

Once Saved, Always Saved?

Scripture: Romans 6:1–20; 2 Corinthians 3:18

Code: B110328



Listen to a discussion about eternal security and you'll eventually hear this question: "Are you saying that since we're secure as Christians, we can do whatever we want to?" It's the "once saved, always saved" idea that says, once you are saved, you're saved no matter how you may behave.

But the question really misunderstands the biblical teaching about our sin and God's grace in our lives.

Pursuing Godliness

Christians have struggled over the years with the best way to deal with sin in their lives. That struggle has produced unbiblical doctrines that promise to "aid" Christians along with their own endeavors to obtain personal godliness.

Perhaps you have encountered some of them. One of the more notorious false doctrines is perfectionism. It's the belief that we can obtain perfect sinlessness in this life. In his book, [*The Vanishing Conscience*](#), John MacArthur describes the dangers of Christian perfectionism,

Church history is littered with examples of sects and factions who taught various versions of Christian perfectionism. Nearly all these groups have either made utter shipwreck of the faith or been forced to modify their perfectionism to accommodate human imperfection. Every perfectionist inevitably comes face-to-face with clear and abundant empirical evidence that the residue of sin remains in the flesh and troubles even the most spiritual Christians throughout their earthly lives. In order to hang onto perfectionist doctrine, they must redefine sin or diminish the standard of holiness. Too often they do this at the expense of their own consciences. ([*The Vanishing Conscience*](#), 127)

I have met a few perfectionists in the past. What I have noticed about their teaching is how they relegate sinfulness to only outward behaviors. One perfectionist I spoke with believed as long as he never physically committed adultery, he wasn't in sin. Thinking about adultery didn't count as being sinful in his book. I reminded him of Matthew 5:27-28—looking upon a woman to lust is *adultery*—but he cleverly dismissed the passage as irrelevant.

I quickly discovered similar groups of Christians like the perfectionists. Rather than “dumbing” sin down, they submitted themselves to outward, legalistic codes to obtain godliness. If they failed to keep those codes perfectly, they believed their salvation was in jeopardy.

These errant views of holiness spring from a misunderstanding of the biblical teaching on sanctification.

The Sanctifying Spirit

Sanctification is a process by which the Holy Spirit works in believers to gradually move them toward Christlikeness (2 Corinthians 3:18). Take note of the word *gradually* in this definition: The Holy Spirit is *gradually* moving us toward Christlikeness; it is not an instantaneous work that makes us perfectly sinless. In Christian theology, the idea of the Holy Spirit *gradually* moving us to Christlikeness is called *progressive sanctification*. Our godliness is progressive, over a life-time of following Jesus.

The apostle Paul provides a concise description of our sanctification in Romans 6. He does not specifically use the word *sanctification* in this chapter, but he certainly outlines the concept.

For example, he writes in Romans 6:2 “How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?” And in 6:6, “Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.” And in 6:11, “Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

There are a handful of thoughts we can glean from Romans 6 that help us understand the doctrine of sanctification and answer our question, “Does being a Christian mean we can live anyway we want?” Let’s open our Bibles and look at a few theological points.

First, notice in verses 4 and 5 how Paul describes our relationship with Jesus as identified with His death and “made alive” in His resurrection. That is a reference to our regeneration we discussed in [my previous article](#). God’s divine handiwork imparts a principle of new life in our lives.

Second, in verses 6 and 7, Paul is saying that we now have the power to obey God – a power we never had apart from Christ. Paul writes we have our “body of sin done away with.” The original word in that phrase can have the idea of *made inoperative or rendered powerless*.

When we were apart from Christ, we had neither a desire nor a willingness to obey God. We were “slaves to sin,” as it says in Romans 6:20. The effort we put forth to be righteous ultimately ended in failure because of our enslavement to sin’s power. Now that we are identified with Christ, sin’s power no longer holds dominion over us. We can now pursue righteousness!

Third, we are never made perfectly sinless, but we do gradually grow in righteousness with a daily life of obedience. In this respect, we put forth cooperative effort with the Spirit, but our cooperation flows out of a changed heart with new desires to obey God.

Paul exhorts us to godly obedience by telling us to present the members of our body as instruments of righteousness (Romans 6:13). His words speak to our whole person both inwardly and outwardly – our thought life, emotions and attitude, as well as our behavior when we interact with the world. For

example, we turn our thought life to dwelling upon the Lord, our hands to serving God and others, and our lips to praising God and edifying His people.

Now, does this mean we automatically know how to think and act in a godly way in everything? No. We still carry a lot of baggage from our lives before Christ, and the worse we lived as sinners, the more baggage we will need to unpack. That's why our sanctification is *progressive*. In Romans 12:2, Titus 3:5, and Colossians 3:10, the Bible describes that work as our renewing process – our spiritual renovation retraining our minds to think like Christians.

The Beginning of a Good Work

So is Paul saying in Romans 6 that if we are saved, we can live anyway we want? The “once saved, always saved” idea? If you look closely at Romans 6:1, Paul is in fact answering that very objection. Do we continue in sin so grace may abound? In other words, “Paul, are you saying since we are saved, we are always secure, no matter *what* we do?” Paul answers emphatically, No!

His entire argument rests on the fact that our salvation begins and ends with God. He saves us, and then He sanctifies us.

I can imagine someone at this point thinking, “But I struggle a *lot* with sin.” John MacArthur has an expression I have heard him say often, “Godliness may not be the *perfection* of your life, but it is the *direction* of your life.” Our battle with sin will be a lifelong endeavor.

We may struggle for years with leftover sin and experience those occasional setbacks in our walk with Christ. But let us lay hold of a promise Paul wrote in Philippians 1:6: “Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.”

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