

What Is Sanctification (and What It Is Not)?

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24

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Following Monday's post on [Counterfeit Sanctification](#), we received a lot of good questions about the nature and assurance of true spiritual growth. Today and tomorrow, John MacArthur will address those issues.

You probably know that most people in America and many more worldwide identify themselves as Christians. But how many of them can explain and defend the gospel, articulate basic biblical theology, or live lives that support the claims of their faith? The tragic fact is that compared to the vast number of people who claim to be Christians, very few are actually growing to be more like Christ.

That process of spiritual growth is called sanctification, and it's a vital part of every believer's life. For the past several weeks, we've been looking at some popular, purported methods of sanctification—commonly called spiritual formation—and weighing them against the biblical models for spiritual growth. As we near the end of this series, I want to highlight some basic, clear teaching from Scripture about the nature of sanctification and help you properly evaluate your own spiritual growth.

It's important to distinguish what sanctification *is* and *is not*. It is not simply feeling closer to God or experiencing His presence. It's not a collection of secret insight and personal encouragement from Him to you. And it's not a vague sense of subjective spirituality—in fact, it's not measured, engaged, or informed by your emotions or feelings *at all*.

True sanctification, according to Scripture, is the process of God's transforming work in your life. In the moment of your salvation, you are declared justified by the Lord through the sacrifice of His Son and freed from the guilt of sin. From there, sanctification frees you from the pollution of sin, helping you destroy sinful patterns and relinquish your former wickedness.

And just as with salvation, sanctification is not accomplished by our will or actions—it's the work of the Lord in the lives of His people. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul prayed that the Lord would complete *His* sanctifying work in their lives.

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).

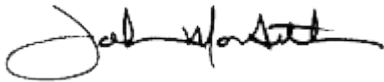
The word translated here as *sanctify* literally means to be set apart—in its noun form it is usually translated as *holiness*. So in basic terms, sanctification is the Lord's process of separating us from sin and setting us apart for holiness. Paul's prayer is that the Lord would bring about that transformation in the lives of the Thessalonian believers—that their lives would reflect a decreasing frequency of sin and an increasing frequency of holiness.

That transformation isn't prompted or fueled by feelings, emotions, or subjective spiritual experiences. As Paul says in Romans 6, it's a function of your new nature in Christ.

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. . . . But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness (Romans 6:12-13, 17-18).

Sanctification is the fruit of salvation. It's the transforming process by which God's people shed their past sinfulness and grow to reflect His holiness. And if you truly belong to God, you're undergoing the process of sanctification right now.

Next time we'll look at how to gauge where you're at in that process.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John W. Smith". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

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