

Sanctification: The process of change

by Scott Grant

Justification with a purpose

In Christ, we have been justified, declared innocent. But justification is not an end; it is a means to an end. Justification, as we have seen, is linked to redemption - freedom from sin. That doesn't mean that we don't sin; it means that sin doesn't prevent us from being free to fulfill our intended purpose: relationship with God. We have been justified so that we might be redeemed for the purpose of knowing God.

The experience of the Apostle Paul illustrates this, as depicted in Philippians 3:8-10: "More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know him ... "

Paul says he counts all things, meaning his own righteous deeds, to be "loss" and "rubbish." He was therefore given the gift of righteousness based on his faith in Christ and his work on the cross. All this was "that I may know him." He was justified and redeemed for the purpose of relationship with God.

The paradigm for redemption is the Exodus. The Lord, in speaking of his plans for bringing the Israelites out of Egypt, says to the people, "I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. Then I will take you for my people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians" (Exodus 6:6-7). The Lord brought the people out via the 10th plague, in which the first-born of Egypt was slain. Thus the people were redeemed so that the Lord could take them for his people and be their God - in other words, so that they could enjoy relationship with the Lord. We have been "brought out" of sin via the death of God's first-born, Jesus Christ, so that we could enjoy relationship with the Lord.

A preoccupation with justification that views forgiveness of sins as an end in itself is therefore inadequate. It is simply another method we adopt to push God away. The result of relationship with God is sanctification.

What is holiness?

The Apostle Peter tells us, "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16). It behooves us, then, to understand what holiness is. If something is holy, it means that it has been designated for a particular use. Instruments involved in the service of the temple were declared holy: designated for a special purpose.

Paul explains holiness as it concerns men and women in his instructions to Timothy to flee from the temptation to argue: "Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor. Therefore, if a man cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work" (2 Timothy 2:20-21).

In Greek, the word for "sanctify" (*hagiazō*) is related to the word for "holy" (*hagios*). "Sanctify" is the verb and "holy" is the adjective. To sanctify, then, is to make holy - to designate something for a specific purpose. And our purpose, according to Paul, is to be "useful to the Master, prepared for every good work."

How is it that we are useful to the Master? We are useful to him insofar as we reflect the character of Jesus, in that we are "conformed to the image of his Son" (Romans 8:29).

And what was Jesus like? Above all, Jesus loved.

Holiness is love

Peter's first command after the one concerning holiness is to love: "Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart ... " (1 Peter 1:22).

The Old Testament words most often quoted in the New Testament may be those found in Leviticus 19:18: "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord." The phrase "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" appears in the New Testament nine times (Matthew 5:43, 19:19, 22:39; Mark 12:31, 12:33; Luke 10:27; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8).

But loving isn't so easy. That's why we set our sights much lower. We'll see the avoidance of alcohol and tobacco, the defeat of lust and masturbation, or effectiveness in ministry and business as more significant responsibilities. And if we succeed, we'll feel good - so we think. But as Tina Turner sings in a completely different context, "What's love got to do with it?"

Love has plenty to do with Jesus, who speaks of it in Matthew 5:43-48: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

To the biblical injunction to love one's neighbor was added the unbiblical injunction to hate one's enemy. That was the easy way, especially when neighbors were narrowly defined as "those who love you." But Jesus extends the definition of a neighbor to all people, even our enemies and persecutors, for whom we should pray. Jesus did that on the cross, when he loved those who crucified him and asked the Father to forgive them (Luke 23:24).

Jesus says we should be perfect, as the Father is perfect. In what sense is the Father perfect in this context? He loves all people; he sends the blessings of sun and rain on the evil and the good. Therefore, we should love in this manner as well. We should love even those who hate us.

Holiness is inevitable

Be holy. Be perfect. Is it possible? It is not only possible; it is inevitable:

- "For I am confident of this very thing, that he who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6).

- "Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

One day the work will be finished. One day we will be sanctified entirely. Sanctification is not an event but a process in which we become more like Jesus, more loving. And when we see Jesus face to face on the day he returns for his own, the process will be complete.

Be holy, for you already are holy

How are we to reconcile the command to be holy with declarations in scripture that we already are holy? Several of Paul's letters are addressed to "saints," which means "holy ones." We are, in fact, "holy and blameless" (Ephesians 1:4) because we are in Christ, and when God looks at us, he sees his holy Son.

It is true; we are holy now. But we do not fully perceive or appreciate this truth in all its glory, or the one who made it possible, because it is impossible for us to grasp the full import of it in these bodies, which are damaged by sin.

Jesus himself withheld telling his disciples some things for this very reason: "I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now" (John 16:12). At that particular time, when they were consumed with Jesus' impending departure, the Lord knew they would not be able to process his words. But he later sent the Holy Spirit to teach them truth (John 16:13). And even the truth that Jesus taught them while with them in body they were not able to fully grasp, for the Spirit later had to remind them of what Jesus said (John 14:26).

"For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully, just as I also have been fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12). Although the context of this verse concerns spiritual gifts and not holiness, it is plain that we do not yet know things fully but one day we will, when Christ returns and we receive new bodies that are free of sin. Then we will perceive truth accurately and appreciate it fully. Then we will perceive accurately and appreciate fully the mind-bending truth that we are holy in Christ and always have been, since the day we were placed in him by faith.

Certainly we can all cite personal stories in which we appreciated a truth, gift or person not at the moment of revelation but later. Often our appreciation grows through the years.

So when we are commanded to be holy, we are commanded to be that which we already are, strange as that may seem. If we believe we are holy, we will think and act in conformity to that belief. "As he thinks within himself, so he is" (Proverbs 23:7).

If I believe the ground is solid beneath my feet, I will walk on it, and I will be able to move from place to place. If I don't believe it, I will never get out of bed. The ground is indeed solid; this is true. But truth doesn't benefit me experientially unless I believe it. I will not act as if the ground is solid unless I believe it is solid. In Christ, we are holy; this is true. But if I will not act as if I am holy unless I believe it.

So the process of sanctification, then, concerns first and foremost what we believe and the appreciation of God that grows out of that belief.

It is to that process that we now turn.

The process

Even a cursory reading of the New Testament reveals a tension between the Spirit and the flesh. The tension can be summed up by Galatians 5:17: "For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please."

The Holy Spirit and the flesh are depicted as having two different goals. The Spirit and the flesh not only have different goals, they also have different means. The Spirit wants to use faith in Christ to promote a worshipful relationship with God that results in holiness: the fruit of the Spirit, the loving character of Christ. The flesh, on the other hand, wants to use works of the law to promote idolatry of the self that results in unholiness: the deeds of the flesh, the selfish character of Satan.

The Spirit operates in the sphere of Christ. The flesh operates in the sphere of the law. As believers in Jesus Christ, we are not under the law but in Christ, although we can choose to think, contrary to the word of God, that we are under the law. If we believe the truth, that we are in Christ, the result will be holiness. If we believe the lie, that we are under the law, the result will be unholiness. It can be illustrated thus:

IN CHRIST

Gal 3:27

faith relationship

Spirit --- uses --- **in** --- to promote --- **with** --- yielding --- **holiness**

Christ God

Gal 5:17 Gal 3:2 Gal 4:6 Gal 5:22-23

Gal 3:3 Gal 3:5 Gal 3:26 Gal 3:4-5

Gal 4:15

UNDER LAW

Gal 3:23, 4:21

works idolatry

Flesh --- uses --- **of** --- to promote ---- **of** ---- yielding --- **unholiness**

law self

Gal 5:17 Gal 3:2 Gal 4:17 Gal 5:19-21

Gal 3:3 Gal 3:5 Gal 6:12 Gal 4:15

The Holy Spirit, who along with the Father and the Son comprise God himself, desires to communicate to each person the truth, which is that life is found in relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. After he has convinced us of this, he places us in Christ, and he himself indwells us. From within us, he continually cries out to the Father, relating us to him (Galatians 4:6, Romans 8:15-16). The name, Holy Spirit, testifies as to what the Spirit wants to accomplish in us: holiness. This happens as we respond to the Spirit's cry within us and enter into a worshipful relationship with God. Paul calls the Spirit "the Spirit of holiness" (Romans 1:4).

The flesh is our humanity apart from the Spirit of God. Apart from the Spirit, man's rational capabilities are flawed. Apart from the Spirit, man in his flesh attempts to determine what is true. Not surprisingly, his definitions disagree with those of the Spirit. According to Philippians 3:3-6, the flesh features heritage and natural abilities (i.e., "a Hebrew of Hebrews") and what one is able to accomplish (i.e., "as to righteousness that is in the law, found blameless"). A similar description is found in 2 Corinthians 11:16-33.

The Spirit and the flesh, therefore, have opposing desires. Believers in Jesus Christ are indwelt not only by the Holy Spirit but also by the flesh (Romans 7:18-20) and will be as long as we have earthly bodies. So there will be a conflict between the Spirit and the flesh as long as we dwell on earth.

The battle on earth is for our minds (Romans 12:2; 2 Corinthians 11:3, Ephesians 4:23). The Spirit desires to bring to our minds Christ and the sufficiency of his work on the cross. The flesh desires to bring to our minds

the law and the sufficiency of our work, bringing all our natural abilities and determination to accomplish into play. The Spirit is relational: He desires to lead us into a worshipful relationship with God. The flesh is independent: It rejects a relationship with God and desires to lead us into a worshipful relationship with the self. The Spirit desires to produce in us the loving character of Christ, which is in fact worship in response to God. The flesh desires to produce in us the selfish character of Satan, which is in fact idolatry in response to the self.

The flesh will not produce holiness, nor will the law. Biblical moral law, comprising elements of Old Testament law that are still applicable and New Testament imperatives, says love God and love others. This law God has placed in all people (Romans 2:14-16). The flesh will attempt to obey the law, redefining it in a way that puts it within reach and corrupting the reason for obedience to it. Our flesh wants to obey the law not because we love God but because we want to be happy as we envision God being impressed with our supposedly good works. If we don't acknowledge God, then we envision happiness stemming from our own approval of ourselves or the approval of others.

Biblical law is "holy and righteous and good" (Romans 7:12). It may sound strange that the holy law cannot produce holiness. We are to indeed live holy lives in obedience to biblical law, but the means by which the law is obeyed takes us by surprise. It has nothing to do with natural abilities or determination to achieve holiness; it has to do with the Spirit's drawing us into a relationship that transforms us. The closer one is to the source of heat, the warmer he or she will be. As the Spirit draws us closer to God, we become more godly.

An amazing thing happens as we experience a relationship with God: Holiness happens. Holiness becomes more appealing; and unholiness becomes less appealing. Holiness becomes more attractive, because it's a response to God's love instead of an attempt to earn it. People who know they are loved respond in love. This is what the Apostle John says: "We love, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

So sanctification - the process of our becoming more loving - is fostered by our relationship with God, which is encouraged by the Holy Spirit. Paul makes this clear in 2 Corinthians 3:18: "But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image, from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18). Sanctification here is seen as an ongoing process of transformation that is the Spirit's responsibility. And what is the Spirit doing? Causing us to behold the glory of the Lord. The Spirit within us allows us to behold the glory of the Lord - who he is. If we behold who the Lord is, we'll be transformed into more loving people.

The process illustrated

This war between the flesh and the Spirit can be seen in the lives of the Galatians and the Judaizers, those who were trying to influence the Galatians away from the Spirit and toward the flesh. The Galatians were "in Christ" (3:27), but the Judaizers were trying to convince them that they were "under law" (3:23, 4:21) and to endeavor to be "perfected," or sanctified, not by the Spirit but by the flesh (3:3). Paul counters that the Galatians began by the Spirit and faith in Christ and should continue in this manner, allowing the Spirit to convince them of the sufficiency of Christ's work on the cross rather than the false sufficiency their works of the law (3:1-5).

He says they are "sons of God," in relationship with him, through "faith in Christ Jesus" (3:26), and that the Spirit, by communicating this truth to them, leads them into a deepening relationship with God, continually crying out in their hearts, "Abba, Father," which is a cry for intimacy (4:6). The Judaizers, those who advocate the flesh and the law rather than the Spirit and faith, are not drawn into relationship with God but into a kind of relationship with themselves. They worship not God but themselves and therefore demand others to acknowledge them, hoping that the Galatians will "seek them" (4:17, 5:12).

The result in the Galatians' lives when they allowed the Spirit to deepen their relationship with God through faith in the sufficiency of Christ's work was "miracles" (3:5), which are the fruit of the Spirit (5:22-23), which is love, which can be seen in their tremendous love for Paul (4:15). But because of the influence of the Judaizers, they began listening to the flesh and trying to obey the law so that they could feel good about themselves, and the result was the deeds of the flesh (5:19-21), which are self-oriented actions that place

demands on others, which can be seen in their new attitude toward Paul (4:15). The Judaizers themselves, for all their talk of works of the law, were, of course, producing the deeds of the flesh (4:17, 6:12).

It's true, so believe it

Why do we don't we marvel at what Christ has done on the cross, enter into a worshipful relationship with God and live lives of holiness? Why, instead, do we marvel at what we can do in obedience to a code, enter into a worshipful relationship with ourselves and live lives of unholiness?

The answer is simple: We don't believe the truth.

We have been placed in Christ, but we don't believe it; therefore, we don't think and act like it. We don't rest in his completed work on the cross, because we don't think it's enough. We are not overwhelmed by his sacrifice, so we are not drawn into an ever-deepening relationship with God. And we do not see holiness in our lives, because fruit can't come forth from a dormant relationship. One who remains distant from the heat source will stay cold; there will be no change.

The answer, simplistic though it may seem, is to believe what God has said in his word. The word says we are in Christ, not under the law. Believe it. We need not seek significance, security and acceptance, for it is already ours in Christ. We need not be like the man frantically looking for the pair of glasses that is already on his head.

Of course, this means we must know what the word says. If we don't know we are not under the law, we will live as if we were under the law. In order to know what the word says, we have to read it, study it, memorize it, meditate on it, listen to it - expose ourselves to it in every way we can, asking the Holy Spirit to lead us into truth. The Spirit will do just that, for he inspired the word and illumines it. And he wants to use it to show us Christ, thereby leading us to God.

"If you abide in my word, they you are truly disciples of mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free" (John 8:31-32).

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