

# The Biblical Doctrine of Sanctification In Comparison with Conversion and Glorification

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## Introduction

The subject of sanctification deals with Christianity where the rubber meets the road in the problems of daily life. It is extremely relevant. Further, it is extremely important because it includes the serious question of an apparent contradiction between being a saint and a sinner at the same time. The nature of this relationship comes into the light when we compare sanctification with conversion and glorification. One of the most helpful passages for this comparison is Romans 6.22: **But 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.**

### A. The change that begins the Christian life

Being set free from sin, from being a slave of sin to being a slave of God indicates a great change, conversion, or what Edwards calls “a remarkable alteration” of a person’s nature (*Religious Affections*, 268). This change is something that the best hypocrites (tares among the wheat of the church) do not have. If one returns to the old and former ways, he is a dog that has returned to its vomit, a swine to its mud, as happens with false prophets and people like them: **They...are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved.<sup>20</sup> For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first.<sup>21</sup> For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them.<sup>22</sup> What the true proverb says has happened to them: “The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire” (2 Pet 2.18-22).** Escaping defilements means that they benefited from a knowledge of Christ in an outward and temporary way. Surprisingly (even alarmingly) significant **knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ** may be present without a change in a person’s nature. It is different for those delivered by the Lord who **knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment** (2 Pet 2.9).

In contrast, true conversion turns a person from sin to God *permanently* because being set free from sin for slavery to God leads to eternal life (Rom 6.22). Those that God calls from death to life, from bondage in sin to freedom from sin are those that He justifies and glorifies (Rom 8.30). Therefore, since the break with sin is definitive and eternal then conversion is God’s sure promise of eternal glory. Put another way: at conversion, we receive the Spirit who is the seal and guarantee of our future (**you...were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit,<sup>14</sup> who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory** (Eph 1.13-14).

### B. The meaning of sanctification

From the fact that glorification involves conformity to the image of Christ (Rom 8.29), we learn the meaning of **sanctification and its end, eternal life** (Rom 6.22). Sanctification is a process that leads to the goal of eternal glorification in the image of Christ. The very word sanctification means holiness. Thus, we arrive at a fundamental definition: sanctification is the process of growth in holiness after the pattern of Christ’s holiness and it continues by the power of God’s call until we attain final conformity to the image of Christ in glory (Rom 8.30, **called are glorified**).

### C. The place of self-examination

Therefore, Christians are persons being gradually made holy (they are saints, holy ones) who still sin and need daily forgiveness. Thus, we return to the tension of being a sinner and a saint at the same time. Those set free from sin are sinner-saints. Sanctification only applies to the sinner who is also a saint; it only applies to those who have been set free from the grip of sin; they are the ones who are set free for growth in holiness.

Thus, regarding tares among the wheat of the church, one reason for the difficulty of differing between them is not only that unbelieving tares may look much like wheat but also that saints may look too much like unbelieving sinners. Of course, this is where self-examination and testing one's calling and election come into play. Properly understood, self-examination is for the goal of humble repentance, not for the justification of oneself on one hand, or for condemnation of others on the other hand.

#### D. The work of God

Comfort in the tension as sinner-saints comes from knowing that sanctification is the work of God as the WSC states: "Sanctification is *the work of God's free grace*, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness" (35). Still, to grow in holiness, we have to expend much effort and self-discipline (Heb 12.14: **Strive...for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord** and 1 Tim 4.7: **train yourself for godliness** [for God-likeness in conformity to Christ in holiness, Rom 6.22 with 8.29]). A daunting task rests on our shoulders: **I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy** (Lev 11.44a) and **as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct** (1 Pet 1.15). The reality of what God has done and promises to do undergirds our work in the pursuit of holiness. Finally, the Lord tells us to take heart because His yoke is easy.

Theologians call this pattern of promise and task the *indicative* (the statements regarding what God has done and promises to do) and the *imperative* (the commands regarding what God requires of us on our journey from conversion to death). It is radically important to recognize that the fulfillment of all the duties depends on the work of God's free grace. The reverse is not true. It is false to say that God's working depends in any way on the work we do. Just as justification is by faith and not based on or merited by our works, likewise, sanctification is by faith and not based on or merited by our works. Good works, godliness, and holiness intertwine and they are the fruits of God's work of sanctification as they are the fruits of God's gift of justification (the fruit of being set free is holiness in life that leads to eternal life, Rom 6.22).

#### E. Large canonical connections

Now, because God sets us free from sin to be a holy people (1 Pet 2.9: **a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light**), it should not surprise us that holiness is a necessary component in the mission of the church, the goal of discipleship, and a central focus of pastoral ministry. The mission of the church is to be disciples unto holiness for the glory of God. The laborer in the word is to build up and equip the saints, the holy ones (Eph 4.12) for holiness and good works: **All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,**<sup>17</sup> **that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work** (2 Tim 3.16-17). Thus, we are restored and are being restored in the image of the Creator to thus fulfill the chief end of man: to reflect the glory of God (Gen 1.26-27; Eph 4.24 [the new man is created after the image of God in holiness]; Col 3.10 [the new man is being renewed in knowledge after the image of the creator]). Renewal in knowledge as disciples is vital to sanctification and the goal of ministry.

#### F. The sweetness of the gospel

The blessing here is that, in pursuing our work as disciples unto holiness, God schools us in the sweetness of the gospel. He opens our eyes to see the beauty of His holiness and to delight in Him. So, we hunger for righteousness because the Lord repeatedly gives us the honey of His word (Ps 19.10). Still, we go through cycles of strength and weakness. We sin and we mourn the loss of fellowship with God. Therefore, we hunger for the word and strive after righteousness. We sin again, mourn, hunger, and strive. In this cycle of life, God gives us joy in His word: **How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!** (Ps 119.103; Ps 19.7-10, 14).