

# Sanctification: The Present Work of Salvation

Salvation is one work of God, but it unfolds in three distinct aspects: **justification, sanctification, and glorification**. Scripture distinguishes them, and so must we. To blur them together is not a small mistake—it is to mutilate the gospel itself.

## Justification Declares

Justification is legal, forensic, and external. It is the once-for-all verdict of God declaring the sinner righteous in Christ through faith alone. “God justifies the ungodly” (Rom. 4:5)—not by making them holy first, but by crediting Christ’s holiness to their account. It is finished, complete, and secure.

## Sanctification Transforms

Sanctification is ontological, progressive, and internal. It is the Spirit’s ongoing work of actually changing us in reality—not in our status, but in our substance. We are being made holy, more and more like Christ. Not perfectly, but truly. Not instantly, but increasingly. This is the present tense of salvation.

## Glorification Perfects

Glorification is eschatological, final, and climactic. It is not gradual growth but the decisive act of God when Christ returns, raising us incorruptible. In that moment, we will not only be holy—we will be **perfectly holy**. A new, ontologically perfect body, sinless and immortal, fitted to worship God forever.

## The False Views That Ruin the Gospel

### Rome: Justification Collapsed into Sanctification

Rome acknowledges justification but redefines it. For them, justification is not a verdict but a process of being made righteous through infused grace. You are only justified to the degree that you are sanctified. The result is despair: no one can ever know they are accepted. Salvation becomes probation. Grace is not good news, but an endless ladder you never climb high enough to finish.

## **The Holiness Movements: Sanctification Collapsed into Glorification**

Groups like the Nazarenes and Holiness traditions rightly affirm justification as forensic, but then collapse sanctification into glorification. They claim the believer can achieve “entire sanctification” or ontological righteousness now. The result is legalism all over again—tying your standing before God to your supposed perfection.

## **Antinomianism: Sanctification Denied Altogether**

Antinomianism shrugs at sanctification as if holiness is optional: “Why bother? I’m justified.” This erases the process entirely. The result is no goals, no desires to grow, no effort toward holiness—spiritual apathy dressed up as grace.

## **What Sanctification Looks Like When We Reject the Errors**

At its core, every false view of sanctification is a false view of righteousness. Rome makes you rely on your own righteousness to secure justification. The Holiness movements make you rely on your own righteousness as if you already had glorification. Antinomians erase righteousness altogether by denying sanctification.

So what does true sanctification look like when we reject these errors? It looks like walking by faith in **Christ’s righteousness at every stage of salvation.**

- **When we reject the Roman view**, we rest in His righteousness **given**—the righteousness of Christ imputed to us in justification. We never fight to earn God’s acceptance; we fight because His verdict is already secured. That produces a settled confidence Rome cannot give—the confidence to act right now, not out of fear, but out of the righteousness already credited to us. We do not fight toward righteousness; we fight from righteousness.
- **When we reject the Holiness view**, we rest in His righteousness **promised**—the perfect, ontological righteousness still coming in glorification. Our own righteousness is real and growing, but it is not yet perfect. To presume we have already arrived is to stop relying on Christ and to begin trusting our own. But sanctification never shifts the ground of faith away from Him. Glorification will give us perfection—but until then, we live dependent, never trusting our own righteousness for even a moment.
- **When we reject the Antinomian view**, we embrace His righteousness **produced**—the Spirit’s present-tense work of sanctification in us. Antinomianism erases righteousness altogether, leaving no goals, no striving, no desire. But true sanctification expects and pursues real change, real growth, real holiness—not to replace Christ’s righteousness, but because we belong to Him. The absence of desire is not freedom—it is death. The presence of desire, however small, is evidence of life.

So sanctification is always about Christ's righteousness. We walk by faith in the righteousness **given** to us in justification, the righteousness **promised** to us in glorification, and the righteousness being **produced** in us through sanctification.

And here is the balance: because of His righteousness, we are becoming more righteous. That is the battle—to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you” (Phil. 2:12–13). But like a young plant, our righteousness is tender and not yet able to stand on its own. We do not put the weight of assurance on it yet. We do not lean on it as the ground of our confidence. We rejoice in its growth, we water it with the Word, we cultivate it with prayer, we protect it in fellowship—but we never rest upon it. We rest only upon Christ's righteousness, even as we watch His life take root and bear fruit in ours.

## The Joy of Sanctification

Sanctification is not about tasks or checklists. It is not God handing you a clipboard of religious duties to slog through. It is about **striving**—but not striving to be accepted. Striving because we are accepted.

It is the Spirit's invitation into a **new set of priorities**. Where the world tells you to chase comfort, security, and self, the Spirit reshapes your heart to long for what truly satisfies. Sanctification is acting in faith upon these desires—trusting that costly obedience is not only good but truly the path to joy.

## The Ongoing Battle

And here is the reality: sanctification never stops being a process, which means it never stops being a battle.

- Not justification: so we fight with confidence, not uncertainty.
- Not glorification: so we fight with humility, not presumption.
- Not antinomianism: so we fight with engagement, not indifference.

The Spirit wars against the flesh, and the flesh against the Spirit. That is sobering—because holiness is never automatic. But it is also comforting—because the very existence of the battle is proof of life. The unbeliever does not struggle against sin—he embraces it. Dead men don't fight. The Christian's conflict itself is assurance that the Spirit dwells within.

So we should not expect perfection here, but we should expect progress. We should not expect ease, but we should expect war. And we should also expect victory—degree by degree, as God conforms us to the image of His Son—until striving gives way to perfection, and sanctification yields to glory.

## Application Questions

**1. Assurance:**

- If justification is God’s declaration apart from works, do you ever find yourself subtly tying your assurance of salvation to how well you think you are doing in sanctification?
- How does seeing the difference free you from despair or pride?

**2. Hope:**

- Do you sometimes expect perfection now?
- How does remembering that sanctification is a process—not glorification—help you persevere when you feel like you’re failing?

**3. Battle:**

- Where do you feel the clash between the desires of the Spirit and the desires of the flesh most clearly in your life right now?
- How do you respond in that moment—do you fight, or do you resign?

**4. Priorities:**

- Which Spirit-given desire do you most neglect—hunger for the Word, prayer, sacrificial love, burden for the lost, gratitude in praise?
- What would it look like to act on that desire this week by faith, trusting it is the path to joy?

**5. Joy:**

- When have you tasted the truth that obedience, even costly obedience, was more joyful than sin?
- How can remembering that moment fuel your fight for holiness today?

**6. Planning:**

- Do you treat sanctification as something to “just let happen,” or do you plan for it—setting goals, structuring your life, pursuing growth intentionally?
- What is one practical step you could take this week to strive for holiness, not to earn salvation, but to enjoy it?