10:29, 13:12, Ephesians 5:25-27 and Colossians 1:22 demonstrate that believers can only be sanctified because of Jesus' death. Hebrews 13:12 says: *“Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the camp.”*

Because of the Fall of the human race and their own personal wrong thoughts, words and actions, all humans without Christ are unholy. If Jesus Christ had not died and paid the penalty for their sins, no human throughout history could have been sanctified by God.

God sanctifies through His unmerited grace and mercy

Hebrews 2:11 reveals it is God Who sanctifies believers when it refers to Him as *“He who sanctifies”*. Sanctification is a *gift of God's unmerited grace and mercy*.

Sanctification is *not a merited reward for good works* like prayer, fasting, giving, loving God, loving others and any acts of obedience to Him.

Good works empowered by the Holy Spirit are a *result* or *fruit* of the fact God has already sanctified believers at conversion. But good works are *not the cause* of the initial sanctification of believers by God. These God-empowered good works are a major aspect of the practical outworkings in believers' lives of their initial sanctification by the Holy Spirit. Such outworkings are a consequence and not a cause of initial sanctification at conversion.

God gives us Himself

Holiness is *not something that God gives us separate* from Himself. By the Person of His Holy Spirit, God imparts to us *Himself* as our holiness. It is not that we ever become God ourselves. God shares His holiness with us as believers. Many do not understand these things.

We must remember that the Holy Spirit is a Person. He is not an “it” or merely an impersonal supernatural force. The Lord Jesus called the Holy Spirit a *“He”* (see John 14:26, 16:7-8 and 13-14). The Holy Spirit is inherently holy as His Name suggests. 1 Peter 1:2, 2 Thessalonians 2:13 and Romans 15:16 show that God the Holy Spirit is involved in the

sanctification of His people. Because we are in spiritual union with the Holy Spirit, God sees us as being holy.

Jesus Christ within us

I have heard Christians talk as though holiness is a mere blessing or gift that God gives to certain people. They do not realise that holiness is the Lord Jesus Christ living by His Spirit inside of us. Living in us, He gives us His ability to be devoted to God the Father, to be separated from the rule of sin, Satan and the flesh, and to be purified. Acts 13:14 describes Jesus Christ as “*the Holy One*”. He is holy as an eternal intrinsic characteristic of His nature. 1 Corinthians 1:30 says Christ is “*our Sanctification*”. God sanctifies us as believers by bringing us into union with the Spirit of Christ.

Under the New Covenant, God the Father always gives us the qualities of holiness, spiritual strength, love and so on as an inclusive part of the Lord Jesus Christ. These God-given qualities are resident in the Lord Jesus, not separate from Him. After conversion, a Christian manifests more of these qualities by being more ruled by Jesus Christ living within him.

Beware of the mistake of trying to obtain these God-given qualities without wanting to be ruled more by the Giver Himself – the Lord Jesus Christ.

If we are not deeply aware that we have a Person – far more than just a spiritual force – living inside of us, we will find it difficult to understand how God defines holiness. This divine Person – the Lord Jesus Christ – wants to help us become more and more like Him and achieve God the Father’s will.

This does not mean that God the Father cannot see our weaknesses and sins after we are initially sanctified by Him at conversion. Nor does this mean that the Father accepts these sins as being good. God sees these sins in our lives but immediately after initially sanctifying us at conversion, begins to work in our lives so that we can manifest a holy life in our daily experience.

A completed act with continuing effects or a state

There are at least five verses in the New Testament which prove God has sanctified believers as a completed action which has continuing effects in their lives or God has already put all believers into a *state* of sanctification. These verses are Acts 20:32, 26:18, Romans 15:16, 1 Corinthians 1:2 and Hebrews 10:10. Each of these verses are in the perfect tense and passive voice in Greek. In these contexts, the perfect tense signifies a completed action which has continuing results or to a state resulting from a previous action. In these five verses, the passive voice means Another – in this case God, does the action of sanctifying believers.

The exact literal translations of the latter part of Acts 20:32 is “*among the (ones) having been sanctified all*” and of the latter part of Acts 26:18 is “*among the (ones) having been sanctified by faith in me*”. The precise literal translations of part of Romans 15:16 is “*having been sanctified by (the) Spirit Holy*” and of part of 1 Corinthians 1:2 is “*to (ones) having been sanctified in Christ Jesus*”. The exact literal translation of Hebrews 10:10 is

“by which will having been sanctified we are through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all”.

In these five verses, the words **“having been”** reflect the completed characteristic of God’s sanctifying of believers. This completed action occurred at each believer’s conversion to Jesus Christ. The completed action of sanctification mentioned in Hebrews 10:10 relates to when Jesus died.

Note that none of the above verses teach that just our spirits are sanctified by God as completed actions at conversion. All these verses reveal *the whole* of each believer is sanctified by God as completed actions or states. This means at conversion, God:

- *separated* our spirits, minds, emotions, wills and bodies from the rule of sin, the world and Satan.
- *dedicated* or *devoted* our spirits, minds, emotions, wills and bodies *totally* to Himself for His use, purposes and glory. Leviticus 20:26 shows God’s act of separating people is combined with His act of dedicating them as His exclusive possession: **“And you shall be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be Mine.”** 2 Timothy 2:21 associates having been sanctified with being useful to God our Master.
- *purified* or *cleansed* our spirits, minds, emotions and wills. This cleansing or purifying aspect of sanctification is referred to in Ephesians 5:26 and Hebrews 9:13. The association between cleansing by the blood of the substitutionary offering and sanctification is seen in Exodus 29:36-37 and Leviticus 16:16-20.

The separation and dedication aspects of sanctification are combined in the expression “believers are set apart by God for Himself”.

Other key aspects of sanctification

There are other important aspects of sanctification taught in the New Testament:

- Sanctification or holiness is initially received at conversion through *faith* and *accompanying repentance* (see Acts 26:18-20). But note sanctification is *not merited* or *earned* through faith and accompanying repentance.
- John 17:17 and Ephesians 5:26 relate sanctification to God’s Word. We are not sanctified through the theories of theologians or others’ unbiblical “revelations” and religious theories. We are sanctified only through the Word.
- In God’s foreknowledge and eternal plans, He saw all believers as being in union with Christ. This is why Hebrews 10:10 says all believers were sanctified – separated, dedicated to God and purified – when Jesus died.
- In 1 Corinthians 6:11, Paul reveals believers were sanctified and justified as associated events: **“And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.”** Believers were justified as whole persons. They did not receive justification of their spirits at conversion and justification of the rest of themselves later as an optional extra. Similarly, at conversion believers are sanctified as whole persons.

- The perfect tenses and passive voices of the action words *“having been sanctified”* in Acts 20:32, 26:18, Romans 15:16, 1 Corinthians 1:2 and Hebrews 10:10 do not mean God sanctifies people regardless of the decisions of their wills. After the Holy Spirit calls them, people must choose to submit their wills to Jesus Christ in faith. Unless people living after Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, willingly in faith receive Him as Lord and Saviour they will not be sanctified by God. In Acts 26:18, Christ refers to *“having been sanctified by faith in Me”*.
- 1 Thessalonians 4:7 also shows God has sanctified our bodies at conversion. 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4 and 7 says: *“For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honour...For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness.”* These verses relate to the use of our bodies for sex in marriage or for wicked sexual immorality. Paul says here that we must operate in sexual matters in holiness. But note later in verse 7, he says we must do this because God called us in holiness. Believers' bodies are to be used for holy purposes because God has already separated them from the rule of sin, the world and Satan for His own use, purposes and glory.

Does not equal permanent sinless perfection in this life

God's separation of our whole being from the rule of sin, the world and Satan and His dedication of our whole being to Himself for His use, purposes and glory does not result in us being permanently sinlessly perfect in this life. We see this very clearly in verses such as 2 Corinthians 7:1, 1 Thessalonians 5:23 and 1 Peter 1:14-15.

In 1 Peter 1:2, Peter reveals that those to whom he was writing were already sanctified by the Holy Spirit. But note in 1 Peter 1:14-15, he said to the same people: *“as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct.”* In 2 Peter 3:11, Peter instructs already-sanctified believers about the importance of holy conduct: *“Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness.”*

Other verses which refer to the continual practical ongoing outworking of sanctification in our lives are 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4, 1 Timothy 2:15 and Hebrews 12:10.¹

God purifies our hearts at and after conversion

One common false teaching is the idea believers in Christ have purified spirits while at the same time having totally unpurified minds, emotions and wills. This error is a poor

¹ There is dispute among Bible translators about the second present participle in Hebrews 2:11 and about the present participle in Hebrews 10:14 which are both related to sanctification. In New Testament Greek, participles have the characteristics of both action words or verbs and describing words or adjectives. The King James Version and the New American Standard Bible translate these participles as *presently completed* actions by using the words *“are sanctified”*, while the New King James Version translates them as *continuous* actions. The New King James Version uses *“are being sanctified”* in these two verses.

attempt at explaining why it is true new converts can still sin and why so many so-called “converts” of the false easy believism “gospel” continue to live like the Devil.

In Acts 15:9, Peter spoke of God cleansing the hearts of the non-Israelite believers. In the context of Acts 15:7-9, Peter was referring to when they were first converted. Acts 15:7-9 states: **“And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: ‘Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.’”** Remember as shown in Chapter “Believing With The Heart”, the word “**heart**” or “**kardia**” in Greek refers to the human mind, emotions, will and spirit. Therefore, Acts 15:7-9 shows God purifies more than just the human spirit of believers at conversion.

2 Corinthians 7:1 proves all believers also need to have their spirits and bodies cleansed after conversion: **“Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”** In context, 2 Corinthians 7:1 is written to believers who were already sanctified at conversion (see 1 Corinthians 1:2 and 6:11). 1 John 1:7 and 1:9 also refer to God cleansing believers after conversion.

1 Peter 1:22 says: **“Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit...”** In the original Greek, the participle **“have purified”** above is in the perfect tense. In this context, the perfect tense refers to a completed action which has continuing effects or to a state resulting from a previous action. Therefore, this verse is teaching that believers *purified* their *souls* by obeying the truth of the Gospel at conversion.

The surrounding context of 1 Peter 1:22 shows it relates to receiving the Gospel, being converted and believing in God through Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 1:18-19 refers to being redeemed by Jesus’ death. 1 Peter 1:25 says the Gospel was preached to them. 1 Peter 1:23 refers to being born again through God’s Word. In Greek, the expression **“having been born-again”** is in the perfect tense just like words **“have purified”** in 1 Peter 1:22 are. These two perfect tenses refer to two completed actions or to two states resulting from previous actions. In 1 Peter 1:21, Peter mentions believing in God through Christ.

1 John 3:3 says: **“And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.”** In Greek, the word **“purifies”** is in the present tense. The present tense here signifies this cleansing or purifying is an ongoing action. Note John here uses a word derived from the same Greek root word for **“purifying”** used in 1 Peter 1:22. So believers are both purified as a completed action at conversion and are being purified.

The practical outworkings of sanctification in believers’ lives

In a New Testament sense, it is right to speak of growing in sanctification or growing in holiness, but wrong to say we have to grow or progress spiritually after conversion until we reach some supposed future state of sanctification. The idea that sanctification is a post-conversion optional extra for only mature, very spiritual believers is contrary to the New Testament.

Similarly, we are not initially sanctified years after our conversion as a result of going through an intensive process of ridding ourselves of known sin. Abandoning and

resisting known sin is part of living in agreement with the sanctified state which God has given us through our union with Christ.

As sanctified believers, we can have crisis spiritual experiences after our initial reception of sanctification as conversion. There can be dramatic times in our lives when we sense new powerful workings of the Holy Spirit in relation to our growing in sanctification. But we must not forget the New Testament teaches we were already sanctified by God at conversion.

We must believe and confess that Jesus Christ is our sanctification and that we have been sanctified through Him. But we should not use this fact hypocritically as an excuse to live a wicked unholy life. There must be *real* though *imperfect fruit* of our God-given sanctification in our daily practical living.

The New Testament basically teaches we must live holy lives because we are sanctified or holy in Christ.

Bible Study Questions

1. Describe sanctification.
2. Which verses show that believers can only be sanctified because of Jesus' death?
3. What does Hebrews 2:11 mean when it says "***He who sanctifies***"?
4. Is sanctification a merited reward for good works like prayer, fasting, giving, loving God, loving others and so on.
5. Which verses reveal the Holy Spirit is involved in the sanctification of His people?
6. What does 1 Corinthians 1:30 mean when it says Christ is "***our sanctification***"?
7. Which five verses in the New Testament reveal that God has sanctified believers as a completed action which has continuing effects in their lives or He has already put all believers into a state of sanctification?
8. Discuss the separation, dedication and purification aspects of sanctification.
9. Which New Testament passage reveals we are sanctified by faith and accompanying repentance?
10. What is sanctification related to in John 17:17 and Ephesians 5:26?
11. Explain what Hebrews 10:10 reveals about sanctification.
12. When were our bodies initially sanctified?
13. Does sanctification equal permanent sinless perfection in this life?
14. What verses refer to the continual practical outworking of holiness in our lives?
15. What do Acts 15:9 and 1 Peter 1:22 reveal about God's supernatural work in our hearts and souls at conversion?
16. Explain what 2 Corinthians 7:1 and 1 John 3:3 reveal about the cleansing and purification of ourselves through Christ after conversion.