

# Progress: He Makes You Holy

September 18, 2022 P.M.  
West Side Church of Christ  
Searcy, Arkansas  
Nathan Guy

## Scripture Reading

“For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (Hebrews 10:14 NIV).

“He gave me the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:16 NIV).

“To the church of God that is in Corinth, to you who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be holy, with all those everywhere who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours” (1 Corinthians 1:2 NABRE)

## ***LEGALISM IS WRONG; BUT BECOMING HOLY IS RIGHT***

“Legalism” is the word for any religious system that teaches “my relationship with God is grounded in or is held secure by my good works and good efforts which makes Him owe me.” It’s the idea that my moral accomplishment is what earns me a spot in heaven—God lets me in because I’m so good. We know that’s wrong. It’s more than wrong; it is awful. The idea that grace is something I purchased with my good deeds, or that grace is something hands out to winners’ circle of the self-righteous club is not only wrong and awful; it is stupid.

I think most of us—maybe all of us—who take a good and honest look in the spiritual mirror know that if we were to look at ourselves and mouth the words “salvation is yours because of your excellent performance and profoundly good moral track record” would be to take leave of our senses.

We know that. We know that at the end of it all—at the sound of the last trumpet—when we stand before the judgment seat of Christ, we know that our one and only defense is to stand before him “not having a righteousness that is my own, but that which comes through faith in Christ.” We know that our sense of assurance is found in this: not that we loved God (let that include whatever we believe love requires of us), but that He loved us, and gave Himself to die for us.” On our best day, our

righteousness is like filthy rags; and God knows that any good that I do I do by His strength at work within me.

We know this. We know this. But legalism, or self-righteousness, or grace-earning notions of faith—while wrong—are not the same thing as becoming (by the power of the Spirit) the holy, righteous, faithful, God-like people of God that what we were called to become. The Christian is given two greatest commandments: to love God with all they have, and to love their neighbors the same way. To love God involves being obedient and faithful; it means keeping his commandments. It means becoming like him in every way. And the shorthand for this—become like God—is called “sanctification” (the art of becoming holy).<sup>1</sup>

### WE ARE SAVED TO BE MADE HOLY

When Paul tells husbands to be like Jesus toward their wives, he says husbands love your wives like Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her *to make her holy* (Eph 5:25-26). That is truly significant. We spend a lot of time talking about what we are saved FROM. We are saved from sin; we are saved from our past; we are saved from our guilt and shame.

But it is equally important to talk about what we are saved FOR. As Paul says “he has rescued us out of the kingdom of darkness and translated us into the kingdom of His dear Son.” God wanted a people—a people who would conform to His image, who would showcase His likeness—so he saved us FROM our self-focused unrighteousness, and he saved us FOR a new life in Christ Jesus.

He died to make men holy.

But what does “holy” mean? George Barna did a study a few years ago, and he discovered very few people could come up with a coherent definition! Even believers did not have a real firm grasp on the concept.<sup>2</sup>

The first definition we probably think of is ‘separate’ or ‘distant.’ There is something to that. We are a “distinct” people. In the Old Testament, people and even things were “dedicated” or “consecrated” to the Lord—set apart for God and His purposes (Ex

---

<sup>1</sup> For an excellent sermon on this point—that legalism is awful, but it is not the same thing as obeying the commandments of God—see Jim McGuiggan, “Living By The Rules”: <https://onedrive.live.com/?authkey=%21AGqXfm3V2ei5Iuc&cid=6C6FE84C4E77D002&id=6C6FE84C4E77D002%212986&parId=6C6FE84C4E77D002%21240&o=OneUp>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.barna.com/research/the-concept-of-holiness-baffles-most-americans/>

29:43-44). We know that separation from evil is part of the story. “Come out from among them and be ye separate, says the Lord.” Bad company corrupts good morals, says Paul. You used to be like everyone else, says Paul, listing all kinds of corrupt practices that usually happen when you run with the wrong crowd. “But you’ve been washed, you’ve been sanctified, you’ve been justified by the Spirit of our God.”

There is that word “sanctified.” It means “made holy.” It’s what God wants for his people. And He means it with utter seriousness. “Sanctified” (being made holy) is not the same as “sanctimonious” (making a show of holiness).

Surely part of what it means to be holy is to stop doing what is evil, and, instead, to do what is good. Look at the contrasting lists in any of Paul’s lists—you’ll find actions that describe people of the world, and contrast, the kinds of actions that describe people of God. And people are supposed to watch what we do (and don’t do), and they are supposed to learn something about God because of it. We are called to holiness as a necessity. According to Heb 12:14, without holiness no one will see the Lord.

But there is more here than meets the eye. For one thing, God doesn’t just list things we should avoid and things we should do and then call that “the Christians responsibility to shape up.” No—the New Testament says God gave us His Holy Spirit so that we might be “sanctified” (that is, made holy). It is God’s job to make us holy. We need the Spirit’s help. And the Spirit majors in bringing about holiness in his people.

And being holy means being like God. God does far more than “avoiding bad actions.” He also doesn’t want to do bad actions. That is, he doesn’t just say “no” to bad desires. Even his desires are pure. So holiness must also include purified desires. So much so that we can learn to “do as we please” once “what we please” is simply to please Him.

There is a third thing about holiness if what we mean is “to be like God.” Yes, it means set apart from evil actions. Yes, it means set apart from evil desires. But that isn’t complete enough. How could God ever take up residence among us if the Holy God must always be “separate” or “distant” from anything less than perfect purity?

Sometimes Christians face moral dilemmas. Some one or something moves into town, doing some things you disapprove of. So what should the Christian do in response? One option is to ban, boycott, or avoid. I think there is a time and a place for that. But we have to balance that with the call of Jesus to be salt and light in a dark world. The call to actually rub shoulders with the very people we are trying to reach with the gospel. To be incarnational—like Jesus was. Many in our culture see Christians as always aloof and unapproachable. That Christians are always marking and avoiding anything that

smells unchristian. When we act that way, we are able to maintain our purity. But how can we purify anything else?

It turns out God’s holiness has two parts: one part speaks to how different (how high and holy) he is; the other speaks to how willing he is to rub shoulders with those who need his holiness to rub off on them. We see it in Isaiah 57:15: “God’s name is Holy. I dwell in the high and holy place, and also in the lowly of spirit.” Did you catch that? What does it mean to be holy, according to God? To be so high above it, and to also dwell within it—untouched by the evil, but present to help serve those wrapped up in evil.

As Kevin Youngblood once said, Holiness is the combination of God’s out there (radical uniqueness) and right here (radical relationality). God wants to connect with you. God’s holiness not only compels God to be unique, but it also compels him to reach out so you and I may share in his holiness. The spirit makes us foreign to our culture and lovingly related to it.<sup>3</sup>

That’s the beautiful language of Hebrews 12:10: “that we might share in his Holiness.”

### ***THREE WAYS TO THINK OF SANCTIFICATION***

We should think of holiness in three ways:

First, there is the ground of our sanctification (what some call “positional sanctification”). This means that we stand, today, as “holy” in the eyes of God. Hebrews 10:29 says it was the blood of the covenant that “sanctified” us. Look at how Paul refers to the church of God. In Acts 20:32, Paul gives his farewell to the elders of Ephesus, and he says “Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” And who are “all those who are sanctified?” It turns out, it refers to all who belong to Jesus Christ. In Hebrews 2:11, the writer says “Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.” The Christians in Corinth used to belong the unholy world. “But you were sanctified” says Paul “by the Spirit of our God.” This means our past sins are no longer on our account. But it also means our present failings are not kept on our account. “There is **now** no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1). “If we walk in the light as he is in the light, the blood of his son continually cleanses us

---

<sup>3</sup> Kevin Youngblood, “Holiness In Exile.” Sermon preached at the Downtown Church of Christ, Searcy, AR (Feb 8, 2015). <https://downtownsermons.com/2015/02/09/holiness-in-exile/>

from all sin” (1 John 1:7). In this first sense, all Christians are sanctified—declared holy—because we belong to the holy one. And God does not see us in our sin; he sees us in our Savior.

And that gives us motivation for the second way the word is used. This refers to our growth in holiness (what some have called “Progressive sanctification”). It means we are in the process of removing the old man and the ways of living that went with our old self, and are being made new in Christ, learning new habits, wanting better things, and learning to trust in the Spirits leading. Verses that speak to God being presently at work doing his work of holiness in you speaks to this. “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through” says Paul to a church already declared to be holy (1 Thess 5:23). Paul says to the Corinthians that we all, with unveiled faces beholding the glory of the Lord, “are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18). Do you see that we are in the process of being changed. We are being made more like Christ day-by-day.

A little boy was asked “who made you?” Without missing a beat, the boy replied, “to tell the truth, mister, I ain’t done yet!”

Indeed. I ain’t done yet. He’s still working on me. As we yield to God’s Spirit, we are being changed day by day, being made holy as he purifies our desires and intentions, as well as our actions.

Let me show you how positional sanctification gives us the motivation for progressive sanctification. We are “declared holy” in Christ because of what Christ did; and that leads us to the high calling to “live holy” as ones declared to be such. We see this clearly in In 1 Corinthians 1:2. You know the church in Corinth. If there was ever a church that was mixed up, far from perfect, in need of growing in grace, it’s the Corinthian church. And Paul says “to the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people.” Do you see that? “those made holy in Christ (past tense), and called to be (present and future tense) his holy people.

Then there is the third sense of the word. This is the ultimate goal of our sanctification (what some might call “Final sanctification”). “He who began a good work in you will stay at it and see it through to a flourishing finish on the day of Christ” says Paul (Philippians 1:6). “Dear friends,” writes John, “now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). And “all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure” (1 John 3:3).

There is a sense in which we are all declared holy—full stop. Because of Jesus. There is a sense in which we will all be made perfect—full stop—when we are with Christ Jesus forever. And there is a sense in which we are in the process of being made holy day-by-day as we yield ourselves to God’s Holy Spirit. For a verse that shows all three of these, check out Hebrews 10:14: “For by one sacrifice (ground) he has made perfect forever (goal) those who are being made holy (growth)” (NIV).

So, for those who are spiritually neurotic, here this profound truth: God has already declared you holy. He has sanctified you. You are safe in him, and he sees you as pure as he sees His son.

For those of you in need of growth, hear this profound truth: The best argument for Christianity is Christians. The strongest argument against Christianity is Christians. How we live reflects on our Father. But He promises by his Spirit to make us new, to cleanse us from the inside out, to renew us and to make us more holy tomorrow than we acted today.

### ***HOW TO “DO” SANCTIFICATION***

So let’s put the puzzle pieces together to make sense of the multiple ways Scripture speaks of holiness.

Christ came to do his sanctifying work (Eph 5:26). And the grace of God teaches us what holiness is and the requirements that belong to it (Titus 2:11-12) which the Spirit invades our lives to bring about (Romans 8:13; Eph 3:16). It leads to a transformation of our minds and hearts (Romans 12:2) which ultimately ends in the perfecting of the saints (Eph 4:7-13). But God doesn’t force his grace on anyone; my co-operation with God’s Spirit is needed. I have a response to give. “Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.”

What does this require of me? It requires me to yield to God’s Holy Spirit.

Monte Cox once gave a vivid illustration. Picture an aquarium—and I have two sponges in my hand. One sponge I hold in a fairly open hand; the other I squeeze tightly in a fist. I then plunge both hands into the water. Which sponge is in the water? They both are. But which sponge is *full* of water? The one that is open to it.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Monte Cox, in a sermon preached at a retreat over 20 years ago. For a similar message, see Monte Cox, “The Just-Try-Harder Heresy.” Sermon Preached at the Downtown Church of Christ (Aug 27, 2017). <https://downtownsermons.com/2017/09/08/rushing-wind-living-water-2/>