

Sanctification of the Believer

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Bible Text: Ephesians 4:17

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The Biblical doctrine of sanctification causes significant discussion among Christians. Some confusion exists over its definition. Just for clarification, I define sanctification as the work of God's free grace whereby the child of God is renewed in the whole man after the image of God and conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. It enables the believer to die more and more unto sin and to live unto righteousness.

The Bible extensively describes this important doctrine. In particular, I call your attention to the Apostle Paul's letter to the Church at Ephesus, Chapter 4, verses 17-24. In this message to believers, Paul clearly spells out correction for their conduct. He describes for them a mode of living that should describe the Christian life. From this passage, I want to examine certain, sure, Biblical truths that Paul gives about sanctification.

The Author Of Sanctification

In these verses, Paul clearly identifies Who originated the idea of sanctification. Unfortunately, many of the household of faith cling to fallacies concerning its origin. For example, many believe sanctification is a sadistic plot by Old World religionists with a desire to eliminate fun. Others view it as something they do to merit God's favor.

The truth lies in neither of these conclusions. In fact, Paul makes it clear that sanctification originates with none other than God Almighty Himself. The section at hand includes 2 phrases or statements that confirm this conclusion.

Notice first the phrase in Ephesians 4:24: "...the new man, which after God is created..." Sanctification, or the ongoing progress of personal holiness, is the creation of God. It originated by His power according to His mind and will. Further, this statement includes the idea that it is molded after His likeness, His image.

Again, this section under study includes another statement that links its origin to the Godhead. In verse 20 it says, "But ye have not so learned Christ..." The purity that God created found its completion in Jesus Christ. He is the express image of God the Father, and all the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Him.

Further, Jesus not only lived a sinless life, but His message emphasized the need for entire separation unto God. For example, Luke 16.13 records the Lord's exhortation to cling to only one master. The Sermon on the Mount again shows His desire that His disciples seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.⁽¹⁾

In fact, the Scriptures contain a multitude of references to prove that God Himself authored sanctification. The example from the Garden of Eden shows it. God created mankind upright and demanded holiness from His creation. When mankind sinned, God punished their disobedience. In addition, the emphasis of the Bible proves it. More than any other attribute, it reveals the holiness of God. Finally, the exhortation of Scripture calls for personal sanctification. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament issue the command:

Leviticus 20:7: "Sanctify yourselves therefore, and be ye holy: for I am the LORD your God."

1 Peter 1:15-16: "But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; { 16 } Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy."

Does this describe how you view sanctification? Do you believe that it has its roots in God Almighty Himself? Do you see that it is His desire for His children? Or do you, too, hold to the false notion that it comes from an Old World emphasis and has no application now? Or do you, like many, believe that it is something done you to merit God's favor? I believe that the Bible is abundantly clear: God Himself authored sanctification and has made it a demand for His children. Therefore, the Christian must make it his aim to give attention to God's desires and demands. It calls for a change in conduct to meet God's clear command.

The Aim Of Sanctification

Not only does Paul give evidence of the Author of sanctification. He also shows the aim or purpose of sanctification. He gives 3 specific commands that highlight the aim of personal holiness.

In the first place, Paul commands them in Ephesians 4.22 to "put off the old man." He uses the picture of the old man to describe their condition before they believed in Jesus Christ. In Ephesians 4.17-19 as well as in verse 22, Paul describes the manner of life of someone before the new birth. It is not a pretty picture: a depraved mind; an obscured understanding; alienation from God; spiritual ignorance from a hardened heart; a prisoner of filthy vices; and ruined by deceitful lusts.

From such, Paul says, turn away. Put them off, like you would remove an old coat. But, sadly, many believers today try to take Christ with no attempt to get rid of their sinful lifestyles. Sanctification involves repentance, a turning from sins of the past life. They no longer have a place in the life of the Christian.

In the second place, sanctification requires a renewing of the spirit of the mind. Note that Paul clearly states "the spirit of the mind." The spiritual nature of the mind provides the

material of its thoughts, deeds, and actions. The progressive, continuous renovation of sanctification changes the bent of the mind.

This renovation affects all of life. For it causes the believer to put to death, or mortify, sin. It remakes the whole of our nature and transforms it into the image of Jesus Christ. It brings a holiness into the nature of the child of God that produces acts and duties of holy obedience to God.

In addition, the passage describes another purpose of sanctification in the Christian. Paul states it in this fashion: "put on the new man."⁽²⁾ Although it comes last in the list in this passage, it actually begins the whole process of transformation. For to put on the new man describes the implanting and realizing the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ in life. It begins the spiritual refining of the soul.

These truths do not stand in isolation in Scripture. In fact, space will not permit the listing of all the references that confirm these truths. But one other passage will certainly restate them. I refer to 1 Thessalonians 4.3-7:

"For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: {4} That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; {5} Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God: {6} That no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter: because that the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified. {7} For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness."

Does this describe your aim in life? Or do you live as you please? Does your lifestyle contradict these Biblical demands? Has your life as a Christian produced a change in your life?

One cannot become a true child of God and live a life like the unbeliever. Biblical Christianity leads the believer to put off the old man, to renew the spirit of the mind, and to put on the new man. In a practical sense, it brings new desires and new conduct. It progresses continuously in holiness to conform the Christian into the image of Jesus Christ.⁽³⁾ Old things pass away; all things become new.⁽⁴⁾

The Accomplishment Of Sanctification

To mention the foregoing truths without explaining how sanctification works in the believer would only bring frustration. In fact, the Author of sanctification is also the One Who brings it into fruition.

At the start of our study, I pointed to Ephesians 4.24 to identify the Author of sanctification, God Himself. In truth that only defines part of His role. The Greek word translated "created" carries the idea that whatever is created is done through the proprietorship of

the manufacturer. In other words, the one who founds or forms something originally also works to bring it to completion.

For the immediate discussion, God created sanctification. He brings it to pass in the life of the believer, too. I hope that two references will help confirm it for you:

Leviticus 21:8: "Thou shalt sanctify him therefore; for he offereth the bread of thy God: he shall be holy unto thee: for I the LORD, which sanctify you, am holy."

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24: "And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. {24} Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it."

God supernaturally sanctifies the believer. The Bible gives ample evidence of the manner in which He works it out in practice. To accomplish His purifying purposes He uses the word of God, the Bible, to sanctify His children. Again, I will cite 2 well-known references to reinforce the point.

The first reference comes from the prayer of the Lord Jesus on the night of His betrayal by Judas:

John 17:17: "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth."

He prayed to the Father for the sanctification of His disciples which would result from the application of God's truth, the word of God.

The second reference comes from Paul's explanation to the Church at Ephesus on how Christ would purify His chosen ones:

Ephesians 5:26: "That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word,"

God's word plays a prominent role in the life of the believer; it sanctifies. In addition, God supernaturally sanctifies the child of God by the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. The well-known Apostles, Paul and Peter, state this truth clearly:

2 Corinthians 3:18: "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord."

1 Peter 1:2: "Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, be multiplied."

Without question, the Scriptures plainly teach that the Holy Spirit works sanctification in the life of the child of God. Does that describe how you believe? Or do you rely upon self-effort and your own works? Do you believe that personal holiness comes by the supernatural work of God through His word and the Spirit?

The Application Of These Truths

I pray that the Holy Spirit has opened your understanding and clarified these important Biblical truths for you. They clearly describe what He wants His children to believe and to obey. The Author of sanctification designed them for application in your life. To believe wrongly about them dishonors God and glorifies the flesh.

Where has the Holy Spirit identified today your failure to apply these truths in your life? Have you believed wrongly and relied upon self-effort and your own works? Do you deny the demand of God for their application in your life? Do you now disobey His claims? Does your life exhibit the failure to deny self and its claims? Has the Holy Spirit identified a neglect of spiritual duty? Does your lifestyle display a want of personal holiness? Do you desire and seek after spiritual holiness?

What conclusions about your conduct has the Holy Spirit revealed to you today? Has He found you faithful or doubtful? Approved or disapproved? Innocent or guilty? Has God's Spirit pointed out your lack of personal holiness?

I would remind you that your guilt of sin brings grief to the Holy Spirit. It quenches His work and ministry in your life. It even separates your fellowship with God.⁽⁵⁾ Yet, you can find forgiveness and cleansing through Jesus Christ. He is the Advocate for all who believe.⁽⁶⁾

What changes does the Holy Spirit need to bring into your life today because of these truths? He must bring you to recognize the refuge of lies that keep you from faith and obedience. Too often we defend our conduct, excuse it, or even blame others.

In addition, the Spirit needs to bring you to recognize God's requirements. He demands personal holiness. He requires immediate repentance, with no excuse for delay.

Further, the Holy Spirit needs to bring you to repent of your unbelief and disobedience. Repentance is no mere sorrow for sin. It includes a sense of sin that does not conceal or compromise. It produces a shame and hatred for the revealed sin that leads to confession with humbleness and in detail. True repentance brings a turn from sin unto Jesus Christ Who alone brings relief from sin.

I pray that you will experience this work and ministry of the Holy Spirit in your life. I pray that He will apply these Biblical truths to you. I pray that the Spirit will come to you in grace and bring a spiritual transformation in your life today.

References

1. Matthew 6.33
2. Ephesians 4.24
3. Romans 8.28-29
4. 2 Corinthians 5.17
5. 1 John 1.6; Isaiah 59.1-2
6. 1 John 2.1

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