

Sanctification

J.C. Ryle

“Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.”—John 17:17

“For this is the will of God, *even* your sanctification.”—1 Thess 4:3

The subject of sanctification is one which many, I fear, dislike exceedingly. Some even turn from it with scorn and disdain. The very last thing they would like is to be a “saint,” or a “sanctified” man. Yet the subject does not deserve to be treated in this way. It is not an enemy, but a friend.

It is a subject of the utmost importance to our souls. If the Bible be true, it is certain that unless we are “sanctified,” we shall not be saved. There are three things which, according to the Bible, are absolutely necessary to the salvation of every man and woman in Christendom. These three are: justification, regeneration, and sanctification. All three meet in every child of God—he is both born again, and justified, and sanctified. He that lacks any one of these three things is not a true Christian in the sight of God, and dying in that condition will not be found in heaven and glorified in the last day.

What does the Bible mean when it speaks of a “sanctified” man?

Sanctification is that inward spiritual work which the Lord Jesus Christ works in a man by the Holy Ghost, when He calls him to be a true believer. He not only washes him from his sins in His own blood, but He also *separates* him from his natural love of sin and the world, puts a new principle in his heart, and makes him practically godly in life. The instrument by which the Spirit effects this work is generally the Word of God, though He sometimes uses afflictions and providential visitations “without the Word” (1 Peter 3:1). The subject of this work of Christ by His Spirit is called in Scripture a “sanctified” man.

He who supposes that Jesus Christ only lived and died and rose again in order to provide justification and forgiveness of sins for His people, has yet much to learn. Whether he knows it or not, he is dishonouring our blessed Lord, and making Him only a half Saviour. The Lord Jesus has undertaken everything that His people's souls require; not only to deliver them from the guilt of their sins by His atoning death, but from the *dominion* of their sins, by placing in their hearts the Holy Spirit—not only to justify, but also to sanctify them. He is, thus, not only their “righteousness,” but their “sanctification” (1 Cor 1:30). Let us hear what the Bible says: “For their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified” (John 17:19). “Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it” (Eph 5:25). “Christ gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works” (Titus 2:14). Christ “bare our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness” (1 Peter 2:24). Christ hath reconciled you “in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unreprouvable in His sight” (Col 1:22). Let the meaning of these five texts be carefully considered. If words mean anything, they teach that Christ undertakes the sanctification, no less than the justification of His believing people. *Both* are alike provided for in that “everlasting covenant ordered in all things and sure” (2 Sam 23:5), of which the Mediator is Christ. In fact, Christ in one place is called: “He that sanctifieth,” and His People, “they who are sanctified” (Heb 2:11).

The subject before us is of such deep and vast importance, that it requires fencing, guarding, clearing up, and marking out on every side. A doctrine which is needful to salvation can never be too sharply developed, or brought too fully into light. To clear away the confusion between doctrines and doctrines, which is so unhappily common among Christians, and to map out the precise relation between truths and truths in religion, is one way to attain accuracy in our theology. I shall therefore not hesitate to lay before my readers a series of connected propositions or statements, drawn from Scripture, which I think will be found useful in defining the exact nature of sanctification.

(1) Sanctification, then, is the invariable *result of that vital union with Christ* which true faith gives to a Christian—“He that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit” (John 15:5). The branch which bears no fruit is no living branch of the vine. The union with Christ which produces no effect on heart and life is a mere formal

union, which is worthless before God. The faith which has not a sanctifying influence on the character is no better than the faith of devils. It is a “dead faith,” because it is “alone.” It is not the gift of God. It is not the faith of God’s elect. In short, where there is no sanctification of life, there is no real faith in Christ. True faith worketh by love. It constrains a man to live unto the Lord from a deep sense of gratitude for redemption. It makes him feel that he can never do too much for Him that died for him. Being much forgiven, he loves much. He whom the blood cleanses, walks in the light. He who has real lively hope in Christ, purifieth himself even as He is pure (James 2:17-20; Titus 1:1; Gal 5:6; 1 John 1:7; 3:3).

(2) Sanctification, again, is the *outcome and inseparable consequence of regeneration*. He that is born again and made a new creature, receives a new nature and a new principle, and always lives a new life. A regeneration which a man can have, and yet live carelessly in sin or worldliness, is a regeneration never mentioned in Scripture. He that is born of God doth not commit sin, doeth righteousness, loveth the brethren, keepeth himself, and overcometh the world (1 John 2:29; 3:9-14; 5:4-18). In a word, where there is no sanctification there is no regeneration, and where there is no holy life there is no new birth. This is a hard saying to many minds; but, hard or not, it is Bible truth. It is written plainly, that he who is born of God is one whose “seed remaineth in him, and he cannot sin, because he is born of God” (1 John 3:9).

(3) Sanctification, again, is the only certain *evidence of that indwelling of the Holy Spirit* which is essential to salvation. “If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His” (Rom 8:9). The Spirit never lies dormant and idle within the soul. He always makes His presence known by the fruit He causes to be borne in heart, character, and life. “The fruit of the Spirit,” says St. Paul, “is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance,” and such like (Gal 5:22). Where these things are to be found, there is the Spirit; where these things are wanting, men are dead before God. The Spirit is compared to the wind, and, like the wind, He cannot be seen by our bodily eyes. But just as we know there is a wind by the effect it produces on waves, and trees, and smoke, so we may know the Spirit is in a man by the effects He produces in the man’s conduct. It is nonsense to suppose that we have the Spirit, if we do not also “walk in the Spirit” (Gal 5:25). We may depend on it as a positive certainty, that where there is no holy living, there is no Holy Ghost. The seal that the Spirit stamps on Christ’s people is sanctification. As many as are actually “led by the Spirit of God, they,” and they only, “are the sons of God” (Rom 8:14).

(4) Sanctification, again, is the *only sure mark of God’s election*. The names and number of the elect are a secret thing which God has wisely kept in His own power, and not revealed to man. It is not given to us in this world to study the pages of the book of life, and see if our names are there. But if there is one thing clearly and plainly laid down about election, it is this—that elect men and women may be known and distinguished by holy lives. It is expressly written that they are “elect through sanctification—chosen unto salvation through sanctification—predestinated to be conformed to the image of God’s Son—and chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world that they should be holy.” Hence, when Paul saw the working “faith” and labouring “love” and patient “hope” of the Thessalonian believers, he says, “I know your election of God” (1 Peter 1:2; 2 Thess 2:13; Rom 8:29; Eph 1:4; 1 Thess 1:3,4). He that boasts of being one of God’s elect, while he is wilfully and habitually living in sin, is only deceiving himself, and talking wicked blasphemy. Of course, it is hard to know what people really are, and many who make a fair show outwardly in religion, may turn out at last to be rotten-hearted hypocrites. But where there is not, at least, some appearance of sanctification, we may be quite certain there is no election.

(5) Sanctification, again, is a *thing that will always be seen*. Like the Great Head of the church, from whom it springs, it “cannot be hid.” “Every tree is known by his own fruit” (Luke 6:44). A truly sanctified person may be so clothed with humility, that he can see in himself nothing but infirmity and defects. Like Moses, when he came down from the Mount, he may not be conscious that his face shines. Like the righteous, in the mighty parable of the sheep and the goats, he may not see that he has done anything worthy of his Master’s notice and commendation: “When saw we Thee an hungered, and fed Thee?” (Matt 25:37). But whether he sees it himself or not, others will always see in him a tone, and taste, and character, and habit of life unlike that of other men. The very idea of a man being “sanctified,” while no holiness can be seen in his life, is flat nonsense and a misuse of words. Light may be very dim; but if there is only a spark in a dark room it will be seen. Life may be very feeble; but if the pulse only beats a little, it will be felt. It is just the same with a sanctified man: his sanctification will be something felt and seen, though he himself may not understand it. A “saint” in whom nothing can be seen but worldliness or sin, is a kind of monster not recognized in the Bible.

(6) Sanctification, again, is a *thing for which every believer is responsible*. In saying this I would not be mistaken. I hold as strongly as anyone that every man on earth is accountable to God, and that all the lost will be speechless and without excuse at the last day. Every man has power to “lose his own soul” (Matt 16:26). But while I hold this, I maintain that believers are eminently and peculiarly responsible, and under a special obligation to live holy lives.

They are not as others, dead and blind and unrenewed: they are alive unto God, and have light and knowledge, and a new principle within them. Whose fault is it if they are not holy, but their own? On whom can they throw the blame if they are not sanctified, but themselves? God, who has given them grace and a new heart, and a new nature, has deprived them of all excuse if they do not live for His praise. This is a point which is far too much forgotten. A man who professes to be a true Christian, while he sits still, content with a very low degree of sanctification (if indeed he has any at all), and coolly tells you he "can do nothing," is a very pitiable sight, and a very ignorant man. Against this delusion let us watch and be on our guard. The Word of God always addresses its precepts to believers as accountable and responsible beings. If the Saviour of sinners gives us renewing grace, and calls us by His Spirit, we may be sure that He expects us to use our grace, and not to go to sleep. It is forgetfulness of this which causes many believers to "grieve the Holy Spirit," and makes them very useless and uncomfortable Christians.

(7) Sanctification, again, is *a thing which grows*. A man may climb from one step to another in holiness, and be far more sanctified at one period of his life than another. More pardoned and more justified than he is when he first believes, he cannot be, though he may feel it more. More sanctified he certainly may be, because every grace in his new character may be strengthened, enlarged, and deepened. This is the evident meaning of our Lord's last prayer for His disciples, when He used the words, "Sanctify them"; and of Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians, "The very God of peace sanctify you" (John 17:17; 1 Thess 5:23). In both cases the expression plainly implies the possibility of increased sanctification; while such an expression as "justify them" is never once in Scripture applied to a believer, because he cannot be more justified than he is. I can find no warrant in Scripture for the doctrine of "imputed sanctification." It is a doctrine which seems to me to confuse things that differ, and to lead to very evil consequences. Not least, it is a doctrine which is flatly contradicted by the experience of all the most eminent Christians. If there is any point on which God's holiest saints agree it is this: that they see more, and know more, and feel more, and do more, and repent more, and believe more, as they get on in spiritual life, and in proportion to the closeness of their walk with God. In short, they "grow in grace," as Peter exhorts believers to do; and "abound more and more," according to the words of Paul (2 Peter 3:18; 1 Thess 4:1).

(8) Sanctification, again, is *a thing which depends greatly on a diligent use of Scriptural means*. When I speak of "means," I have in view Bible-reading, private prayer, regular attendance on public worship, regular hearing of God's Word, and regular reception of the Lord's Supper. I lay it down as a simple matter of fact, that no one who is careless about such things must ever expect to make much progress in sanctification. I can find no record of any eminent saint who ever neglected them. They are the appointed channels through which the Holy Spirit conveys fresh supplies of grace to the soul, and strengthens the work which He has begun in the inward man. Let men call this legal doctrine if they please, but I will never shrink from declaring my belief that there are no "spiritual gains without pains." I should as soon expect a farmer to prosper in business who contented himself with sowing his fields and never looking at them till harvest, as expect a believer to attain much holiness who was not diligent about his Bible-reading, his prayers, and the use of his Sundays. Our God is a God who works by means, and He will never bless the soul of that man who pretends to be so high and spiritual that he can get on without them.

(9) Sanctification, again, is *a thing which does not prevent a man having a great deal of inward spiritual conflict*. By conflict I mean a struggle within the heart between the old nature and the new, the flesh and the spirit, which are to be found together in every believer (Gal 5:17). A deep sense of that struggle, and a vast amount of mental discomfort from it, are no proof that a man is not sanctified. Nay, rather, I believe they are healthy symptoms of our condition, and prove that we are not dead, but alive. A true Christian is one who has not only peace of conscience, but war within. He may be known by his warfare as well as by his peace. In saying this, I do not forget that I am contradicting the views of some well-meaning Christians, who hold the doctrine called "sinless perfection." I cannot help that. I believe that what I say is confirmed by the language of Paul in the seventh chapter of Romans. That chapter I commend to the careful study of all my readers. I am quite satisfied that it does not describe the experience of an unconverted man, or of a young and unestablished Christian; but of an old experienced saint in close communion with God. None but such a man could say, "I delight in the law of God after the inward man" (Rom 7:22). I believe, furthermore, that what I say is proved by the experience of all the most eminent servants of Christ that have ever lived. The full proof is to be seen in their journals, their autobiographies, and their lives. Believing all this, I shall never hesitate to tell people that inward conflict is no proof that a man is not holy, and that they must not think they are not sanctified because they do not feel entirely free from inward struggle. Such freedom we shall doubtless have in heaven; but we shall never enjoy it in this world. The heart of the best Christian, even at his best, is a field occupied by two rival camps, and the "company of two armies" (Song 6:13).

(10) Sanctification, again, is *a thing which cannot justify a man, and yet it pleases God*. This may seem wonderful, and yet it is true. The holiest actions of the holiest saint that ever lived are all more or less full of defects and imperfections. They are either wrong in their motive or defective in their performance, and in themselves are

nothing better than “splendid sins,” deserving God's wrath and condemnation. To suppose that such actions can stand the severity of God's judgment, atone for sin, and merit heaven, is simply absurd. “By the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified...We conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law” (Rom 3:20,28). The only righteousness in which we can appear before God is the righteousness of another—even the perfect righteousness of our Substitute and Representative, Jesus Christ the Lord. His work, and not our work, is our only title to heaven. This is a truth which we should be ready to die to maintain.

For all this, however, the Bible distinctly teaches that the holy actions of a sanctified man, although imperfect, are pleasing in the sight of God. “With such sacrifices God is well pleased” (Heb 13:16). “Obey your parents...for this is well pleasing unto the Lord” (Col 3:20). “We do those things that are pleasing in His sight” (1 John 3:22). Let this never be forgotten, for it is a very comfortable doctrine. Just as a parent is pleased with the efforts of his little child to please him, though it be only by picking a daisy or walking across a room, so is our Father in heaven pleased with the poor performances of His believing children. He looks at the motive, principle, and intention of their actions, and not merely at their quantity and quality. He regards them as members of His own dear Son, and for His sake, wherever there is a single eye, He is well-pleased.

(11) Sanctification, again, is a thing which will be found absolutely necessary as *a witness to our character in the great day of judgment*. It will be utterly useless to plead that we believed in Christ, unless our faith has had some sanctifying effect, and been seen in our lives. Evidence, evidence, evidence, will be the one thing wanted when the great white throne is set, when the books are opened, when the graves give up their tenants, when the dead are arraigned before the bar of God. Without some evidence that our faith in Christ was real and genuine, we shall only rise again to be condemned. I can find no evidence that will be admitted in that day, except sanctification. The question will not be how we talked and what we professed, but how we lived and what we did. Let no man deceive himself on this point. If anything is certain about the future, it is certain that there will be a judgment; and if anything is certain about judgment, it is certain that men's “works” and “doings” will be considered and examined in it (John 5:29; 2 Cor 5:10; Rev 20:13). He that supposes works are of no importance, because they cannot justify us, is a very ignorant Christian. Unless he opens his eyes, he will find to his cost that if he comes to the bar of God without some evidence of grace, he had better never have been born.

(12) Sanctification, in the last place, is *absolutely necessary, in order to train and prepare us for heaven*. Most men hope to go to heaven when they die; but few, it may be feared, take the trouble to consider whether they would enjoy heaven if they got there. Heaven is essentially a holy place; its inhabitants are all holy; its occupations are all holy. To be really happy in heaven it is clear and plain that we must be somewhat trained and made ready for heaven while we are on earth. The notion of a purgatory after death, which shall turn sinners into saints, is a lying invention of man, and is nowhere taught in the Bible. We must be saints before we die, if we are to be saints afterwards in glory. The favourite idea of many, that dying men need nothing except absolution and forgiveness of sins to fit them for their great change, is a profound delusion. We need the work of the Holy Spirit as well as the work of Christ; we need renewal of the heart as well as the atoning blood; we need to be sanctified as well as to be justified. It is common to hear people saying on their death-beds, “I only want the Lord to forgive my sins, and take me to rest.” But those who say such things forget that the rest of heaven would be utterly useless if we had no heart to enjoy it! What could an unsanctified man do in heaven, if by any chance he got there? Let that question be fairly looked in the face, and fairly answered. No man can possibly be happy in a place where he is not in his element, and where all around him is not congenial to his tastes, habits, and character. When an eagle is happy in an iron cage, when a sheep is happy in the water, when an owl is happy in the blaze of noonday sun, when a fish is happy on the dry land—then, and not till then, will I admit that the unsanctified man could be happy in heaven.

I lay down these twelve propositions about sanctification with a firm persuasion that they are true, and I ask all who read these pages to ponder them well. Each of them would admit of being expanded and handled more fully, and all of them deserve private thought and consideration. Some of them may be disputed and contradicted; but I doubt whether any of them can be overthrown or proved untrue. I only ask for them a fair and impartial hearing. I believe in my conscience that they are likely to assist men in attaining clear views of sanctification.