

# What is sanctification?

By

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“Sanctification” simply means “being made holy” or “being set apart especially for God”. In the Christian life, there are two different ways that we are “made holy” and it is very important that we understand what these two ways are and don’t mix them up.

## Positional sanctification

First, there is “positional sanctification.” This refers to the moment when we first believed the gospel, God counted us perfectly holy (2 Thessalonians 1:10), and set us apart especially for Himself (1 Peter 2:9-10). This is not because we are holy in ourselves (Isaiah 6:5; 1 John 1:8), or can offer holy gifts to God (Isaiah 64:56) – we still sin every day (Luke 11:3-4). The reason God counts us holy is because of Jesus’ atoning death (Hebrews 13:12): by faith we have been united to Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection (Colossians 2:12), and so Jesus “has become for us ... our righteousness, holiness and redemption” (1

Corinthians 1:30), far beyond any holiness we could ever offer for ourselves (Philippians 3:7-9). This is why one of the Bible's most common terms for ordinary Christians is "saints" – literally, "holy ones". So if you are a Christian, and someone asks you, "Are you holy?" in this "positional" sense, the answer is: "Yes – by God's grace!"

### Progressive sanctification

Second, there is "progressive sanctification." Jesus saves us in our sin (Luke 5:32), but He doesn't leave us in our sin (John 5:14): He has given us the Holy Spirit to empower us to live increasingly "holy" lives (1 Thessalonians 4:7-8) in response to what God has done for us (Romans 12:1) and in line with who we now are (Colossians 3:12). As God works in us to will and to act according to His good purpose (Philippians 1:12-13), we become increasingly useful for God's service (2 Timothy 2:21) as we bear the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) and live self-controlled lives (Ephesians 5:3; 1 Thessalonians 4:4) overflowing with hope (Romans 15:13), joy (1 Thessalonians 1:6), and praise (1 Peter 2:5, 9). So, if

you are a Christian, and someone asks you, “Are you holy?” in this “progressive” sense, the answer is: “Not completely, but I’m getting there – by God’s grace!”

Don’t separate positional and progressive sanctification

Even though “positional” and “progressive” sanctification must always be distinguished, the Bible also shows that they must never be separated. Hebrews 10:14 says of Jesus: “by one sacrifice He has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.” Notice how we have **ALREADY** been made perfect (positional sanctification) but are still **BEING** made holy (progressive sanctification). Jesus gives us a picture of this in John 13:10. “A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you.” Notice how the disciples who believed Jesus’ word (John 15:3; cf. 1 John 1:7) had already had the bath (positional sanctification); but they still needed regular forgiveness for their sins (cf. 1 John 1:8-10) until the day they would finally reach perfection in heaven (progressive sanctification).

It is important to understand the difference

We can now understand why it is so important to understand the difference between “positional” and “progressive” sanctification. If we don’t understand “positional” sanctification, we may live our whole lives under the fear of condemnation, rather than rejoicing in the love and grace of God (Romans 5:1-2; 1 Peter 1:3), fully assured that we are God’s beloved children (1 John 3:1) and that God has mercifully cancelled all our sins (Acts 3:19). On the other hand, if we don’t understand “progressive” sanctification, we may mistakenly think that Christians can achieve perfect holiness in this life, and so be crushed by our own repeated failures.

Do not deny either “positional” or “progressive” sanctification

Worst of all, however, is to deny either “positional” or “progressive” sanctification. If we deny the possibility of salvation by grace alone through faith in Christ alone, we cannot be saved (Galatians 2:16), however “moral” our lives may be (Romans 10:1-4). On the other hand, if we

show no signs of “progressive” sanctification, we must ask whether or not we really are “in Christ” at all (John 15:4-6). Whatever we might say with our mouths, if our lives show no signs of obedience to Christ (Matthew 5:13; 7:15-27), then we are in danger of being condemned on the last day as wicked and unproductive servants (Matthew 18:32-35; 24:48-51; 25:26-30) – in reality, no servants of Christ at all (Matthew 7:21-23).

In conclusion, then, “positional sanctification” and “progressive sanctification” must always be distinguished, but must never be divided. We’re saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone. As the Bible says: “Without holiness, no-one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14).

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