

PROGRESSIVE SANTIFICATION

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Eziel Wedemeyer 22189267

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INTRODUCTION

In the daily lives of Christians, there is always the struggle between living in the likeness of Christ versus feeding your flesh which comes from our sinful nature as imperfect humans. By no means will believers in Christ ever be perfect; however, there is a lifestyle that we are called to live by. If one calls himself a Christian, then there are certain traits and actions that come forth from actually living out his faith. This is what distinguishes the believer from the non-believer: the daily walk in life that is totally influenced by faith in Jesus Christ. Having known that Jesus has died on the cross and has resurrected, the believer in Christ understands that because of that act of grace, people who put their sincere faith in Christ have been forever declared righteous (Rom. 5:1). Is there now an extension of justification that we as Christians are supposed to live out here on earth?

This is the topic that will be examined throughout this paper. Progressive Sanctification is the proper identification in defining how God's righteousness is lived out in man. Throughout this paper progressive sanctification will be examined. After reading this paper, one should understand what progressive sanctification is defined as and what is necessary in order for this progressive sanctification to occur. Furthermore, one can grasp an idea of what are the means of progressive sanctification and how it is obtained while also learning that due to this process of gradual sanctification, there are benefits that occur when the believer is "in step" with the Holy

Spirit. Finally, this paper will address how long sanctification will last and look deeper into the question of sanctification being a gradual process or not. The focal point of this paper is to analyze and synthesize what progressive sanctification is really about in order to better understand the relationship with have with Christ and how, as believers in Jesus, we can be great testimonies and represent our faith on earth before we are united with Christ in glorification.

DEFINITION

Scholar Definitions

Many scholars have had several interpretations of what sanctification can be defined as. According to the *Nelson's New Christian Dictionary*, sanctification is defined as an “act, process, or experience of consecration and purification by which a person is made holy and acceptable to God through the working of the Holy Spirit.”¹ This definition is fairly adequate depiction of what sanctification is in terms of it being a joint participation of the Holy Spirit and the believer. However, I disagree with that possibility of sanctification being an act instead of a process. Another definition that is derived from Donald Alexander’s book, *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, states the Lutheran definition of sanctification as:

Sanctification is thus simply the art of getting used to justification. It is not something added to justification. It is not the final defense against a justification too liberally granted. It is what happens when the old being comes up against the end of its self-justifying and self-gratifying ways, however pious. It is life lived in anticipation of the resurrection.²

This definition, although has some good ideas of stating that sanctification is an extension from justification, it does not do a good job of actually realizing that there is the work of the Holy

¹ George Thomas Kurian, ed., *Nelson's New Christian Dictionary*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001) , 679

² Donald Alexander and Sinclair Ferguson, *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 14

spirit that also comes into play when a believer is in their process of sanctification. This definition does have a good point though of realizing that through sanctification, the believer is drawn away from himself and it looking to strive to be less like him and more like Christ. Wayne Grudem defines sanctification as being a progressive work of God and man that makes us more and more free from sin and like Christ in our actual lives.³ I believe that this is a very accurate definition of what sanctification really is and how it should look like.

Writer's Definition

I believe that sanctification is a progressive activity that involves the work of the Holy Spirit guiding man in his walk with Christ meanwhile man consciously submitting to the authority of the Holy Spirit in order so that the righteousness of God may be seen in the believer's life and that the end result would be that the believer will be in the likeness of Christ. The Holy Spirit definitely plays a big role in the sanctification process and it is by that power of the Holy Spirit that a believer is able to participate in the process (Rom. 8:2; Phil. 2:13; John 14:26). The term that is describe as sanctification in Romans is the Greek term *hagiosmos*.⁴ This term means to be set apart from something and to be set apart to something.⁵ This can be defined as being set apart from the fleshly desire of sin and being set apart to a life of righteousness with God. It also evident that the believer is making his own choice to follow God, which is why sanctification is a participation from both parties: God and man. This is not, in any means, putting man and God on the same level; clearly it is all the work of God and if it was not for grace of God allowing Jesus to be a sacrifice for the redemption of man and then indwelling

³ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 326

⁴ Michael J. Smith, class notes of this student in BIBL 425, Romans, Liberty University, Fall 2011, 1

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1

believers with the gift of the Holy Spirit, then it would be impossible for man to even participate in sanctification. All the glory of the sanctification process goes to God, the one who manifests it.

BASIS

Progressive Sanctification, as defined earlier, is a gradual process that the believer in Christ will participate in for the rest of his life. The basis of progressive sanctification is derived from the result of justification. The first thing that needs to be in place is justification of the believer, which was applied when the believer puts his whole faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:24). Furthermore as it is written, the Bible explicitly states that believers have died to sin and have become united with our Federal Headship (Jesus Christ) in the likeness of His death and resurrection (Rom. 6:5). This is important foundation of sanctification because it sets the fact that believers who were once slaves of sin, are no longer bounded by sin but find truth in living out righteousness of God (Rom. 6:11). This is possible because it is stated that the believer's "old self" has died so that one can walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:4). This means that our old ways have died and we who are believers in Christ are now called into a new life with Christ where God and the believer is in cooperation to live holy on earth.

The "old self" does not mean that our flesh, which is our inherent sinful nature, has left us because if that were the case then sanctification would not be needed. However, what is true is that we are still living in the same body that was living with the "old self", except now since the "old self" has died; we walk in newness of life with the aid and guidance of the Holy Spirit (Ps. 32:8). In reference to what Paul is trying to state in regards to the "old self" of a believer, Leon Morris explains:

And this “old man”, Paul says, was crucified with. The verb conveys the thought that the old man was thoroughly destroyed. “The old man” is no longer supreme. This does not mean that the believer lives untroubled by the possibility of sinning.⁶

This why Paul explains that sin no longer has dominion over the life of the believer, but we are in reality slaves to righteousness because we have been completely freed from sin. Therefore, the basis of sanctification includes that once we are justified, in cooperation with God through his Holy Spirit, we have the guidance to be alive to God and dead to sin as we live out God’s righteousness in our daily walk, in step with Christ. It is true that the “old self” and its ways have been crucified and no longer have desires for it through the work of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:24). Again, in this thought process of how we have died to sin and are alive in Christ, this is where we should base our lives and the process of sanctification.⁷

Furthermore on the basis of sanctification, the believer needs to understand and consider the fact that sanctification is also possible because we (believers in Christ) have been unified with and in Christ (Rom. 6:5). Our unity in Christ is explained earlier in Romans 6 where Paul explains that believers who were baptized in Christ were also baptized in His death (Rom. 6:4). This picture of baptism is one where the believer identifies himself with Christ.⁸ The idea and meaning behind the baptism is that this spiritual baptism places the believer in Christ and in His Body (Eph. 1:13; 1 Cor. 12:12-13).⁹ This reinforces the fact that we are literally united with Christ, like if we were crucified, died and resurrected with Jesus. Thomas Schreiner suggests that

⁶ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 251

⁷ Robert Mounce, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Reference, 1995), 153

⁸ Michael J. Smith, class notes of this student in BIBL 425, Romans, Liberty University, Fall 2011, 3

⁹ Ibid, 3

to be baptized into Christ is to be joined with the second Adam.¹⁰ This is necessary for the basis of sanctification because the believer needs to reflect on how the unification with Christ is congruent with the progressive sanctification that he is in active participation. It is because of this unification with Christ that we are able to get the strength and ability to walk in the newness of life.

Since the basis of sanctification is based upon the fact that one has received justification through faith in Jesus Christ, it is evident that salvation is a requirement of basis in order to be in the process of sanctification. The whole point of how sanctification is available is because of the death and resurrection of Christ; through offering of Himself we have justification and therefore also believers are sanctified (Heb. 10:10). So, salvation is an obvious requirement that is necessary and has to be true in order for sanctification to be possible.

MEANS

Free in Christ, Believers have died to the Law

Now that the basis of progressive sanctification is clearly stated, how is the Christian able to participate in this sanctification activity? In order to explain how the believer is able to be involved in the sanctification process, the relationship of the believer and the Law has to be examined first. According to Paul, the unity that believers have in Christ has allowed the believers to part ways with the Law (Rom. 7:4). What this means is that since we have died with Christ, we have also died to the Law, which makes us not bounded by the Law. This creates freedom for us to serve Christ and allows us to live out the righteousness of God through sanctification for the glory of God. Paul uses an example of marriage in order for people to

¹⁰ Thomas Schreiner, *Romans*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 307

picture the type of relationship we have with Christ. Paul explains that just how a woman is no longer bounded to her husband if he dies, it is the same it is for those who are in Christ; those who have died with Christ and have unity with Him have also died to the Law because Christ has risen and so has the believer.

To make it clear, the Law is not bad, it is actually holy. The reason why the law was in place was so that people may be able to identify sin. Since the Law exposed sin, people were aroused by the law, and had shown sinful passions that were driven by our imperfect flesh.¹¹ In the viewing the Law from a pre- and post- conversion standpoint, Leon Morris explains how the Law was an important factor:

All people have some idea of right and wrong; a moral code of some sort is almost universal. People who do not have the law may well know that they have done wrong. But people without God's law do not see wrongdoing as it really is, as sin against God. There is a great difference between the breaching of human moral code and sin, that evil thing which God forbids. It takes the law to show wrongdoing to be sin. And to see my misdeeds as sin against God inevitably means that I am troubled and begin to so see my need of a Savior. There is a healing function in the law's work of convicting the sinner.¹²

Therefore, the Law, which is good and holy, was used by sin in that sense that it brought forth death in us (before we were in a relationship with Jesus) and made us slaves to sin (Rom. 7:13). However, through Jesus Christ, believers can live in newness because of the death to sin and death to the law. This is only capable because of the victory over the flesh that was enabled through Jesus' death, something that was not possible through the law.¹³

Cooperation of the Holy Spirit, the Believer, and God's Word

¹¹ Michael J. Smith, class notes of this student in BIBL 425, Romans, Liberty University, Fall 2011, 1

¹² Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 278-279

¹³ Michael J. Smith, class notes of this student in BIBL 425, Romans, Liberty University, Fall 2011, 1

Paul explicitly declares that there is no condemnation against any believer (for those who are in Christ) (Rom. 8:1). Since that is true and now the believer is free from sin, there is a special agent that is indwelled in us that helps us with our daily walk in Christ. Progressive sanctification involves a relationship between the believer and his adherence to the Holy Spirit. The call to be instruments of righteousness is only possible by the guidance and strengthening of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 6:13; Ps. 25:9). This is where progressive sanctification is distinctively different than justification: it is up to the believer to choose to either walk by the spirit or allow sin to reign over him. The Holy Spirit is indwelled in us (as believers) and it is specifically God and the Holy Spirit who works within us to give us greater holiness in our lives and help us sanctify ourselves.¹⁴ This evident in the Bible because is stated that sanctification occurs by the Spirit, through the leading of the Spirit, and it if the Holy Spirit who helps believers bear fruit of the Spirit (2 Thess.2:13; Gal. 5:16; Gal. 5:22-23). Furthermore, Thomas Schreiner, in regards to how the Holy Spirit is at work, explains that:

In Paul's theology the gift of the Spirit is especially associated with the power to live a new life. This conception also flows from the Old Testament (Ezek 11:19-20; 36:26-27) where the gift of the Spirit empowers people to obey God's law.¹⁵

In regards to the role the believer plays in cooperation with God and the Holy Spirit, Wayne Grudem explains that the role that the believer pays is both passive, where we depend on God to lead us; meanwhile it is also active because we strive to obey God and take steps that will increase our sanctification.¹⁶ There are countless encouragements and verse that explain the active role of the believer in the sanctification process. We are called to abstain from immorality,

¹⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 331

¹⁵ Thomas Schreiner, *Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 262

¹⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 331

strive for holiness, make efforts to grow ourselves and mature in sanctification (1Thess. 4:3; Heb.12:14; 2 Pet. 1:5). It is evident that the believer has a role in the sanctification process and it is ultimately up to him to keep growing and maintaining reverence to the Lord, yielding to God (Rom.6:13). Paul states that one should walk the Holy Spirit, and then the believer will have the strength to say “no” to the desires of his flesh (Rom. 8:17).¹⁷

Another way that a believer can participate in the sanctification process and make it his own is through the Word of God and how it is allowed to work in the life of the believer. The Word of God is the foundation of how the Spirit testifies truth in the progressive sanctification of the believer because the Word of God in it of itself is the truth (John 17:17). In fact, the Word of God is actually God himself (John 1:1). The Holy Spirit will never lead the believer astray and one can have assurance of that because it will always be in line with what the Word of God says and it will always lead in the path of God (Ps. 119:105). Thus, it is important for the believer to adhere to the Holy Spirit, make a conscious effort to follow and be in step with Holy Spirit, and to guard his heart with the Word of God; these are the means of sanctification.

RESULTS/BENEFITS

By allowing the Holy Spirit to guide us and teach us how to be more in the likeness of Christ, there are great benefits that come from this special gift that indwells in us. The fruits of the Holy Spirit are benefit that are shown and come to life as a believer matures and strives to be entrenched with God. The fruits of the Spirit include love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,

¹⁷ Michael J. Smith, class notes of this student in BIBL 425, Romans, Liberty University, Fall 2011, 2

goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). These fruits are not characteristics that can be done systematically or by the will oneself. These will become evident among the believer's walk in Christ by faith and being in one accord with will of the Holy Spirit.

Another benefit that is a true blessing is the fact that the believer can choose to live in freedom from the power of sin. Paul explains that before when one was in a life of sin, the fruit that one was bearing was fruit that lead to death (Rom. 6:21). However, with the ministry of the Holy Spirit in us, we are free to walk away from that lifestyle of sin. Therefore we do not have a spirit of fear of going back into the "old ways", but we are encouraged and take pride in the fact that we do not let sin have dominion over us through the adoption that God gave us, and the sonship we have through the Spirit of God (Rom. 8:15). The sonship of Christ allows us to be children of God. In this we live victoriously because we have the benefit of the Holy Spirit who lives in the believer and the Holy Spirit gives us strength (Eph. 3:16-17). Furthermore, we have received the spirit of God who enables us to have wisdom in our lives (1 Cor. 2:6-8). So, the power of sin no longer has a hold on the believer who is actively participating in progressive sanctification and who is in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

The ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer is another benefit that is seen in the life of the believer in many ways. One spiritual truth that is a result of the ministry of the Holy Spirit is the fact that it gives security that we belong to Christ and that we are alive to righteousness (Rom. 8:9-11). The Holy Spirit helps us when we are in weakness, because it intercedes for us (Rom. 8:26-27). This is extraordinary benefit because it shows God's care and loving kindness, while also noting that we are not by ourselves and that God will never leave us believers. The Holy Spirit also contributes by administering the wisdom of God and makes that available to the believer. The Holy Spirits helps us think thoughts of God.

George Eldon Ladd explains this when he states:

The first work of the Spirit is to enable men to understand the divine work of redemption....Paul speaks of a hidden wisdom of God—of the revelation through the Spirit of divine truths—of being enabled by the Spirit to think the thoughts of God—of a wisdom that transcends all human wisdom.¹⁸

The Holy Spirit allows us to adhere to the wisdom of God and it is made evident that the Spirit searches the depths of God; the Holy Spirit is the only one who knows the wisdom of God and we as believers are dependent on that wisdom as we walk by faith in our process of sanctification (1 Cor. 2:6-13).

Another benefit from the ministry of the Holy Spirit is that we have a new mindset that directly is rooted from the Holy Spirit. That mindset that is derived from the Holy Spirit is a mindset that assures life and peace (Rom 8:5-8). This allows our spirit to be renewed and also our minds (Eph. 4:23). Leon Morris further explains the result of adherence to the Holy Spirit in terms of the mindset of life when he states:

The opposite of the mind that is death is “the mind of the Spirit”, which, Paul says, “is life and peace.” Again the thought is of thoroughgoing concentration. When things of God dominate one’s outlook, when one is constantly responsive to the direction of the Spirit, then there is life.¹⁹

Thus, the benefits of sanctification are evident in the daily lives of believers. These benefits are things to forward to as one walks his faith out because they are results of living out the righteousness of God in one’s life.

¹⁸ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 290

¹⁹ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 306

PERMANENCY

Progressive sanctification is something that God just starts and then lets it alone after a while. On the contrary, God is in full-time ministry of sanctification of the believers. This is true because it is in God character to always finish what he has started, to always make his work complete and He will never fail at His work just because of who He is as God (Rev. 22:13). In addition, concerning sanctification of the believer, it is stated in His Word that God, the one starts a good thing in the life of the believer, will continue it and bring it to completion, even until the day of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:6). Schreiner explains how God does not allow His work in the life of the believer to go void and how God is active in the process when he states:

Only God, therefore can release them from subjection, for new desires are necessary to escape the bondage of sin. Of course, this is precisely what God has done. He has liberated them from the tyranny of sin so that they “have become obedient from the heart” to the gospel. He has planted new desires within them.²⁰

God cares and has an unconditional love for His creation of man, so much that He will be the architect of the sanctification process. He never forsakes, or forgets the believer in whom He elected (2 Thess. 2:13). Therefore, God who is all-powerful and all-good will have the believer in His hands throughout the whole process of the sanctification.

TIME FACTORS

Progressive sanctification is a life-long process. The reason why sanctification is a lifetime process is because as believers we will never get to a point in our lives here on earth where we will not fall or sin. This stays on the same page as what Paul was stating earlier in the book of Romans, where he says that no one is good, and that we are all sinful and imperfect

²⁰ Thomas Schreiner, *Romans: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 337

(Rom. 3:10). It is the very nature one's sanctification to take time and strong effort. The Bible warns the believer to stay in track and follow the Holy Spirit because God does not want the believer to ever desert the principles and walk with Christ (Heb. 5:11-14). Of course there will be times in a believer's life where there are ups and downs in terms to the different standards and stages of life because of the very reason that we are still of the flesh in terms of we still live in the same body that was sinful before we came to Christ (1 Cor. 3:1-4). Thus, understanding that this is a life journey and as believers we need to be humble and stand back up whenever we fall down and into the "old ways."

CONCLUSION

Progressive sanctification is something that truly is unique versus all other religions and ways of life. What makes this special is the very fact that the believer has the ability to exert on his free will and choose to either feed into his flesh or allow sin to keep reign in his life; or the believer can participate in this special relationship that occurs when one allows to be led by the Holy Spirit. David Peterson explains how the Holy Spirit works ultimately on behalf of God when he states:

Sanctification certainly has present and ongoing effects, but when the verb "to sanctify" (Gk. *Hagiazein*) and the noun 'sanctification' (Gk. *Hagiasmos*) are used, the emphasis is regularly on the saving work of God in Christ, applied to believers through ministry of the Holy Spirit.²¹

Overall, progressive sanctification is something provides the believer with many benefits from the Holy Spirit, including the indwelling of the Spirit in us and living in a state of holiness (not

²¹ David Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 24

total pure holiness but in the sense that we strive to be holy in the like ness of Christ)²². God will continue His work in us until the day of glorification. Overall, this relationship that we have with Holy Spirit is another form of worshiping, and praising God for who He is. This act of sanctification in the end is for the glorification of God.

²² Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1996), 405

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