

Progressive Sanctification

The New Testament declares that every believer, following conversion, is obliged to live out his positional sanctification, make spiritual progress, and grow in practical godliness.¹ In this way he shows his positional sanctification to others. Indeed, under the provisions of the new covenant, the believer will be moved to show, by his life, his sanctified status in Christ.² In other words, the believer will be moved to demonstrate his positional sanctification – which cannot be seen by men – by his progressive sanctification – which must be seen by men – as evidence of his change of status before God:

You will recognise them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles?... You will recognise them by their fruits... The tree is known by its fruit (Matt. 7:16,20; 12:33; see also Jas. 3:11-12).

This is how the apostle knew that the Thessalonians were elect, had truly come to Christ by faith, and had been positionally sanctified in Christ:

We know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction... And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:4-10).

¹ Take the last three chapters of Ephesians, for instance.

² See my *Christ*.

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The Spirit guarantees this progressive sanctification in those who have been positionally sanctified. It is a vital aspect of his sovereign work in the new covenant:

You show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory?... The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (2 Cor. 3: 3-8,17-18).

Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh... If [since] you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law... If [since] we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit (Gal. 5:16,18,25).

As Paul wrote to the Romans:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

What is it 'to live according to the flesh'? Just this:

Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit... To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God,

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for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

And that is a perfect description of what the believer was before he was converted; grim, but true. But now, having been united to Christ, having been positionally sanctified, he has the Spirit, he is in the Spirit, and the Spirit moves him to holiness of life:

You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you (Rom. 8:1-11).

Here we have it: believers are beyond condemnation, beyond every charge against them (Rom. 8:33-34), perfect in Christ in the sight of God, have the Spirit, and so 'walk... according to the Spirit... live according to the Spirit... [setting] their minds on the things of the Spirit'. In this way, the believer is being continually 'transformed' into Christ's likeness, and is thus demonstrating his positional sanctification by his progressive sanctification.³ As Paul later wrote to the Romans:

I appeal to you therefore [that is, in light of the gospel I have set out before you], brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12:1-2).

This progressive sanctification, I repeat, is essential. What is more, as the above extracts make very clear, although the believer has the Spirit, his progressive sanctification nevertheless requires conscious effort on his part, deliberate

³ As I have observed, the believer's progressive sanctification is the only aspect of sanctification which is never complete in this life, and which can be increased or diminished.

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submission to Scripture, and continued application of Scripture to his life. If it were not so, a great deal of the New Testament would never have been written! The apostles repeatedly, times without number, call believers to live a godly life, urging them to obey apostolic commands, imperatives, instructions and exhortations, and to put apostolic example into practice (1 Cor. 4:16; Phil. 3:17; 4:9; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2 Thess. 3:9) just as they copied Christ (1 Cor. 11:1; 1 Pet. 2:21). Sanctification, therefore, is not a mere desirable for the child of God; it is obligatory (Gal. 5:13-18,25; 1 Thess. 4:1-7), a matter of obedience to a scriptural command: ‘Pursue... holiness [the sanctification, NASB], without which no one will see the Lord’ (Heb. 12:14). ‘As he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct’ (1 Pet. 1:15). Believers are to perfect ‘holiness in the fear of God’ (2 Cor. 7:1). ‘Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity’ (2 Tim. 2:19). So much so, those who are not progressively sanctified ‘will not inherit the kingdom of God’ (1 Cor. 6:9-11).⁴ None of this means that the believer is trying to live contrary to the spirit of: ‘We serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code’ (Rom. 7:6). There is all the difference in the world between the old and the new way.⁵

Of course, if a man is not being progressively sanctified, he will never see the kingdom: he is in the flesh, is not regenerated and converted; his profession is vain:

Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit...You must be born again (John 3:5-7).

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still

⁴ I do not say this merely because of the ‘sanctified’ in verse 11. That sanctification, as I have explained, is primarily positional. I say it because progressive sanctification is the tenor of the passage. Believers are justified and sanctified, yes, *but they must show it in their lives. Or else!*

⁵ For the full argument behind all this, see my forthcoming *Believers Under The Law Of Christ*.

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live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! (Rom. 6:1-15).

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come (2 Cor. 5:17).

The one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life... Neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation (Gal. 6:8,15).

When Paul urged Timothy: ‘Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers’ (1 Tim. 4:15-16), he wasn’t exhorting him to make progress in his mastery of theology, or take a higher degree in it! Consider Peter’s closing injunction to his readers: ‘Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ’. This growth on the believer’s part is the way to bring about the

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apostle's desire: 'To [Christ] be the glory both now and for ever' (2 Pet. 3:18). And this growing experience of the grace and knowledge of Christ, and the fruits and effects of it, constitutes progressive sanctification.

The legalist wants salvation *by* his holiness, *by* the merit of it, *because* of it, but he cannot have it. The antinomian wants it *without* holiness, but God will not allow it. The true believer knows he cannot be saved *by* his holiness, nor *without* it.

Let me show all this by means of further scriptural quotations. While the word 'sanctification' may not always appear in every extract, this is of no consequence; progressive sanctification is what the writers are talking about. Apart from the following individual extracts, Christ's extensive discourse in John 13 – 16 is the fullest and most detailed of all the scriptural teaching on this practical matter. And that leads me to my first quotation, one which comes directly after that extended passage. I refer, of course to Christ's prayer – in the first instance, for his immediate disciples, but then for all believers throughout this present age (John 17:6-19). Christ prayed thus:

Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him... I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word... They are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified (John 17:1-2,6,14-19).

True, in the first place, Christ was praying for the positional sanctification of his elect, one of the many rewards to be given him as Mediator for his obedience to the Father. But he did not leave it there; he was clearly also praying for their progressive sanctification once they had been converted. Putting John 17 and Romans 8 and Galatians 5 together, note that the believer's

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sanctification is brought about by the Spirit and the word – both, not either/or. A believer has the inward grace of the Spirit to teach him, but he also has the external word to rule him. It is not either/or, but both. It is light and life.⁶ And by the Spirit, under the word, the believer has to live out, and will live out, by a life of godliness, his positional sanctification. Paul repeated the same message to believers in all the churches:

Just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification... Now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life (Rom. 6:19-22).

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said: ‘I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty’. Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God (2 Cor. 6:14 – 7:1).

Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh... If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law... The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another. Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of

⁶ See my *Christ* pp154-155,231-232,253,256,328. As before, see my forthcoming *Believers Under The Law Of Christ*.

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gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ (Gal. 5:16 – 6:2).

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life (Phil. 2:12-16).

We ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification (1 Thess. 4:1-3).

All these passages speak of progressive sanctification. As for the power necessary for this great work, Paul made it very clear that this arises directly by the Spirit of God dwelling in every believer. It is one of the great provisions of the new covenant:

God... has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory. Since we have such a hope, we are very bold... To this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their [that is, the Israelites'] hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:6-18).

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And speaking of the believer's present increasing glory takes us neatly into the fifth aspect of sanctification.