

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. Last week, or I could also say last year, we finished discussing the wonderful doctrine of adoption. Therefore, as we continue to go through the *ordo salutis*, or the order of salvation, we come to the next item, which is sanctification. So, Dr. Spencer, how would you like to begin?

Dr. Spencer: I'd like to begin by reading 2 Corinthians 5:17, where the apostle Paul tells us that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"¹

Marc Roby: Well, it is certainly appropriate to begin a new year by discussing a new creation!

Dr. Spencer: It does seem fitting, doesn't it? And, of course, when Paul wrote that "if anyone is in Christ" what he was saying was that if the person has been born again, repented, believed, been justified and adopted. And, as we have discussed before, the *ordo salutis* puts these steps in our salvation in order, but that doesn't necessarily imply that there is a time sequence to the events. In some cases it is only a logical sequence. Nevertheless, only a person who is born again and justified can be sanctified.

Marc Roby: You noted at the end of our session last week that adoption, being a legal declaration, does not change our nature. But that God's children will be changed to be more and more like their heavenly Father.

Dr. Spencer: And that's a very important point, we are most definitely changed. Adoption can be singled out as a legal declaration and, as we saw, the apex of privilege for a Christian, but that isn't the end of the story. It is also true that God brings about *real* tangible change in every single person he saves. We are *not* saved on the basis of anything we have done or will do as we have stated many times, rather, we are saved based on the perfect obedience of Christ alone. But that in no way implies that there isn't a very real, observable change that takes place in us as well.

Marc Roby: Which is what Paul is getting at when he says that we are new creations.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. When we are enabled by regeneration to repent and believe the gospel, we are united to Christ by that faith. As a result of our union with Christ, God declares us to be just and adopts us as his children, which are both legal declarations and have nothing fundamentally to do with our actual nature.

But regeneration brings about more than just the ability to repent and believe. Regeneration is a real change in our nature. It produces a radical change in our worldview and affects every aspect of our being. As I noted last time, God doesn't just adopt us, he also changes us so that our lives change to be conformed more and more to the example of our older brother, Jesus Christ. That is

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the process of sanctification. The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, in Question 35, “What is sanctification?”

Marc Roby: And the answer is, “Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.”

Dr. Spencer: And that is a wonderful answer that provides a good summary of the biblical teaching. Sanctification refers to the process of being sanctified, which means to be set apart for a sacred purpose or to be purified. Both senses are important theologically. Christians are people who have been chosen by God, as we read in Romans 8:29, for the purpose of being conformed to the likeness of Jesus Christ, which requires being purified.

Marc Roby: And being purified sets us apart from the rest of the world.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly, both senses of the word sanctified apply. We are God’s chosen people and we are called his treasured possession six times in the Old Testament. For example, in Deuteronomy 26:18 we read, “And the LORD has declared this day that you are his people, his treasured possession as he promised, and that you are to keep all his commands.” Isn’t that amazing? God calls us his treasured possession. It boggles the mind. But God is in the business of perfecting his people so that we become truly holy in the end. He will not leave his treasured possession in their sinful condition.

Marc Roby: It is important to emphasize again that we are not chosen because of anything in us that makes us more deserving than someone else. Nor do we make ourselves holy or deserving by anything we do; we can’t remove the stain of sin ourselves. We aren’t saved because of anything we have done or will do.

Dr. Spencer: That’s very true and very important. Our salvation is completely a gift of grace from beginning to end.

I’d also like to quote Wayne Grudem from his *Systematic Theology* text. He says that “*Sanctification is a progressive work of God and man that makes us more and more free from sin and like Christ in our actual lives.*”² Now Grudem’s definition emphasizes two facts: First, that sanctification is usually thought of as a progressive work and, second, that it is a work to which we also contribute, and both of these things are certainly true. But an often-overlooked aspect of sanctification is what John Murray calls definitive sanctification.

Marc Roby: And what does Murray mean by that?

Dr. Spencer: He means that there is an aspect of sanctification that is definitive, meaning that it has already been accomplished and is final. Now, to be clear, there is also a progressive aspect to sanctification, but Murray points out, surprisingly, that the progressive aspect is *not* the biblical emphasis for the term sanctification.

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 746

Murray wrote that “We properly think of calling, regeneration, justification, and adoption as acts of God effected once for all, and not requiring or admitting of repetition. It is of their nature to be definitive. But a considerable part of New Testament teaching places sanctification in this category.”³

Marc Roby: Now, which Scriptures does Murray use to illustrate this point?

Dr. Spencer: He points to Paul’s opening address in his first letter to the church of Corinth. We read in 1 Corinthians 1:2, “To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy”. The Greek word Paul used, which is translated by the past tense verb sanctified, is a perfect, passive participle form of ἁγιάζω (hagiazō), which means to make holy, or purify. The fact that it is in the perfect tense tells us that Paul views it as a completed action.

Murray also cites 1 Corinthians 6:11, where Paul tells the Corinthians that they were washed, they were sanctified, they were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. He gives a number of other examples as well, and when you look at them in context there is no doubt about Murray’s statement. He is certainly correct in claiming there is a significant strand of New Testament teaching that views our sanctification as a completed work.

Marc Roby: Of course, it does not follow that we have been made sinless in this life.

Dr. Spencer: No, that doesn’t follow at all. In fact, John tells us, in 1 John 1:8 that “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” We still have sin in us even after being regenerated, converted, justified and adopted. In fact, the Bible clearly teaches that we will have sin in us until the day we die. But, as Murray points out, “It is one thing for sin to live in us: it is another for us to live in sin.”⁴

Marc Roby: That’s a clever and memorable way to put it. A Christian still sins, sometimes grievously, but our lives should not be characterized by sin. It is not the pattern.

Dr. Spencer: And Murray’s statement makes this important point. This idea of definitive sanctification is extremely important because there is a very common heresy in the church world today that says you are saved if you have prayed a certain prayer at some point, no matter how you then live your life. But that teaching is a dangerous lie that finds absolutely zero support in the Bible. The New Testament consistently portrays believers as changed people. We certainly continue to change more and more throughout our lives, and the overall trend should be one of increasing holiness. That is progressive sanctification and we will talk about it next. But first, I want to discuss this doctrine of definitive sanctification. There *must* be significant change in a person’s life when that person first comes to faith in Christ or the conversion is not real.

Marc Roby: Now, of course, you don’t mean that this change will be equally large in every single person who comes to faith.

³ John Murray, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, Banner of Truth Trust, 1977, pg. 277

⁴ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955, pg. 145

Dr. Spencer: No, I don't mean that at all. Nor will the change necessarily be readily observable by everyone, although it usually is quite noticeable to people who know the person well. But the change will always be clearly noticeable to the person himself. If a man claims to have been born again, he must be able to tell you about the immediate changes he noticed in his life.

Now, it must be said that if he was a decent, law-abiding, honorable man before his conversion, the changes may not be very noticeable to others. They may mostly be changes in his thoughts, imagination, attitude and so on. But even those internal changes will show up in his speech and actions so that people who know him well will notice.

Marc Roby: Well, if nothing else, he will be telling them about Christ.

Dr. Spencer: That is often the first indication unbelievers have that someone they know has been born again. All of a sudden he wants to tell them about Jesus Christ and what has happened. But there is more. His priorities are different. How he spends his time is different, who he wants to fellowship with is different. And, if he was regularly involved in any obvious outward sinful behavior before his conversion, then the change will be very noticeable.

Marc Roby: Can you give us some examples?

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. Suppose a man used to go out every Friday night with his friends and get drunk. That will stop. I'm not saying he will never drink again at all, nor even that he will never get drunk again in his life; but he will recognize that being drunk is a sin and because of the change in his nature he won't desire to spend an evening with unbelievers engaging in sinful behavior. Therefore, this behavior will stop. Or suppose he had been someone who used a lot of filthy language or told a lot of course jokes. That behavior will also change.

Marc Roby: Although it may take time to completely break the habit of using certain kinds of speech.

Dr. Spencer: Well of course it will. I'm not suggesting the change will always be complete immediately, but even though the change may not be complete, there *will* be immediate change. And the more obviously sinful and deliberate the actions, the more complete the immediate change will be.

Marc Roby: That makes me think of what Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:28, "He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need."

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's a good example. Being a thief is obviously unacceptable, sinful behavior and is very deliberate. You can imagine someone who used to swear a lot slipping and having a foul word pop out, especially if he is excited or angry, but it is not possible to imagine someone accidentally breaking into someone else's house and stealing their TV set.

Marc Roby: Yes, I don't think anyone would believe that was accidental.

Dr. Spencer: No one I know would believe such a thing. And so, if someone was a thief when he was saved, you would expect that behavior to stop immediately. Or if he was committing

adultery, you would expect that to stop. There will always be immediate, tangible change in a person who is saved. There are no exceptions to that rule, although as we noted, the changes may be less noticeable in some people than in others, especially if the person was already living an outwardly moral and decent life. But the Bible is clear that an abrupt change will always occur. We read in 1 John 3:9 that “No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.”

That verse makes a powerful argument. If a man has been born again, God’s seed remains in him, which means that the man’s fundamental nature has changed. He is not *just* God’s adopted son, he has also been changed in his being. Both his legal status *and* his nature have been changed. Therefore, he cannot go on sinning.

Marc Roby: Yes, that is a powerful argument. Although we should probably point out that John is *not* saying that a Christian will never sin at all, which is how some people have interpreted the verse. You quoted 1 John 1:8 before, which says that “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” Therefore, it is obvious that 1 John 3:9 cannot mean that a born-again person will never sin at all.

Dr. Spencer: And 1 John 3:9 isn’t the only verse that causes this trouble for some people. Just a few verses earlier, in 1 John 3:6 he wrote that “No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.” There are two primary ways I’ve seen these verses interpreted. Wayne Grudem, for example, says that they mean a Christian will not sin habitually, in other words, it won’t be the pattern of his life.⁵ John Murray disagrees with that view and says that the verses mean a Christian will never commit the unpardonable sin.⁶ I happen to think Grudem’s view is correct here, but in either case, the verses do *not* mean that a Christian will never sin at all.

Nevertheless, the point is clear that when a person is born again, there is a fundamental change to his nature, not just his legal status. And that change in nature is immediately evident in his attitudes, thoughts and behavior.

Marc Roby: And that is the main point Paul makes in Romans Chapter Six.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. That is a famous chapter, which we have discussed before, but it is proper to look at it again in the current context. At the end of Chapter Five in Romans, Paul argues that where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more. In other words, in some sense, God’s grace is even more obvious when sin is greatest.

In Chapter Six, the apostle then deals with an erroneous conclusion that he anticipates some people will draw from that statement. He states this wrong conclusion in Romans 6:1, where he writes, “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” In other words, someone might incorrectly conclude that if greater sin makes God’s grace even more

⁵ Grudem, *op. cit.*, pg. 751

⁶ John Murray, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, Banner of Truth Trust, 1977, pp 282-283

evident, we should just continue to sin and thereby increase the grace that God pours out on us because doing so would increase his glory.

Marc Roby: And Paul's answer to this erroneous view is unambiguous. In Romans 6:2 we read, "By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?"

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that answer is unambiguous. In his commentary on Romans John Murray makes the following comment about this answer; "The reason is not in the form of elaborate argument but in the form of a question to show the inherent contradiction, indeed absurdity, of the supposed inference."⁷ In other words, the idea that we should go on sinning is an absurd contradiction given the fact that we died to sin. We must remember that the biblical idea of death is not a cessation of existence, it is separation. If we are dead to sin we are separated from it. Murray also wrote, "Death and life cannot coexist; we cannot be dead and living with respect to the same thing at the same time. ... What the apostle has in view is the once-for-all definitive breach with sin which constitutes the identity of the believer."⁸

Marc Roby: In other words, it is definitive sanctification.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly.

Marc Roby: Well, I look forward to continuing this discussion, but I think we had better stop for today. So, let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We would love to hear from you

⁷ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997, pg. 212

⁸ *Ibid*, pg. 213