Verse by Verse: When Are Believers Sanctified

By Arthur Whiting

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We are indeed glad to welcome you, once again, to Dr. Talbot's Bible study hour. And we sincerely hope that the ministry of the word of God may be a real blessing to each one of you.

And now, friends, we come to our second study on what the Bible reveals about sanctification. Today, we are going to consider the question, when are believers sanctified? From our last study, it became evident that when the Bible speaks of a thing, or place, or person as sanctified or holy, it primarily means that such a thing, place, or person is set apart, classified, or made separate with a particular purpose in view. As applied to the Christian, of course, it means that the believer is set apart for the use or purpose God has intended. It is a separation from sin and a separation unto God, and all for a definite purpose. In the light of this truth, then, we are not surprised to learn that God alone is responsible for our sanctification. Never forget, my friends, that sanctification, like justification, is a divine operation. We are not justified by our own efforts. Neither are we sanctified through our own strivings. Justification is God's work for us, sanctification is God's work in us. "It is God who is working in us," says Paul as he writes to the Philippians. "Yes, it is God who can sanctify us holy," as he says when he writes to the Thessalonians; it is God who will also do it.

But the question is, when does God thus work in our sanctification? This question has occasioned much discussion. Discussion that has involved great controversy, and has resulted in tragic confusion. The first answer, which the Bible gives to the question, when are believers
sanctified? Is this. Believers are sanctified when they believe. Sanctification is true of every born again believer. In 1 Corinthians, Chapter 1, verse 2, we read this: "Unto the Church of God, which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called saints with all that in every place, call upon the name of Jesus Christ, both theirs and ours." Did you notice those to whom this epistle is addressed? They are described as to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus. In this address on the envelope, so to speak, Paul has in mind not only the local assembly at Corinth, but every believer in this age of grace. His references to sanctification and sainthood, very properly then, apply to every believer. The plain teaching is that every member of the true church--here, of course, in this reference, 1 Corinthians 1:2, designated as the Church of God. The plain teaching is that every member of the true church is already sanctified and already a saint. This is an aspect of sanctification that is not something we are to expect in the future, but something that already has taken place. This is a sanctification that commences the moment salvation comes to a person. That means then, if you are saved, you are sanctified. The moment you trusted the savior, the moment you entered into life, that very moment God sanctified you. He separated you from a godless and condemned world and set you apart unto himself, in his son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Every believer, therefore, is sanctified, set apart to God, at least with reference to his position. Thus, it is that believers are addressed as those who are sanctified by God, the Father and preserved in Jesus Christ, and called. That is what we find in the little epistle written by Jude. Thus, it is that the word of God declares, "But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption." That was 1 Corinthians, chapter 1 verse 30. Now, if you take a marginal reading of the American Standard Version, then you have the suggestion that Christ is made unto us wisdom. And out of that fact, there comes
the blessing of our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. The great truth, of course, is that all we need is found in Christ.

Secondly, I want you to notice that this sanctification is grounded in our union with Christ. 1 Corinthians 1:2 says, "We are sanctified in Christ Jesus." Also in that first chapter of 1 Corinthians, in verse 30, you find the declaration that it is "Those who are in Christ Jesus to whom our Lord is made sanctification." Now, friends, very simply, to be in Christ is to be united to Christ. In Christ speaks of our oneness with him and expresses our new standing before God. As Christ is separated from sin, so are we who are linked with him by faith. In him, we are accepted in all the wonder and glory of his perfection.

Thirdly, I want you to notice that this sanctification is perfect in its extent and character. In Hebrews 10:14, we read, "For by one offering he hath perfected forever them that are sanctified." This means that since Christ died and we have believed God's testimony that it was for us, we have a perfect position before God, one that never can be improved upon. Our standing before God is pure and perfect because of the value of Christ's person, and the merit of his work for us. We are positionally sanctified because we occupy the same position that Christ does. And we do this because of our union with him. Positionally then, we are as perfect as Christ is perfect. And I want you to remember that this is true of every believer, whether he be carnal or spiritual, whether he be weak or strong.

Positionally we are perfect, but practically we are not. Our loved ones know this very well, don't they? Our standing before God is definitely perfect. Our state before men is decidedly imperfect. We are sons of God, but we do not always live as sons should live. The Corinthian believers were addressed as saints and twice they are said to be sanctified, but they were not proving themselves to be very saintly in life. The letter addressed to them reveals that there was
much that was wrong. For instance, there were party factions. There was pride in human wisdom. They were babes, living in a state of protracted infancy. They were sadly indifferent to sin in their midst as they failed to discipline the incestuous brother. They were wrongly taking their disputes into the law courts. Yet, these very same believers are said to be dwelt by the Holy Spirit. They are said to be sanctified. They very certainly were not manifesting holiness in life. Nor were they exhibiting the fact that God had set them apart from sin unto himself. But according to the scriptures, they were sanctified. That is, they were positionally set apart in Christ. A blessing which was theirs all together, apart from anything they were in themselves, or anything they themselves did. Their lives should have been in harmony with their positional sanctification in Christ, but as is so often tragically true today, they were not.

In the fourth place, I want you to notice that this sanctification is made possible through the sacrifice of Christ. In Hebrews Chapter 10, verse 10, we read these words, Hebrews 10:10, "By the which will, we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." It was the death of Christ at Calvary, when he became the sin offering for us, that enabled God effectively to deal with the sin problem, and enabled God to set us apart forever as his own particular possession. What the Old Testament sacrifices could not do, the sacrifice of Christ did. The Old Testament sacrifices needed to be repeated. The sacrifice of Christ was once for all, as the Bible says. Eternally sufficient in its value and power. We have a permanent position of sanctification as believers. Why? Because we have a permanent Savior who made a permanent and sufficient sacrifice.

In the fifth place, I want you to notice that this sanctification, which comes at the moment you believe, comes through the exercise of faith. Turn, if you will, to Acts Chapter 26. Take a look at the 18th verse. Acts 26, verse 18. This is what we read, "To open their eyes and to turn
them from darkness to light. And from the power of Satan unto God that they might receive forgiveness of sins and inheritance, “now listen carefully,” among them, which are sanctified by faith that is in me." Did you get that? "Among them, which are sanctified by faith that is in me" says the Lord. In this record of the Lord's Commission to Paul, this sanctification is clearly shown to be by faith that is in the Lord. It is a positional benefit which comes to us at the very moment we trust the Savior. It is instantaneously ours at the time of belief, when we pass from death to life. My friends, this is a very important truth to grasp, because there are those who teach that a man must first be saved and then later he can go on to receive what is called the second blessing, and this will make him sanctified. While it is true, of course, that there is a phase of sanctification that concerns the saved person, even as we shall see in just a moment or two. It is gloriously true that when we trust Christ as our Savior, at that very moment of faith in him, we are wondrously sanctified. Some Christians will gladly say they are saved, yet they will hesitate to say they are sanctified. And usually they do it because they think they're not good enough. My friends, I want you to remember their own goodness had nothing to do with their justification. Neither does it have anything to do with their positional sanctification. They are counted among God's sanctified because of the goodness of Christ that has become theirs through faith. Yes, there is a sanctification that comes the very moment we believe. Therefore, we can say on the testimony of the word that believers are sanctified when they believe.

But secondly, the Bible teaches very definitely that believers are sanctified when they grow spiritually. Positional sanctification is intended to be reflected in personal experience. That perfection we have in Christ is designed to reveal itself in everyday life, as the Lord Jesus Christ is reproduced in us. God intends that the person thus set apart by the exercise of saving faith shall live a life different from that of the life lived by the person who is not set apart. In other
words, the life of a believer is to be different from the life of a non-believer. It was said in the
day of Moses that "The Lord doth put a difference between the Egyptians and Israel." And you
can find that declaration in the 11th chapter of Exodus, verse 7, "The Lord doth put a difference
between the Egyptians and Israel." My friends, that is always true. There is a difference between
the unsaved and the saved in every age. Even in this age of grace. I wonder how much of this
difference is seen in your life. It is not merely a matter of attendance at church, but it is a
question of approximation to Christ likeness. What I am saying is that there is a progressive
sanctification for the one who is positionally sanctified.

There is to be development in the Christian life, our development, which will involve a
separation from sin in daily practice and the transformation into the very likeness of Jesus Christ.
The New Testament, of course, is very emphatic and very insistent upon this truth. For instance,
take 1 Thessalonians, chapter 3, verse 12, 1 Thessalonians 3:12, "And the Lord make you to
increase and abound in love, one toward another and toward all men." In 1 Thessalonians,
Chapter 4, verse 1, 1 Thessalonians 4:1, "Furthermore, then we beseech you brethren and exhort
you by the Lord Jesus that as ye have received others, how he ought to walk and to please God,
so he would abound more and more." And then the verse that we frequently quote, 2 Peter
chapter 3, verse 18, 2 Peter 3:18, "But grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and
savior, Jesus Christ."

I think perhaps the one verse that gathers up the blessed truth of progressive
sanctification, however, is 2 Corinthians, chapter 3, verse 18, 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." The verse speaks of the progressive
character of the transformation into the image of Christ, and you will notice it specifies the
various agents that are used. "Beholding as in a glass," it says, "the glory of the Lord." Well, of course, the glass is none other than the word of God. You remember it was our Lord Jesus himself who prayed, "Sanctified then through thy truth, thy word is truth." In other words, it is the word of God, which is the God appointed agent for our progressive sanctification. And we are sanctified in our state only as we know the cleansing of the word. As it washes from the daily pollution of sin and builds up in the faith. It has been well said, of course, that the Bible will keep you from sin, and sin will keep you from the Bible. Since then, this is the way to every day, holiness, how zealous we should be to study the word. Study the good old book. Discover God wants you to, what he wants you to be, and what he wants you to do, and allow the spirit to accomplish his work in you and through you, because the Holy Spirit has a very definite part to play in our sanctification—both positional and progressive.

Turn, if you will, to 2 Thessalonians, chapter 2 and verse 13, 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 verse 13, "But we are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brethren, beloved of the Lord. Because God hath from the beginning chose in you to salvation," now listen, "through sanctification of the spirit and belief of the truth." In other words, there is a sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit that leads a person to repose his confidence in Christ, and joins him to Christ as the source of his life. Then the spirit enters that one, and waits for the opportunity of changing the believer into the likeness of Christ in everyday experience. And as the believer gives himself to the word, then the Holy Spirit can do his work. For 2 Corinthians 3:18 declares that this wonderful change into the image of Christ is even as by the Spirit of the Lord. Such a continuous process never could be an operation apart from the enjoyment of a present deliverance from the power of sin in daily life.
We all recognize, of course, that there are evil tendencies resident within us, tendencies which disposes to sin. On the other hand, there is the wonderful presence of the Holy Spirit, and it is he who disposes us to true holiness. Experience is certainly not likely to let us forget the existence in us of these two opposing powers. Their presence gives rise to a conflict, a conflict which lasts as long as we are in this earth seen. You remember what Galatians 5:17 says, "For the flesh, lusteth against the Spirit" and that's a capital S, they're referring to the Holy Spirit, "and the Spirit against the flesh." In other words, you have a conflict between the old sin nature and the Holy Spirit, who indwells the believer. Now, friends, progressive and experiential sanctification becomes a reality when the Holy Spirit is in the ascendancy and the old sin nature is held in check. The divine provision which makes this possible, is going to be the theme for our next study. For we are going to examine the Bible teaching for victorious living, how to live victoriously. Certain it is that when the Holy Spirit is administering the rulership of Christ in the believers life, then that believer will approximate Christ likeness more and more every day, because he will be progressively sanctified.

But you may say, "Shall I ever really resemble my wonderful Lord?" Well, the good old book gives the answer in no uncertain way. There is an ultimate experience that terminates the process. So thirdly, and finally, we say that believers are to be sanctified when the Lord Jesus Christ appears. Some persons have imagined a contradiction in Paul's language as they find it in Philippians 3 verses 12 and 15, Philippians 3:12 and 15. Philippians, 3:12 says, "Not as though I had already attained either were already perfect, but I follow after." Whereas Philippians 3:15 says, "Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded." And the difficulty lies in the use of the word perfect in each verse. Verse 12 seems to be a declaration of imperfection, while verse 15 seems to be a claim of perfection. In the original language of the New Testament, the
words rendered perfect are not the same. In verse 15, the word means mature. And what Paul is really saying is "not as though I had already received or had been already perfected, already made mature." The difference between being perfected and being perfect is the difference between final and present attainment. We shall never be perfected here in this present life. But we can be as perfect as it is possible to be, as we pass through the various stages of development in the Christian life. Blossoms are perfect. But certainly, they are not perfected until the fruit comes.

There is a perfection for the believer that is the work of perfected sanctification. An ultimate divine operation that will result in a finished and final likeness to our blessed Lord. We're not left in doubt as to when this shall be, 1 Thessalonians, 5:23 says, "And the God of peace sanctify you wholly in every part, and may your spirit, and soul, and body, be preserved entire without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." Not in this life shall we know the fullness of God's work in setting apart from sin, our whole person, spirit, soul and body. It is not even at death. But it is at the coming again of our blessed Lord. There will be a final perfecting in each separate element of Christian personality when Christ returns for his own. That is what John says in his little family letter. We know that when he shall appear, we shall be like him.

Friends, an old English theologian, when asked for his views on scriptural holiness, replied that it seemed to him to be and I quote, "an eternal approximation towards an unrealizable ideal." Well, friends, for my part, I'll take God's own word. We shall be like him. We are sanctified; that is positional sanctification. We are changed into the same image; that is progressive sanctification. When he shall appear, we shall be like him. Friends, that is perfected sanctification. This is the will of God, even your sanctification. Let us pray.
Our father, we thank thee for this revelation, make it very plain to us, seal it to our hearts. Water this truth with the Holy Spirit that it may be truly productive and every believer's life. And we'll thank thee for it in the name of our blessed savior, the Lord Jesus. Amen.

And now, friends, we must bid you good bye for the present. May the joy of the Lord always be your strength, as you keep looking up.