

Categories of Sanctification and Its Synergistic Nature

The Categories of Biblical Sanctification

Question 19: Explain the biblical categories of past, present, and future sanctification.

Sanctification Defined

- The biblical concept of sanctification derives from the root word *hagios*, meaning “to be holy.” Sanctification and Holiness are synonymous words. Scripture teaches three main categories of sanctification: Positional sanctification, progressive sanctification, and ultimate sanctification (permanent).
- In both the Old and the New Testaments, the language used for sanctification contains the idea of being devoted to a special use, ‘withheld from ordinary use, treated with special care.’ God has set us apart for Himself. Thus, we have already been sanctified. He gradually transforms us so that we begin to reflect his attributes and attractiveness.

Positional (Past) Sanctification

- Positional sanctification occurs at the moment of salvation and is entirely God’s work, where He draws the sinner to Himself, convicts them of sin, cleanses them, and saves their soul. This sanctification applies to all believers, regardless of their spiritual maturity.
- For as through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous — Romans 5:19
- For Christ also died for sins once for all, *the* just for *the* unjust, so that He might bring us to God. — 1 Pet 3:18.
- “And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build *you* up and to give *you* the inheritance among all those who are sanctified — Acts 20:32.
- Holiness, then, is not necessary as a *condition* of salvation—that would be salvation by works—but as a *part* of salvation that is received by faith in Christ. 2 Tim 2:21

God Chose Us Before the Ages Began – Positional Sanctification

- Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began — Titus 1:1–2.

- Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him — Eph 1:3–4.

Salvation in Positional Sanctification

- He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit — Titus 3:5.
- We are no longer what we were.
Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. 1 Corinthians 6:11.

Progressive (Present) Sanctification

- The present aspect of sanctification involves an ongoing battle with sin, where Christians continually work to become increasingly holy until they meet Jesus. Though forgiven in Christ, believers must still be set apart from sin.

“For this is the will of God, your sanctification; *that is*, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; *and* that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is *the* avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned *you*. For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification — 1 Thessalonians 4:3–7

Salvation in Progressive Sanctification:

- So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure (Philippians 2:12–13).

Future or Ultimate Sanctification

- The future dimension of sanctification looks forward to being completely sanctified and kept blameless at Christ’s coming.
But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits

of the righteous made perfect — Hebrews 12:22–23

Our Ultimate sanctification (glorification) is spoken of as a present reality:

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified — Romans 8:28–30.

Salvation in ultimate sanctification

- Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. Romans 13:11

God's glory is on Display in Each Phase of Our Sanctification

- In positional sanctification, God sets believers apart eternally and infallibly in Christ, as a gift that cannot be earned or lost, demonstrating His grace. This glorifies God by showcasing His sovereign power to redeem and transform sinners.
- In progressive sanctification, it involves continual growth in becoming more like Jesus, as we develop and mature spiritually. This transformation occurs as the Holy Spirit uses God's Word to make believers more like the Son of God, thereby glorifying God through the visible transformation of His people.
- Ultimate sanctification (or glorification) is the final phase where believers will be completely like Christ for eternity. This represents the culmination of God's redemptive plan, ultimately bringing maximum glory to Him by presenting a perfected people who perfectly reflect His image.

Colossians 1:27 — to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

The twenty-four elders will fall down before Him who sits on the throne, and will worship Him who lives forever and ever, and will cast their crowns before the throne, saying, "Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created." Revelation 4:10–11

Importance to Biblical Counseling

- It is crucial to biblical counseling because sanctification is a process where the Holy Spirit, working through God's Word, enables Christians to become more like Jesus Christ by progressively transforming their thoughts and actions.
- This process involves both a definitive, one-time separation from sin and an ongoing, daily transformation that continues throughout life.
- This process involves addressing sin in all its dimensions - including wrong behaviors, distorted thinking, personal desires, and attitudes - which is often habitual and deceptive.
- The ultimate goal is to facilitate growth in Christ, recognizing that failure to understand and apply God's Word leads to stunted spiritual growth, damaged relationships, and unresolved personal challenges.
- Counseling becomes a vital aspect of sanctification by helping believers grow and breaking through obstacles that impede spiritual transformation.

The Synergistic Nature of Sanctification

Question #20. Explain the synergistic nature of sanctification, being sure to describe the relationship between God's grace and moral effort in the Christian life.

Partnership Between God's Grace and Man's Effort

- The synergistic nature of sanctification involves a dynamic partnership between God's grace and human moral effort in the Christian life. Sanctification is a synergistic work that involves human effort, but this effort is made possible by divine enablement and grace. Phil 2:12-13; Rom 12:1-2; Eph 4:1-6; 20-24; Phil 4:4-9; Col 1:10-11; 1 Thes 4:1-8.
- So progressive sanctification very much involves our activity. But it is an activity that must be carried out in dependence on the Holy Spirit. It is not a partnership with the Spirit in the sense that we each—the believer and the Holy Spirit—do our respective tasks. Rather, we work as He enables us to work. His work lies behind all our work and makes our work possible. Phil 2:12-13
- "In the process of sanctification, there are certain things only the Holy Spirit can do, and there are certain things He has given us to do. For example, only He can create in our hearts the *desire* to obey God, but He does not obey for us. We must do that, but we can do so only as He gives us the enabling power to obey." Jerry Bridges — "Transforming Grace"

God's Holiness

- “Holiness is the intensity of the love that flows with the very being of God, among and between each of the three persons of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.... [Therefore,] in us it must also be a corresponding deeply personal, intense, loving devotion to him—a belonging to Him that is irreversible, unconditional, without any reserve on our part. Simply put, it means being entirely his, so that all we do and possess are His. We come to think all of our thoughts and build our lives on this foundation.” Sinclair Ferguson in *Devoted to God*.
- Holiness marks God's ontological distinction from creation and represents His “supreme separateness” – a total moral purity that exalts him above all creation (Isa 37:16)

Goal of Sanctification

- Sanctification has the goal of developing Christlikeness in the entirety of who we are. Christlikeness is the aim of our sanctification (2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 5:2; Heb. 12:2). This happens in our whole person as we are changed from our inner person in thoughts, feelings, desires, and consciences as these flow out to the outer person in our physical behaviors. Biblical sanctification, which reflects Christlikeness, is not about mere behavior change, but about a completely new person changing from the inside out (Col. 3:1–4:1)
- Sanctification is transformation, not conforming to the world.
Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom 12:1–2).
- The Priority is Love, which is the perfect bond of unity (Col 3:14).
- The qualities of the maturing believer are described in Col 3:12–17.

Moral approach without Christ

- The Pharisees were legalistic, believing that the way to gain favor with God was by earning merit—and the best way to gain merit in God's eyes, they thought, was through fastidious observance of the Law. The Pharisees' approach to religion naturally fostered self-righteousness (Romans 10:3–4) mixed with overt contempt toward anyone who didn't measure up in their eyes. And He [Jesus] also told this

parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt (Luke 18:9).

A Problem of Legalism in the Church – Gal 3:1-3

- Galatians 3:1–3 — You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?
- There is a strong warning against law-keeping apart from the Spirit of God (Gal 5:2-4)

Flesh vs. Spirit Conflict

- Flesh is used here in reference to our fallen, corrupt human nature. “The flesh profits nothing” (John 6:63).
- Desires are at odds - Galatians 5:16–17
But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. 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.
- Walking in the Spirit – The power that works out Christ in us is the Holy Spirit. “Apart from Me [Christ] you can do nothing” (John 15:5)
- The fruit of the Spirit is the reflection of Christlikeness. (Gal 5:22-23)

Satan and the believer’s sanctification

- He is the tempter – Matt 4:1-11
- He is the accuser – Rev. 12:10
- His goal is to thwart the believer’s sanctification (Eph 6:12, 1 Peter 5:8)
- His schemes deceive man therefore we must put on the armor of God (Eph 6:13-17).

Means of Grace

- Confession – Keep a short account of your sin and remember He is faithful and just to forgive. (1 John 1:9; 1 Peter 1:15-16).
- Prayer – Everything begins with prayer. Our help comes from the Lord (Ps 121, Heb 4:15-16, 1 Thess 5:17, Phil 4:6)
- The Word of God – John 17:17, 2 Tim 3:16-17, Heb 4:12, 2 Tim 2:15, John 8:32
- The fellowship of the saints – Heb 10:19-25; Rom 12:10, 16, 15:14.
- Serving as a member of the body of Christ – 1 Cor 12:12-31, Eph 4:15

- Participation in the ordinances (baptism: Acts 2:38-42, Rom 6:3-4); (the Lord's table: Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor 11:25-26).

A Prayer for Sanctification 2 Thess 1:1-12

- Thanksgiving to God for the saints – v.3.
- Praise for their faith and perseverance – v.4.
- Praise for the benefits of suffering for the kingdom of God – v.5.
- Recognition that God's justice will act on behalf of the believer – v.6-9.
- He will be glorified in His saints – v.10.
- Petition for the continued faithfulness in their calling – v.11.
- Purpose: So that the name of our Lord will be glorified in you, and you in Him – v.12.

Holiness is Not an Option – Heb 12:14

- Our holiness before God depends entirely on the work of Jesus Christ for us, by God's will. Holiness, then, is not necessary as a *condition* of salvation—that would be salvation by works—but as a *part* of salvation that is received by faith in Christ.
- Holiness is required for fellowship with God.
- Holiness is required for our own well-being (Heb 12:6).
- Holiness is necessary for effective service to God (2 Tim 2:21).
- Holiness is necessary for our assurance of salvation (2 Cor 5:17). The only safe evidence that we are in Christ is a holy life (1 John 3:3; Rom 8:14).
- Likeness to Christ is the ultimate goal of sanctification. It is therefore also the ultimate fruit of being devoted to God.

Importance in Biblical Counseling

- It is crucial in biblical counseling because it emphasizes the collaborative process between God's power and human responsibility in spiritual growth.
- Sanctification is a process where the Holy Spirit, working through His Word, enables Christians to become more like Jesus Christ by replacing sinful life patterns with biblical alternatives, and this is an ongoing, often irregular process throughout life.
- This process requires trust in God the Father and abiding in Christ, with believers being delivered from sin's bondage through their union with Christ's death and resurrection.
- Biblical counseling in its fullest sense, then, is simply an application of the means of sanctification.

For Further Reading:

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