

The Apparent Paradox of Sanctification

Scripture: Philippians 2:12–13

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How do you overcome sin and live the Christian life? Is defeating sin something God does in you, or do you defeat it by obeying the commands of Scripture? In other words, is the Christian life an exercise in *passive* trust or *active* obedience? Is it all God's doing, all the believer's doing, or a combination of both? Those questions are as old as the church, and the varied answers have spawned movements and denominations.

This is not an unusual issue when dealing with spiritual truth. Many doctrines involve seeming paradoxes. For example, Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully man; and while Scripture was written by human authors, God wrote every word. The gospel is offered to the whole world, yet applied only to the elect. God eternally secures believers' salvation, yet they are commanded to persevere.

Christians who try to reconcile every doctrine in a *humanly* rational way are inevitably drawn to extremes. Seeking to remove all mystery and paradox, they emphasize one truth or aspect of God's Word at the expense of another which seems to contradict it. This is precisely how many Christians have handled the doctrine of sanctification. One view of sanctification emphasizes God's role to the virtual exclusion of the believer's effort. This is often referred to as *quietism*. The opposite extreme is called *pietism*.

The quietist sees believers as passive in sanctification. A common maxim is, "Let go and let God." Another is, "I can't; God can." Quietism tends to be mystical and subjective, focusing on personal feelings and experiences. A person who is utterly submitted to and dependent on God, they say, will be divinely protected from sin and led into faithful living. Trying to strive against sin or discipline oneself to produce good works is considered not only futile but unspiritual and counterproductive.

One champion of this view was the devout Quaker Hannah Whitall Smith, whose book *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life* has been read by millions. In it she writes,

What *can* be said about man's part in this great work but that he must continually surrender himself and continually trust? But when we come to God's side of the question, what is there that may not be said as to the manifold ways, in which He accomplishes the work entrusted to Him? It is here that the growing comes in. The lump of clay could never grow into a beautiful vessel if it stayed in the clay pit for thousands of years; but when it is put into the hands of a skilful potter it grows rapidly, under his fashioning, into the vessel he intends it to be. And in the same way the soul, abandoned to the working of the Heavenly Potter, is made into a vessel unto honor, sanctified, and meet for the Master's use. (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1952, 32. Italics in original.)

How a Christian can fall into sin is a difficult question for the quietist to answer. They are forced to

argue that such a person obviously misunderstands the matter of complete surrender, and has taken himself out of the hands of the heavenly Potter. But that flawed answer brings God's sovereignty into question—if the Lord is completely in control, how can a believer take *himself* out of God's hands?

Pietists, on the other hand, are typically aggressive in their pursuit of doctrinal and moral purity. Historically, this movement originated in seventeenth-century Germany as a reaction to the dead orthodoxy of many Protestant churches. To their credit, most pietists place strong emphasis on Bible study, holy living, self-discipline, and practical Christianity. They emphasize such passages as “Let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Corinthians 7:1) and “Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself” (James 2:17).

Unfortunately, this unbalanced view often leads to an overemphasis on self-effort to the virtual exclusion of dependence on divine power. As you might expect, pietism frequently leads to legalism, moralism, self-righteousness, a judgmental spirit, pride, and hypocrisy.

The quietist says, “Do nothing.”

The pietist says, “Do everything.”

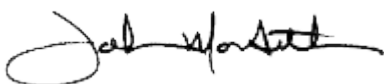
In Philippians 2:12–13, Paul presents the appropriate resolution between the two. He makes no effort to rationally harmonize the believer's part and God's part in sanctification. He is content with the paradox and simply states both truths, saying on the one hand, sanctification is of believers (Philippians 2:12), and on the other hand, it is of God (Philippians 2:13).

The truth is that sanctification is God's work, but He performs it through the diligent self-discipline and righteous pursuits of His people, not in spite of them. God's sovereign work does not absolve believers from the need for obedience; it means their obedience is itself a Spirit-empowered work of God.

Today there is an intense debate within the church about this vital issue. The stakes are high—your view of sanctification informs and directs how you understand your new nature in Christ, how you evangelize others, pursue godliness, govern your heart and mind, how you raise and discipline your children, and how you understand and follow God's commands in Scripture. For pastors and church leaders, your position on this issue will determine how you preach and teach, how you give counsel to troubled hearts, and how you engage in church discipline.

Neither quietism nor pietism represents the biblical path of sanctification. Both are spiritual ditches to steer clear of—they will impede your spiritual progress, and potentially obstruct it altogether.

In the days ahead, we're going to examine the model of sanctification Paul presents in Philippians 2, and explore the dual realities of God's sovereign work and man's responsibility.



(Adapted from [*The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Philippians*](#).)

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