

PROGRESSIVE SANCTIFICATION

To know God is to experience God, and if we do not experience God, there is really not much sense to being a Christian. Progressive sanctification deals with our Christian lives with special emphasis upon what God is doing in the life of the Christian every moment of every day.

“Progressive sanctification is a work of God based on the Cross in which a Christian is continually, gradually and progressively set apart, by means of the Holy Spirit, whereby he is being delivered from the power of sin in his daily life and enabled to live unto righteousness.”
(Jack Arnold)

God is at work in every Christian so that the Christian will produce ethical and moral holiness. If you are a Christian, God is at work in you to make you more Christlike in your experience. In and through every experience of life, God is sanctifying you.

CONTRASTING PROGRESSIVE SANCTIFICATION AND JUSTIFICATION

Salvation begins for a person the minute he trusts Christ as Lord and Savior. At that very moment, a person is given an eternal position or standing before God. He is saved from the guilt and penalty of sin; he is positionally set apart to God; he is justified before God. The word “justification” means *to declare righteous*. Any person who admits he is a sinner and turns to Jesus Christ in faith to save him is justified by God’s grace. “*... and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*” (Rom. 3:24). He has a new position before God and is declared righteous before God, not in his own righteousness but in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. God accepts the sinner not on the basis of who he is but on the basis of Who he is related to; that is, Jesus Christ.

Our position is perfect before God but our experience is not perfect for we still have sin in our lives as believers in Christ and need constant deliverance from its power. In a very casual conversation, a person may ask me how I am. My answer is that positionally I am perfect but experientially I am having my ups and downs.

We should get a proper contrast between justification which is positional and progressive sanctification which is experiential. Justification declares a sinner righteous; sanctification makes a saint righteous. Justification is a once and for all act; sanctification is a continuous work. Justification causes salvation; sanctification is the effect of salvation. Justification removes the guilt and penalty of sin; sanctification removes the growth and power of sin. Justification deals with the Christian’s standing before God; sanctification deals with the Christian’s experience in life. Justification is objective; sanctification is subjective. Justification changes a person’s position before God; sanctification changes a person’s disposition. Justification is for the sinner; sanctification is for the saint. [See CHART #1]

Justification and sanctification are not the same but they can never be separated. Sanctification is not a duty a Christian performs after justification. It is, in fact, a necessary step that proceeds from justification. Every person who is justified must be sanctified. Every person who has been delivered from the penalty of sin must be delivered from the power of sin.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PROGRESSIVE SANCTIFICATION

The Author. The author of sanctification is God. Behind all that happens in our Christian lives is God.

“Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6).

“Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Phil. 2:12-13).

This helps us to understand that our Christianity is supernatural, for God is chipping away at the sin in our lives and sanding off the rough edges to make us His man of His woman.

The Reason. Every Christian needs sanctification because all Christians still have much sin in their lives.

“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” (1 John 1:8).

“I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.” (Rom. 7:15-18).

Discovery of indwelling sin is very painful for the Christian, for it causes him to face up to the fact that there is no good thing in him. The only way we will ever defeat sin in our lives is to realize that we have it. We must face it honestly and get deliverance from it.

The Relationship to Regeneration. Sanctification is the result of the Holy Spirit’s work in regeneration. *“Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6).* Regeneration means to impart life. When one believed in Christ, God imparted life into that Christian and he came alive spiritually. Regeneration is the imparting of spiritual life. Sanctification is the development and growth of that life, and its transforming influences in the life of the regenerate person. If sanctification does not grow, it does not live. [See CHART #2]

“An unchanged life is the mark of an unchanged heart and an unchanged heart is a sign of an unregenerate life” (Charles Spurgeon).

The Process. Sanctification is gradual, continual and progressive.

“And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” (2 Cor. 3:18).

“But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.” (Col. 3:8-10).

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” (2 Cor. 4:16).

There are obviously degrees of sanctification, for some people are further along in their Christian lives than others. Election, regeneration and justification do not allow for degrees because a person cannot be more of these than he already is, but a person may be more sanctified than he is. Each moment of the

day, in every experience of life, God is working upon the Christian through the Spirit and is transforming him progressively and gradually into the image of His Son. John Newton, a Puritan preacher, understood progressive sanctification when he said,

“I am not what I ought to be; I am not what I want to be: I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still I am not what I once used to be, and by God’s grace I am what I am.”

The Finality. Sanctification once begun is never lost. “*Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus*” (Phil. 1:6). The sanctification process may fluctuate with the faithfulness of the Christian but he never falls back into the stupor of the unregenerate state.

The Human Responsibility. In the sanctifying process, God does not operate apart from the human will but through it. Faith and obedience are the means God has ordained by which the Christian will appropriate and realize the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

“*So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him.*” (Col. 2:6).

“*If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.*” (John 7:17).

The Importance of the Word. There is a definite relationship between progressive sanctification and a knowledge and application of the Bible to life.

“*Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.*” (John 17:17).

“*For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God*” (Col. 1:9-10).

From the human viewpoint, the rapidity of progressive sanctification will be determined by a person’s knowledge of the Word and his willingness to put it into practice.

The Importance of Change. The Bible clearly states that sanctification involves an inward change of heart as well as an outward change of behavior. Sanctification is not reformation but transformation. It is not just the removal of sin, but it is also growth in grace. There is progressive love for Christ, the Bible, and other Christians. Sanctification involves not only a negative removal of sin, but a positive life lived for Jesus Christ. In progressive sanctification, there must be change. The change in one’s life will be in degrees and gradual, but change there will be if one has truly been born of God’s Spirit.

COUNTERFEITS OF PROGRESSIVE SANCTIFICATION

There are many counterfeits for true sanctification and we must be aware of them so we can determine the false Christians from the true Christians, the true believers from the false believers and the real disciples from the unreal disciples.

Moral Virtue. There are many who are not Christians and many who profess Christ that think living a good, clean moral life alone makes one a good Christian. They feel if a person is a good fellow, a good citizen and even a good churchman, this will make him acceptable to God. How deceived these people are! The Bible tells us, and experience shows us, that there are many outwardly moral people who have high standards of ethics, but inwardly their hearts rebel at the whole idea of bowing their wills to a sovereign

Christ. The moral worldling has a secret hatred of grace and despises the fact that the Bible says he is a sinner by nature.

Many folk do right but hate spiritual righteousness. They boast of their good works but have never humbled themselves before Almighty God. There is an infinite gulf between religion and regeneration, between grace and works, and between Christ and church. Christianity is supernatural and not humanistic.

Superstitious Devotion. Another counterfeit of true sanctification is superstition. Some people believe that adorations, images, altars, holy water, mumbling a few prayers or whatever makes them sanctified. Protestant superstition comes when people think that if they have a Bible in their home they are Christians. The only time they turn to God is when they are in trouble, and then they blow the dust off the old Bible and begin to read it.

What a mockery this makes of true sanctification. A superstitious holiness costs no great labor; there is nothing of the heart in it. Let's face it, if bowing to images, mumbling a few pious prayers and having a Bible in our possession is sanctification, and this was all that was required of a person to demonstrate his salvation, then hell would be empty, none would go there. But sanctification is much more than superstitious devotion. It is a life of separation unto Christ, devotion for Christ and commitment to Christ. Christ has proven His sovereignty by His resurrection from the dead, and all who trust Christ gladly submit their minds and humble their wills to the sovereign Christ.

Hypocrisy. Another counterfeit is that men make a pretense of holiness, which they do not have. They go to church; they give their money to the church and charity; they may have been baptized and feel themselves a member in good standing of some local Christian congregation. They do all the outward things that Christians are supposed to do but their hearts and minds do not want to be subject to God's will for their lives. They too have an inward secret hatred of grace and God's sovereign will for their lives.

True sanctification is not only a negative removal of sin, but a positive instilling of love for Christ, the Bible and other Christians. Many sincere people think they are Christians because they "do not smoke, drink, dance or chew and do not go with the girls that do." However, real sanctification involves a genuine desire to please and serve Christ in everything.

The church hypocrite has deceived himself and he may also deceive other Christians, but he cannot deceive God who knows the heart.

"You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.'" (Matt. 15:7-9).

The hypocrite's judgment waits for him in eternity when he shall meet the thrice holy God.

Restraining Fear. One of the most obvious counterfeits to true sanctification is fear of social reprisals. Men may not do evil although they do not hate it. Conscience, social pressures, law enforcement and fear of the consequences of getting caught often are a man's real reason for not doing sin.

This is not so, however, for the person who understands real sanctification. Sanctification involves a change of heart towards Christ and sin. The Christian does not sin because he fears the law but he loves his Lord and knows that sin displeases Christ. The Christian obeys the law of the land because his Lord has told him to do so. Christians restrain themselves from sin because they love Christ and fear God. Restraining fear may curb sin but it cannot cure it. Only Christ can give a person the power to cure sin.