

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Sanctification - Positional 1 Corinthians 1:2; Practical 1 Thessalonians 4:3

We continue today with our short series on what the Bible has to teach on some key subjects. Two weeks ago the subject was condemnation, including that wonderful statement in Romans 8:1: "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus." Last week the key subject was justification, including reference to Romans 5:1: "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" together with James 2:21 where justification by works is the outward evidence of what has taken place inside a person.

Today, our key subject is sanctification, a word that is rarely used in day-to-day conversation but which is used frequently in both Old Testament and New Testament, a word that is applied to the Lord Jesus and to God's people and a word the meaning of which is also the basic meaning of related words such as saint and sanctuary.

Before going further into the details of sanctification, we should remind ourselves of a fundamental Bible principle which affects today's subject. When God places someone into a particular position, that person's right to that position comes with God's authority and the position is not affected by that person's practical response in his or her living, although of course the life should match the position. For example, in the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15, the son was always his father's son. He behaved and lived in a completely inappropriate way but through it all his position as son remained the same, unaffected by his low level of practical living.

With that in mind, I would like to divide this talk into four aspects, first of all positional sanctification, second practical sanctification, third sanctification applied to the Lord Jesus and fourth the related words of saint and sanctuary. My Bible references are all to the Authorised Version of the Bible.

Our first heading is positional sanctification. Let me use a simple illustration to try to help to convey the meaning of the word sanctification. Over the past few years, I have built up a modest collection of small model farm animals, mainly British breeds of cattle, pigs, sheep and horses. We all have our own interests and looking at these models gives me a lot of pleasure. No one else touches them. I decide how they are set out - they are set aside for my use and pleasure. Other people may or may not enjoy them, but I certainly do and they are there for me.

Sanctification means set apart for God's holy purpose or use. When God sanctifies someone or some people or some thing it means that He sets them or it apart from other people or other things so that they or it are there for His purpose and for the use of nobody else.

Now, let us spend a few minutes following through a few examples of this in the Bible. It is always useful to note the first reference in the Bible to any word or incident. The first reference to sanctification is in Genesis 2:3 where it says that "God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it." That seventh day, the Old Testament Sabbath, was particularly set aside for God in Old Testament times as a reminder of God's rest up to which God had been working in the first six days of creation. Subsequently God's Old Testament people had to keep that day holy as embodied in the fourth of the Ten Commandments recorded in Exodus 20.

In Exodus 19:10 and 14, it is said that all the Israelites were sanctified. As we read further through Exodus and Leviticus, we see that Aaron and his sons were sanctified as priests, that is set apart for God's purposes in that particular sphere of service for Him. In those two Bible books we also see references to particular objects being sanctified so that they are also separated for God's holy use, for example the altar, the tabernacle and the laver.

Perhaps it is worth pointing out that, in the Old Testament, the same Hebrew word may be translated sanctify or consecrate or holy. Similarly in the New Testament, in a number of cases in the Authorised Version of the Bible the words 'sanctification' and 'holiness' are simply different translations of the same Greek word.

When we come to the New Testament, there are two interesting references to sanctification in 1 Corinthians. Firstly, right at the beginning of the book, in 1:2, Paul addresses his letter to "the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus." Then in chapter 6, after describing the nature of the unrighteous who would not inherit the kingdom of God, in verse 11 Paul goes on to say: "And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified." These references are quite remarkable. 1 Corinthians makes it very clear that many of the Christians

at Corinth were anything but holy or righteous in their Christian living, but Paul emphasises right from the start of his letter that, positionally before God, they are sanctified because they are in Christ Jesus and have been made clean in Him. Incidentally, that washing has nothing to do with baptism but is because believers are sanctified with the blood of Jesus – see Hebrews 13:12. Our sanctification comes at great cost to God. In positional sanctification, the emphasis is on what is suitable in the view of God.

Let me read Hebrews 10:10 and 14: “By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all... For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.” The letter to the Hebrews sets out a comparison between the things of the Old Testament and those of the New Testament, showing that the latter are better than the former. In the Old Testament, God desired Israel to be a nation set apart for Him, but they failed God and became often indistinguishable from the heathen nations. Now, in Hebrews, God shows that it is His will, His desire and decision, that a new people shall be set apart for Him and His pleasure. And how is this to be achieved? By the once-for-ever offering of the body of Jesus Christ.

From these verses in Hebrews 10 we see the involvement of both Father and Son in sanctification. Now let me read part of 1 Peter 1:2: “Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit...” So Peter tells us that the third Person of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit, is also involved in sanctification. If the Father’s will determined sanctification and the offering of the Son is the basis of sanctification, then the Spirit is the divine Agent through whom sanctification is made real to us. Jesus said: “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit” – John 3:6. What a wonderful position is the position of being sanctified!

If in any doubt about the wonder of that position, let me read from Hebrews again, this time 2:11: “For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren.” I will not even attempt to add to the wonder of those words!

So, that is the first area, the Bible truth of positional sanctification, a position into which God places me as soon as I become a born again Christian. It is not something which I increasingly move into as I grow as a Christian; I am placed once and for ever into that position which never changes.

However, it is a different matter when we come to the second of our four headings, practical sanctification. There is no progress at all in positional sanctification. But in practical sanctification, the challenge to me is whether as a Christian I am growing in holiness as the years go by. In other words, is the way I live and behave increasingly appropriate to the position God has given me?

Take the example of King David in the Old Testament. He was chosen by God and placed by Him in a position as king and leader. Did David’s behaviour match his position? Sadly, not always. Not long after the kingdom became fully his, David even committed adultery and murder. He wanted the beautiful woman Bathsheba for his wife but she was already married to a man called Uriah and King David arranged for Uriah to be placed in the front line in a fierce battle so that Uriah was killed and David could have Bathsheba. The sorry incident is recorded in 2 Samuel 11. Positionally, David remained king; practically, he often failed.

A few minutes ago, we noted from Exodus 19 that all the nation of Israel were sanctified, that is in the positional sense of sanctification. Yet from time to time the people were told to sanctify themselves and be holy, for example in Leviticus 20:7. This is the idea of practical sanctification. Their way of living and their approach to God was to be consistent with their position as God’s people. In their lives they were to demonstrate the fact that they were set apart for God’s holy purpose, to live and behave differently from the nations around them. Sadly, they frequently failed. We only need to skim through the book of Numbers, which records the Israelites’ journey from Mount Sinai to the River Jordan, to note examples of their constant failures. Regular practical failure there was, but positionally they remained God’s people.

Let us follow through this idea of practical sanctification to a few verses in the New Testament, starting with John 17. This chapter contains intimate details of the Lord’s Prayer to His Father and in verse 16 Jesus says: “They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.” Jesus stated the position of believers as belonging to another place. He then goes on to pray in verse 17: “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.” The desire of Jesus was that believers who belonged to another place would be practically sanctified, that sanctification being achieved through the truth as seen in and spoken by Jesus, the Son of God that sets us apart from the world. How important it is then that I know that truth because, without it, I shall not be able to be practically sanctified.

In writing to the Thessalonian Christians, in his first letter Paul makes two references to sanctification, both in the practical sense. First in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4 he says: “For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: that every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour.” In the first part of this chapter, Paul is laying great emphasis on the need for practical holiness. He states that this is God’s will for us. In the world in which the Thessalonians lived, dominated by the Roman Empire, sexual

impurity was the norm. Paul was instructing the Thessalonian Christians to be, and to be seen to be, separated from that way of unholy living which was against God's will and inappropriate for those whom God has sanctified. And let us note that God's standards never change and so sexual impurity is unacceptable for God's people today.

Secondly, in 1 Thessalonians 5:23 Paul writes: "The very God of peace sanctify you wholly," that is w-h-o-l-l-y. God, whose will it is that we should be practically sanctified, desires that that sanctification should be of my entire being, with no part of me unaffected, my "whole spirit and soul and body" as the verse goes on to say. Now that is some challenge for me! Am I completely sanctified, allowing the power of God to take control of every part of my being?

I wonder if at this stage I could briefly mention something which I have heard said occasionally over the years. The false logic goes along the lines that if I am saved and my position before God is secure and will not be altered, which is the case if genuinely I am born again, why worry about the way I live now? My position won't change, I will go to heaven anyway, so why go to the effort of seeking to live practically in a holy way? Paul deals with this important issue in Romans 6. Let me read verses 1 and 2: "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?"

While there are a number of other references to practical sanctification in the New Testament, we have time to look at only one other. This is 2 Timothy 2:21 which reads: "If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work." I understand that in the original language the word translated 'purge' in this verse is a very strong one meaning to cleanse out. What I learn from this verse is that if I want to be useful for the Lord, I myself have to make the effort to set myself apart from anything or any association which leads to unholiness. Of course, I do this cleansing out through the power of the Spirit of God who dwells in me (see Romans 8:9) but I have to determine in my heart to do it.

The third part of this talk is sanctification applied to the Lord Jesus. I have in mind two scriptures in John's Gospel. The first is in 10:36 where it refers to "him, whom the Father hath sanctified, and sent into the world" and the second is in 17:19 where Jesus says to His Father "for their sakes I sanctify myself." These are marvellous scriptures! In 10:36 Jesus is saying that the Father set apart the Son for what the Father had in mind and sent the Son into the world to carry out that purpose.

In 17:19 where Jesus says "for their sakes I sanctify myself", it could be that there are two further thoughts to bring out regarding Jesus' sanctification. One is that Jesus is the supreme Example of setting Himself apart for God, to achieve God's purpose and will. It is recorded in John 6:38 that Jesus said: "I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me." Jesus was holy and He lived out perfectly that holiness in everything that He did and said, so much so that even one of the thieves crucified alongside Jesus could say: "We receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss" – see Luke 23:41. The writer to the Hebrews describes Jesus as "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners" – see Hebrews 7:26. So we see Jesus as the only perfect Person ever to live on this earth – indeed, the supreme Example of holy living! There is a verse of a hymn that comes to mind:

*Saviour, we Thy path retrace,
Patient love and lowly grace,
Matchless, holy, all Thy ways;
Saviour, we adore Thee.*

The second consideration in that statement "for their sakes I sanctify myself" is that Jesus is setting Himself apart in glory in heaven so that not only is He the supreme Example of holy living while He was on earth, but also He is in heaven for God and as our Object in glory. He has set Himself apart there so that the Holy Spirit can point us to the glory of Jesus in heaven, thereby sanctifying us today.

Now to the fourth and final part of our consideration of sanctification where I would like briefly to refer to two other Bible words which have the same underlying meaning as sanctification, that is, set apart for God's holy purpose. One is the word sanctuary, frequently used in the Old Testament and also a few times in Hebrews. In the Old Testament, the sanctuary was a place set apart, a place distinct from other places, a place where, separated from others, God's glory and mind could be revealed. In Psalm 73, the writer sets out the problems and uncertainties of life which were too painful for him; but he then records in verse 17 of that Psalm: "Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end."

The second related word is saints. Earlier, I quoted part of 1 Corinthians 1:2 and I would like now to quote more of that verse: "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called saints..." In the New Testament, saints are holy ones, those set apart for God, belonging to God. It is God, not Paul or any other human being, who bestows on us this title. What dignity and standing this gives to believers! Paul used the term frequently in his writings and we need not shy away from using this lovely scriptural term. Let us also remember that

there is a manner of behaviour, a way of living, which is appropriate to saints. On at least two occasions Paul uses the phrase “as becometh saints” – in Romans 16:2 and Ephesians 5:3.

What an extensive, wonderful and key subject sanctification is! Jesus the supreme Example, the marvellous, unchanging position in which God has placed every believer in Jesus, and the practical challenge of holy living which is consistent with our position!

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