

## **THE GRACE THAT JUSTIFIES AND SANCTIFIES**

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**T**he words *justification* and *sanctification* find their fullest conceptual development in the writings of the Apostle Paul. Therefore this chapter will focus upon Paul's presentation of these two themes.<sup>1</sup>

### **THE MEANING OF JUSTIFICATION**

At the outset it is important to note the relationship between the terms *justification* and *righteousness*. They seem to be two different words, but in the language of the New Testament, they are basically the same word based on the same Greek stem which in English means "right." *Justification* could better have been translated as "rightification." Consequently, it is important to understand that to *justify* means "to bestow righteousness," and to *grant righteousness* means "to justify."

### **Forensic Background and Relational Foreground**

*Justification* is a forensic word, which indicates that it is to be understood in terms of the pronouncement which a judge renders in a courtroom

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proceeding. If the judge finds against the accused, the verdict is one of condemnation, but if the judge finds for the accused, a verdict of acquittal (justification) is rendered. In other words, guilt or innocence is established by the findings and pronouncement of a judge. Thus, justification has a declarative sense in which the defendant is not made right but is pronounced right.

This forensic usage is the primary background for the New Testament teaching on justification. However, the forensic character of justification, while vital to the biblical understanding of the term, does not exhaust Scripture's teaching. Particularly in the New Testament, court judgments and relationships are translated into the higher key of forgiving grace and personal relationship with God, and the concept of God as Judge is exceeded, though not superseded, by the idea of God as Father. In other words, the forensic meaning of justification flows into the theology of the inexhaustible and super-abounding riches of God's gift of grace in Christ. It is this that establishes an altogether new and right relationship between God and humanity.

## The Righteousness of God

To speak of a right relationship with God is to speak of God's righteousness. Paul's letter to the Romans, with important support from Galatians and Philippians, is Scripture's most salient source for understanding God's righteousness and the justification it brings. Paul's initial approach to the topic begins in Romans 1:16–17. Here he presents the thesis which he will pursue in the rest of the letter. He declares that the Gospel—the proclamation of God's Son as Messiah (Savior) and Lord (1:3)—powerfully leads to salvation. It does so because the gospel is the locus for the revelation of God's righteousness. This revelation is absolutely essential if humans are to be saved from their unrighteousness and God's just wrath upon it.

Paul paints a sordid picture of the depths of human sin in Romans 1:18—3:20. Here are the primal sin of Gentile idolatry as it flows into immorality (1:18–32) and the Jewish sin of judgmentalism upon Gentiles being accompanied by hypocrisy (2:1). Thus, whether it be the Jew who has the written law or the Gentile who has the inner law of conscience, all have sinned (2:12–15; 3:9). Consequently, no one escapes sin's clutches, and the law, though giving the knowledge of sin, cannot deliver from it and bring justification (3:19–20).

In Romans 3:21, which picks up the theme of 1:16–17, an entirely new dimension is brought to view, introduced by the revolutionary word *but*. The whole world stands guilty before the judgment seat of God and awaits execution (3:19–20) . . . “*but*.” Clearly a revolution and reversal of the human situation is signaled here, for the word *but* turns things the opposite way. The human *but* often changes hope into despair, but the divine *but* transposes despair into hope. In place of human unrighteousness (3:19) comes the restorative righteousness of God which is appropriated solely by faith (3:22; cf. 1:17), and by which God saves guilty humankind from His just wrath.

What is meant by the righteousness of God, then, is not a static state of rightness in God, but God’s covenant faithfulness in action for the salvation of God’s people. This comports with a significant class of Old Testament texts, particularly in Isaiah and the Psalms, where God’s righteousness, sometimes translated as “deliverance,” or “vindication,” is synonymous with His salvation. This can be seen clearly, for example, in Isaiah 46:13: “I bring near my deliverance [righteousness] . . . and my salvation will not tarry.” Verses of the same import in Isaiah are 51:5; 54:8; 56:1; 59:16; 61:10. God Himself is spoken of as One “announcing vindication [righteousness], mighty to save” (Isa. 63:1). Indeed, God is “a righteous God and a Savior” (45:21; also Pss. 31:1; 40:10; 51:4; 71:15; 98:2; 143:11).

There are a number of facets in God’s bestowal of His saving righteousness and justification of sinners. These may be enumerated as follows.

### Justification as Acquittal

Directly related to the forensic or juridical background of justification is the concept of acquittal, the opposite of which is condemnation. This contrasting word pair is found in Deuteronomy 25:1; Proverbs 17:15; Matthew 12:37; Romans 5:16, 18; 8:33–34; and 2 Corinthians 3:9. Thus, in justification, God saves sinners from condemnation for their sins (Rom. 8:1) by acquitting them at the bar of divine justice.

### Justification as the Reckoning of Righteousness

The most important passage for defining the meaning of justification is Romans 4. Here Abraham, who in the Jewish tradition of Paul’s day was

thought to be a paragon of virtue and a man of perfection,<sup>2</sup> is brought forth as an illustration of what Christianity's forefather according to the flesh found, and what the rest of humanity, the ungodly, may find as well (4:1, 22–24). In Jewish thought, as echoed in the first part of verse 2, it was believed that Abraham was justified by his works, the inference being that he had a boast. Paul demolishes this view at the end of verse 2 by making it clear that Abraham could not boast before God, which renders all boasting empty. The corollary of this is that justification cannot be by works. Thus, Romans 4:2 shows what Abraham did not find, while verse 3, quoting Genesis 15:6, describes what he did find. He found that his faith, engendered by God's promise, "was reckoned to him as righteousness." This means that justification, which from one standpoint is acquittal, may from another be understood as the reckoning of righteousness. This reckoning, counting, or imputing of righteousness occurred when Abraham believed God.

Observation of the line of argument from Genesis 15:1 to 15:6 is instructive. Three major stages emerge: the divine promise of blessing, the human response of faith, and the divine pronouncement of righteousness. In other words, when God confronts humankind with His Word of grace, and humans accept it in faith, God's verdict goes forth: "Your faith is reckoned as righteousness," that is, "Your faith is pronounced to be a right response to My grace and indicative of a right relationship with Me." A right standing with God results from the cause-effect interaction between promise and faith. The promise elicits faith, and faith receives the promise. Paul's argument in Romans 4:3 is that if there is a divine *reckoning* of righteousness, such righteousness can never be considered as humanity's achievement, but only as God's grace. This is clarified in Romans 4:4–5. Verse 4 indicates how things operate on the human level: people work and get wages, not grace, for it. Verse 5, on the other hand, indicates how things operate on the divine level: by abandoning working for righteousness in favor of trusting (having faith in) the God who justifies the ungodly, this trust or faith is reckoned as righteousness.

To speak of the ungodly as being justified or reckoned as righteous was a radical, indeed a shocking, statement. To Paul's Jewish contemporaries it seemed supportive of ungodliness—hence the charges against Paul in

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2. C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, rev. ed., Black's New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black, 1991), 82.

Romans 3:8; 6:1; and 6:15—and directly contrary to the Hebrew Scriptures, which say that God will not acquit the wicked (Exod. 23:7) and that those who justify the wicked or condemn the righteous are an abomination to God (Prov. 17:15; cf. Isa. 5:23). In this world of thought God pronounces only the just to be just (cf. 1 Kings 8:32).

What answer can be given to the apparent ethical dilemma Paul's words pose? According to the Psalms, God Himself is justified in His condemnation of evil (Ps. 51:4). What justifies God, then, in justifying the ungodly rather than the godly? The Psalmist further pleaded: "Do not enter into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you" (143:2). Thus, for the Psalmist, God's judgment upon the unrighteous could only be "Guilty!" However, in Paul's use of the forensic terms *righteousness* and *justification*, he teaches that God *does* enter into judgment with His unrighteous people and, incredibly, the verdict is not "Guilty!" but "Righteous!" What justifies this seeming contradiction? First, it must be remembered that Paul taught that "all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin" (Rom. 3:9). Thus, if anyone were to be justified, it would have to be from among the ungodly. Second, Paul did not teach merely that God justified the ungodly, but that God justified the ungodly *who placed their faith and trust in Him* (4:5). These are people who have repentantly responded "Yes!" to God's verdict upon them as sinners and have cast themselves upon the mercy of God. This is already a new alignment with God, a saying "Amen!" to God. To have faith is, indeed, the right response to God. Third, the faith these people have is in the atoning sacrifice which God has provided as the means of justification (3:24–25).

### Justification as Divine Forgiveness

In Romans 4:6–8 Paul gets to the heart of the matter. After discussing Abraham and a prominent text, Genesis 15:6, now he turns to David and another prominent text, Psalm 32:1–2. It was an Old Testament dictum that an important testimonial was to be established by at least two witnesses (Deut. 17:6), so Paul presents Abraham and David. Further, Paul had proffered his belief that the law and the prophets witness to righteousness by faith (Rom. 3:21), so he presents Abraham as the witness of the law and David as the witness of the prophets (i.e., from the rest of the Old Testament). What Paul, in effect, does is to use the testimony of David to

explain more fully the meaning of the reckoning of righteousness to Abraham. The basis on which Paul did this was by applying the second of Rabbi Hillel's seven rules of biblical interpretation, *gezerah shawah*, which deals with equivalent expressions.<sup>3</sup> According to this principle, a word or phrase found in one text of Scripture could be explained by the meaning it bears in another biblical text. Since the word *reckon* appears not only in Genesis 15:6 but also in Psalm 32:1–2, considered as a unit of thought, Paul uses the latter text from Psalms, with its threefold parallelism, to illumine the former text from Genesis. When this is done, the inner meaning of justification or the reckoning of righteousness unfolds. *Justification* comes to mean the forgiveness of sin or, what amounts to the same thing, the covering of sin or its *nonreckoning* to the believer. Guilt is gone, sin is covered so that it does not appear for judgment, and all charges are dropped. The latter member of this triad of ideas which explain the content of justification finds a meaningful echo in 2 Corinthians 5:19: "in Christ God was [at the cross] reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them." Thus, through one nuance or another, forgiveness lies at the heart of justification. In harmony with this, Ellen White says: "Pardon and justification are one and the same thing."<sup>4</sup>

### Justification as Eschatological Life and New Creation

There is a further ingredient in the meaning of *justification* which is also found in Romans 4. *Justification* not only refers to the reckoning of righteousness but also to the bestowal of eternal life. Paul mentions this in a pungent phrase in Romans 5:18, where he speaks of "one man's act of righteousness" (the cross) as leading to "justification and life." This translation could equally as well and, perhaps better, be rendered "lifegiving justification" or "justification which issues in life." Thus, justification brings not only pardon but life. In Romans 4:17 this is seen with utter clarity. Paul speaks here of Abraham standing "in the presence of the God . . . who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things which do not exist." Paul here utilizes two great realities of Scripture to explain the fullness of

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3. Herman L. Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1931), 93–94.

4. Ellen G. White, Ms 21, 1891.

justification: *Creation*—God calls into existence the things which do not exist—and *Resurrection*—God gives life to the dead. In other words, justification is a new creation in which the power of God is present to bring life to those who are spiritually dead. Second Corinthians 5:17 affirms: “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” Galatians 6:15 comports with this when, in a letter in which justification is the main theme, Paul says that circumcision and uncircumcision count for nothing, but what really counts is a new creation. This is in line with Paul’s rabbinic background according to which when a Gentile was converted to Judaism, that Gentile was considered to be a “new creature” through the forgiveness of sins.<sup>5</sup> The concept of newness is found in Romans 6:4 which speaks of one who has been united to Christ as walking in “newness of life,” a reference to the eschatological life of the age to come manifesting itself in present existence.

In terms of Romans 4, justification, while having a legal setting in the pronouncement of a judge, goes beyond it by speaking of the believer’s personal relationship to God who both forgives his or her sin (judges do not forgive sin) and, as Creator, makes him or her a new creature in whom eternal life is already present.

### Justification as Exchange of Lordships

Another component, without which the full implications of justification will not be seen, is found in Romans 6. Often this chapter is thought to deal primarily with the subject of sanctification as a reality following after justification. To be sure, sanctification as both a word (vv. 19, 22) and a concept (vv. 2, 4, 6, 13, 17–19, 22) is present in the chapter. However, these references must be seen in the light of the purpose for which Romans 6 was written in the context of Paul’s argument. The occasion for the chapter was the misunderstanding of Paul’s teaching on justification by faith alone apart from the law (Rom. 3:21–4:25). That teaching had been misconceived to mean that believers could justifiably perform

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5. Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, trans. David Cairns (London: SCM Press, 1960), 33, 36; W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 1955), 119; Arthur Darby Nock, *Early Gentile Christianity and Its Hellenistic Background*, Harper Torchbooks (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 64.

evil that good may come (3:8), which meant that Christians could continue in sin so that grace might abound (6:1). This was an erroneous deduction from Paul's teaching that when the law came in at Sinai, far from sin being abated, trespasses abounded, only to be met by the superabounding of grace (5:20). Some of Jewish background thought that such a construction was tantamount not only to the justification of the ungodly, but also to the justification of ungodliness. To quash this view, Paul wrote Romans 6. His primary argument in clarification of his teaching is that in the life of believers there has occurred a transfer or exchange of lordships. Sin *used to be* lord (vv. 17, 20), but as a result of baptism *into* Christ and His death (vv. 3–4), death to sin's lordship occurs, and the lordship of Christ begins. In the forensic language of Romans 8:3, Christ judicially condemned sin in the flesh, and thus sin has lost its case in court and is thereby deprived of authority over, or custody of, the life of the Christian. In other words, *freedom* from sin as lord is the result of union with Christ. It is remarkable and illuminating that the Greek word employed in Romans 6:7 to state that freedom from sin's reign has taken place is the word ordinarily meaning "to justify." This word, when used with the preposition *from* means, in the passive voice, "being freed from," as in Acts 13:39. In a parallel construction in Romans 6:18, 22, the Greek verb "to free" is used in the passive voice with *from* to indicate freedom from sin's slavery. There can be no question that for Paul justification, in addition to forgiveness of sins, involves liberation from the old lordship of sin. This newfound liberty is the root out of which the fruit of sanctification, spoken of in Romans 6, emerges. Justification is a far more powerful reality than a mere legal adjustment in the books of heaven. It is a dethroning of that illegitimate authority which prevents a sanctified life and the establishment of that divine authority which enables it. The rest of this chapter will focus on sanctification as a result, or fruit, of justification.

## THE MEANING OF SANCTIFICATION

Sanctification, or holiness, in one form or another, is one of the most significant and frequent (more than one thousand occurrences) concepts referred to in Scripture. So crucial is the matter that believers are admonished to strive for "the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14).



Sanctification is grounded in the Christological reality of Christ as both Savior and Lord. As Christ's Saviorhood can never be severed from His lordship, so salvation as gift can never be severed from salvation as claim; grace and faith can never be separated from works or fruit; life from Christ can never be divided from living for Christ; and justification can never be disconnected from sanctification. In what follows, sanctification will be discussed in terms of its two major components: the relational and the moral.

### A New Relationship and Status

*Sanctification*, like *justification*, is a relational word. Its basic meaning has to do with being set apart or separated. This is illustrated by the seventh day which God set apart from the rest of the week to be His special day (Gen. 2:3; Exod. 20:8–11). In this relational sense, the word *sanctification*, as applied to humankind, is not first of all a matter or morals but of belonging to God as one consecrated or separated for Him. God's call to holiness is well expressed in Leviticus 19:2: "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." God's holiness means that He is "Wholly Other," totally unique and transcendent. God is holy in and of Himself, so that He can be called the "Holy One" (Isa. 10:17; Hos. 11:9) to whom the Seraphim cry "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts" (Isa. 6:3). God's people are holy or sanctified only in a derivative sense, holy by virtue of a relation to Him. By His own action God has consecrated them to Himself.

It is in this context that 1 Corinthians 1:2 is to be understood. Notwithstanding the many serious moral and theological problems the Corinthians had, Paul still addresses them as "those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints." The perfect tense in Greek which is used here in "sanctified" points to a completed action in the past which has continuing results in the present. The Corinthians already have been sanctified or set apart as His people by the consecrating power of His call. This is not sanctification in the ethical, but in the relational sense. While sanctification in the moral sense is the work of a lifetime,<sup>6</sup> sanctification in the relational sense, whereby believers become God's property and part of His people, is, like justification, the work of a moment. This is corroborated by 1 Corinthians 6:11, which

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6. Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 560–61.

places washing, sanctification, and justification alike in the past as the product of the activity of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Spirit of God—for which reason each verb is in the passive voice, the so-called divine passive. The fact that sanctification can be coupled with justification, itself a relational term, as a past event and even listed before justification shows that both sanctification, in the relational sense, as well as justification, itself a relational term, are twin roots of moral growth.

In the sense discussed so far sanctification refers to God's setting apart of a people to belong to Himself. The note of being the people of God is also found in 1 Corinthians 1:2 where, following the statement that the Corinthians have been sanctified, it is said that they were "called to be saints." Here "to be" is not in the Greek text and, while appropriate to use in English, should not be understood as referring to a status which will take place sometime in the indefinite future. By virtue of the fact that the Corinthians were already sanctified, they were already saints. The same root is used in Greek for both *sanctification* and *saint*. It is because people belong to Jesus Christ (i.e., are sanctified in Him)—that they can be called saints. That is why Paul addresses his letters to the saints. They have become such by God's action in sanctifying or setting them apart. The term *saints*, then, which almost always occurs in the plural, means "the people of God," or "God's own people."

## Moral Growth in Goodness

Out of the root of sanctification as *belonging* emerges sanctification as *becoming*. The former, as the "already" of God's consecrating activity, leads to the "not yet" of God's transforming activity (2 Cor. 3:18). The former has previously been completed; the latter continues on. Heaven itself will be a ceaseless approaching unto God.<sup>7</sup>

One of the most important passages of scripture for sanctification as moral change is Romans 6. In this chapter Paul affirms that the Christian, as one who has died to sin as lord, no longer lives under its domination (vv. 2, 14). With the crucifixion of the old self, sin's possessive power over the body has been broken so that the believer need no longer render slavish service to sin (v. 6). This definitive death is symbolized by the rite of baptism.

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7. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 331–332.

Baptism not only represents a Christian's commitment to Christ, accepting Him as his or her new Lord. It is also a sign of the believer's unification with those main soteriological events by which complete redemption has been acquired, namely, Christ's death and resurrection (vv. 3–4). In consequence of the believer's union with the crucified and risen Lord, he or she is to (1) walk in newness of life (v. 4); (2) not let sin reign in his or her mortal body (v. 12); and (3) yield his or her members to God as instruments or weapons of righteousness rather than to sin as instruments or weapons of wickedness (v. 13).

As to the first of these, newness of life is a reference to the eschatological life of the age to come. The Christian has been grasped by this life, and his or her life-walk in this world is to be transformed thereby.

Thus, the believer's participation in the realities of the age to come is manifested and attested by the way he or she walks (i.e., conducts his or her moral life).<sup>8</sup> There is to be a profound contrast between the unconverted and converted person: "For just as you once presented your members to impurity . . . so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification" (Rom. 6:19). Since believers are not their own because they have been bought with a price, they are empowered to glorify God in their bodies (1 Cor. 6:19–20).

The second consequence of the believer's union with the crucified and risen Lord is that the Christian need not and therefore should not let sin reign in his or her mortal body, to obey the body's continuing desires (Rom. 6:12). Though the old self has been crucified, and sin's kingly hold over the body has been broken (v. 6), the body still belongs to the old aeon—that is why it is called a mortal body (v. 12)—and, thus has continuing desires. These are the avenues through which sin seeks to regain the throne of its former subject. Thus, while the Christian is freed from the reign of sin, he or she is not freed, this side of the resurrection to immortal life, from sin's influence. The only thing which can keep sin from reestablishing its rule is the same thing that ended it in the first place, the grace of God (v. 14). Thus, the Christian is still subject to temptation through the old bodily appetites, but by the grace of God and the Spirit of God, the believer may find victory over appetites becoming life-characterizing deeds of the flesh (Rom. 8:13; Gal. 5:16–25).

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8. For more on this topic see Ivan T. Blazen, "Salvation" in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 297.

In the third place, as Romans 6:13 instructs, believers are asked to yield their bodies and its members to God as instruments or weapons of righteousness instead of to sin as weapons of wickedness. This is the Christian warfare, and it helps to define the implications of death to sin mentioned in 6:2. Death to sin does not mean, even after the exchange of lordships from sin to Christ, that sin has no further relation to the lives of believers. Rather, death to sin means that having been freed from sin as lord, believers are to fight sin as enemy. Having been released from sin's sovereignty, they are to battle sin's solicitation. The Christian has peace with God, but he or she is never again to be at peace with sin, but aggressively hostile to it.

The sanctification of the Christian is one of constant movement forward. The will of God for human life cannot be reduced to any fixed level of attainment. There is no boundary on the ethical commitment to which the gospel calls believers (Phil. 1:27; cf. Eph. 4:1). The reason for this is that Christ is the norm of Christian existence, as Scripture testifies: "For to me living is Christ" (Phil. 1:21). As He loved, forgave, and welcomed sinners, they are to do the same (Rom. 15:7) as His newly adopted children. In other words, what believers have learned of Christ is to determine their behavior (Eph. 4:20). He is the One who illustrates in His own existence the principles of love, humility, and service believers are to emulate because He is Lord (Phil. 2:5-11). When it comes to Christian demeanor, the example of Christ in suffering is to be imitated by His people. They are to "follow in his steps" (1 Pet. 2:21-23).

To consider Christ in this way is to see that there is no ultimately reachable height or depth of the sanctified life, no end to the journey of sanctification. There is fulfillment, but not finality. At whatever stage Christians arrive, there is always further advance to be made. Christians may already be living to please God, but they are to do so "more and more" (1 Thess. 4:1). Even when they have exemplified love itself, the apostolic call is to love "more and more" (4:9-10)—to "increase and abound in love" (3:12). The fundamental reason for the "more" of these texts is not because original sin keeps believers from doing the good, but because of the inexhaustible nature and challenge of Christ's love.

According to Philippians 1:9-11, Christian love is to abound with knowledge and all discernment so that believers may "determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ

for the glory and praise of God.” This text uncovers an important aspect of sanctification. As the Christian lives in the insight of Christ’s love, he or she is to learn the excellent way which meets with God’s approval. This concept coheres with that expressed in Romans 12:2: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Within the framework of the love of Christ transforming the mind, the Christian is called to *discover* or *discern* what God’s will is in the varied circumstances of life. According to Ephesians 5:8–10: “For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light.” Thus, believers are to “live as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true”—and to “try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord.” In other words, the Christian is one who in every situation seeks for the will of God, for what pleases Him. This is not a static standard but a dynamic one which calls us to ever new and increasing sanctified insight and moral fulfillment.



## **THE GRACE OF CHRISTIAN PERFECTION**

*Hans K. LaRondelle and Woodrow W. Whidden*

Christ explained how the love of the heavenly Father, flowing out impartially to both the good and the evil, is a perfect love that must be imitated or reflected by the true children of God. This New Testament concept of Christian perfection is found in Matthew 5:43–48. Christian perfection implies a personal experience of the saving love of the God of Israel and the manifestation of its sanctifying power in wholehearted love to all who need our help.

### **CHRISTIAN PERFECTION AS EMBEDDED IN NEW TESTAMENT SOTERIOLOGY**

The context of self-sacrificing service to others found in the story of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:21 lays the foundation for the entire experience of perfecting grace. Perfection, then, is not the striving after ethical ideals or even the endeavor to imitate or copy Christ's life independent of Him, but it is the wholehearted, undivided belonging to Him and living with Him by His saving and sanctifying power. Thus Christian perfection is defined not by one's living according to moral law only but by belonging to and following the living Lord Jesus with a pure heart. All such follow the Lamb wherever He goes (Rev. 14:4).

The very foundation of any Christian experience of perfecting grace includes grace-empowered obedience to the will of God and is experienced in the heart of any disciple that is totally dedicated to the service of Christ and to His human children. Such dedication can only arise out of a heart that

has been led to trust in Christ Jesus as the converting, forgiving, and transforming (sanctifying) Christ. It thus becomes quite apparent that the experience of Christian perfection is woven into the very fabric of the various facets of every true believer's personal experience of salvation.

For any person who is on the path of conversion, full surrender to Christ as Lord is the essential, initial step in the process of conscious character change. This includes six subsequent, definitive phases. Included in these experiences are:

1. Pardon, or forgiveness for all sins, or as it is more technically known, justification by faith alone in the imputed merits of Christ;
2. Sanctification by faith in the imparted merits of Christ;
3. Coming to the place in the experience of sanctification where the believer is finished with sins of willful premeditation and attitudes which are constantly excusing known sins or character defects;
4. The experience of perfection will then reach a stage where there will be no compromise with sin and temptation, no matter how severe the test may be. In other words, those who receive the "seal of the living God" described in Revelation 13 and 14 will be so perfect that they would rather die than knowingly disobey any clearly revealed command of God;
5. Sinless perfection, in both nature and character will only be fully realized when glorification of the body transpires at the second coming of Christ. For the first time in human history, since the Fall, the people of God will then be able to say that they are "sinless" in the more absolute sense of the word. And then there is the final phase of the redeemed experience of Christian perfection;
6. The constant character growth that all of the saved will experience as they dynamically grow in the likeness of Christ for all eternity!

Thus what follows will be a brief exposition of each of these varied facets of what can be called the biblical taxonomy of perfection. The redemption of Christ in its fullness is in the New Testament distinguished by two aspects or phases, the *present salvation* of justification and sanctification by faith in Christ on the one hand, and the *future salvation* of glorification at the second advent of Jesus Christ, on the other. Like the concept of the kingdom of God, so also *perfection* is a present gift and reality; yet, in another sense, it is a promise to be realized only at the ultimate



establishment of the kingdom of glory. This dual distinction Paul also applies to the concept of believers *as God's children*. In Romans 8:14, he assures the Christians that they have become already "sons [and daughters] of God," since they are led by the Spirit of God. "For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God."<sup>1</sup>

This present redemptive assurance Paul then underlines by stating: "And by him we cry 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we *are* God's children" (vv. 15–16; emphasis added). However, when the apostle proceeds to dwell on the future glory to be revealed to believers, he makes the remarkable statement that "[while we humans have the Spirit of God, we] groan inwardly *as we wait eagerly for adoption to sonship*, the redemption of our bodies" (v. 23; emphasis added).

The relationship of God and the believer as Father and child, therefore, is both a *present reality*, in one real sense, and a *future reality*, in another sense. The difference is determined by the meaning of the two advents of Christ. The same principle applies to the use of perfection with the Apostle Paul. On the one hand, he can say that believers in Christ are *perfect* in Him and may grow up together into one perfect body or spiritually mature manhood and womanhood (Col. 1:28; 3:14; 4:12; Eph. 4:13; 1 Cor. 14:20). On the other hand, Paul stresses that the ultimate perfection *has not yet* arrived and is still future (1 Cor. 13:10). Only at the glory of the second advent will Christ sweep away the imperfect.

## Phase 1: Perfection as Justification by Faith Alone

When the believer responds to the drawing power of God's convicting grace and surrenders to the lordship of Christ, such a one is then accepted for the sake of the doing and dying of Christ, and is declared to be perfectly sinless in a legal or forensic sense. This then becomes the effectual foundation of all subsequent experience of character transformation into the likeness of Christ. The key Bible verses are 1 John 1:9 and 2:1–2: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." "But if anyone does sin, we have an

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advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ the righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” Thus the newly converted believer stands in a new legal relationship to God and the “in Christ” status brings with it the blessing of absolute legal perfection (2 Cor. 5:17–21).

## Phase 2: Perfection as the Fruit of Sanctification

Perfection as sanctification includes dynamic growth in the likeness of Christ’s character. Paul upheld the human body as a good and holy creation of God, which was to be consecrated to the service of God. In contrast, with those whose “god is their stomach, and . . . [whose] glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things” (Phil. 3:19), Paul explicitly renounced every self-righteousness or perfection (vv. 8–12). Seeking his righteousness exclusively in Christ, Paul looked forward to his ultimate perfection in the resurrection from the dead (v. 11): “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (v. 12).

Philippians 3:12–15 provides one of the clearest definitions of perfection in the New Testament. For those who are pressing toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ, the very fact of their progress in reaching out to the prize is called Christian maturity or being perfect: “All of us, then, who are mature (perfect) should take such a view of things” (v. 15). Thus genuine Christian perfection or maturity includes dynamic growth into the likeness of Christ’s perfect righteousness. Perfection as growth in grace has to do with the fact that such growth involves a struggle, which strongly suggests that such perfection is not strictly sinless. Paul had such a close fellowship of heart with the living Christ that he could testify, “For to me, to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21), and “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). With this profound testimony the apostle touches upon the inward Christian struggle, which he also knows himself (1 Cor. 9:27), and which he develops more fully in Galatians 5:16–24 and Romans 7:14–25.

Paul did not say that his *I*, his self, was shot to death or was hanged to death, but it had been crucified, which indicates a prolonged dying process.

Although a crucified one was legally dead and exterminated, in actual reality such a one could live on for several days and nights on the cross, but in increasing sufferings and agonies. This illustration may serve to clarify the apostle's message in Galatians 5 and Romans 7. On the one hand, baptized Christians have to consider themselves, by faith in Christ, legally dead to sin and the condemning law of God (Rom. 6:11; 7:4). On the other hand, they discover that the old self is still alive in empirical reality; that the inherited and cultivated tendencies to evil and wrongdoing still send their desires and impulses to the cleansed heart.

It is a significant fact that not one apostolic letter in the New Testament presupposes a sinless church or a Christian life without the abiding battle with self. All the New Testament writings abound with moral exhortations and admonitions to fight the good fight against the flesh, the world, and the powers of darkness. For the baptized believers, however, there is no despair or defeat necessary in this battle. Christ dwells in their hearts and gives the victory (1 Cor. 15:57). The believers are called to be "strong in the Lord and in his mighty power" (Eph. 6:10). Being led by His Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit may be developed: "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23). Paul, therefore, summons: "So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. . . . But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law" (Gal. 5:16-18).

James adds the important idea that the various trials of life for the Christian operate as the *testing* of his faith, which produces steadfastness and, in this way of battle, perfection of character (James 1:2-4; compare also Rom. 5:3-4). These apostolic admonitions show that the Christian life is not one of mere peace and joy. On the contrary, the way of Christian perfection or sanctification knows inexpressible depths of struggle, sorrow, and repentance, besides the heights of redemptive joy. The way of Christian perfection can never be one of feeling holy or sinless, because God will gradually reveal more and more the defects of a person's character through an ever-increasing understanding and efficacy of His holy, spiritual law.

The consciousness of both truths *simultaneously* in Paul's mature Christian experience is the most profound proof that Christian perfection is not just a life of ecstatic joy or emotional elation, but it is also a life of faithful obedience and wrestling submission to our divine Lord and Savior.

Fighting in the divine power of the whole armor of God (Eph. 6:13ff), the Christian is called to destroy every obstacle to his or her living connection with God and to “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). The Christian can accept no other gods before Him. Christ wants to reproduce His own perfection of character in those who were originally created in His likeness and image.

“And we all, who with unveiled face contemplate the Lord’s glory are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18). This is the dynamic, increasing Christian perfection which the Apostle Paul extols and with holy passion urges upon the primitive church and thus on the church of all ages. The Old Testament covenant imperative to follow Yahweh is not annulled, but fulfilled and concretized in the true following of Christ. For believers to know Christ and to love Him with all their soul and all their heart means neither the renouncing of Yahweh nor apostasy from Moses and the prophets of Israel. On the contrary, only through the Son, “who is himself God” (John 1:18), can the Father be known, loved, obeyed, and fully honored.

### **Phase 3: No Acts of Sinful Premeditation and Attitudes of Excuse for Sinning**

John’s exposition on love in his first letter mounts a most compelling case for this important phase of Christian perfection: “No one born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God” (1 John 3:9). The Apostle John evidently proclaims only a Christian love, which consumes sin in the lives of the believers. When Christians are really in Christ, and Christ in them, they will “walk in the light, as he is in the light” (1 John 1:7). “Whoever says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made completed (perfected) in them. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did” (1 John 2:4–6). Thus to John, Christian perfection is more than sinlessness; it is a moral communion and dynamic love relationship of the soul with Christ, revealing the same character of holy love as Christ. Then there will be no fear in the believer’s heart for the day of judgment or shame when Christ appears in His holy glory: “This is how love

is made complete (perfected) among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: in this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:17–19; also 2:28).

As long as the soul is united with Christ and the Spirit of Christ abides in that person, that soul cannot sin, says the apostle in 1 John 3:9. The walk of the regenerated Christian in the light does not imply, however, any consciousness or feeling of sinlessness. On the contrary, to walk in the light means a continued dependence on God's forgiving and keeping grace. In other words, the victorious life of the Christian is not the automatic result of a sinless nature. There is no inherent righteousness in the Christian before his or her final glorification in the day of God. Therefore the believer can fall into sin again, as appears from John's consolation: "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ the Righteous One" (1 John 2:1).

Far from being written as an excuse for sinning or for a walk in darkness, this comforting message reveals the consciousness that in the reborn children of God, the old, sinful nature is at work, always striving for the mastery. The knowledge of inherent lusts of the flesh and of the eyes (1 John 2:16), will lead the believer to a deepening repentance of heart and self-condemnation. Only implicit trust in the word of acquittal from a God who is "greater than our hearts" (1 John 3:20), while walking in loving obedience to Him, will "set our hearts at rest in his presence" (1 John 3:19). Such implicit trust in the word of acquittal from God will not lead to presumptuous acts of sin on the part of a true believer.

When John distinguishes between mortal sin and non-mortal sin (1 John 5:16–17), he is only continuing the old-covenant doctrine of sin, which differentiated sharply between deliberate, presumptuous sin and unintentional sin, which is afterward repented (Num. 15:27–31; Ps. 19:13–14). The apostle wants to clarify, finally, that the Christian is kept from mortal or presumptuous sin because he or she is being *kept* from this way of sinning by the indwelling Spirit of Christ. The child of God is no longer under the overruling power of the evil one, as is the world (1 John 5:18–19).

#### **Phase 4: Sinless Loyalty in the Final Crisis of Christian History**

Very closely related to perfection, defined as the absence of acts of sinful, willful premeditation and attitudes of excusing sin, is the fourth phase. There will be a great eschatological test of perfect obedience for those who have cultivated the habit of constant trust in the power of forgiving and transforming grace (and not thinking “about how to gratify the desires of the flesh” [Rom. 13:14]) and who live to see the coming of the Lord. This takes place in the great struggle between the seal of God versus the mark of the beast crisis that is graphically laid out in Revelation 12–14, especially in the key passages of 12:17 and 14:12. These familiar verses strongly suggest that in history’s final end time on earth there will be a group of Christ’s faithful followers who will loyally follow the Lamb, even in the face of the threat of death. While they do not appear to claim any sinless perfection of nature, the imagery does strongly suggest a perfect character of those “who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.”

#### **Phase 5: Sinless in Nature and Character at the Second Coming: Glorified Sinlessness**

The redemption of Christ in its fullness distinguishes between the two aspects of *present salvation*, justification and sanctification, and the *future salvation* of glorification at the second advent of Jesus Christ, which ushers in the ultimate establishment of the kingdom of glory. And it is at this glorious juncture of the salvation plan that it can be positively affirmed that the saints are sinless, not only in character, but also in nature bodily, morally, and mentally. Paul classically states this glorious future reality: “And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Phil. 3:20–21; cf. 1 Cor. 15:51–54).

#### **Phase 6: Dynamic Growth in Grace Through All Eternity**

This final phase of perfection refers to the eternal growth in character of the people of God during the ceaseless ages of eternity. This is based on the understanding that God’s love is infinite; and thus, those who are with Him

“in Christ” for all eternity will have endless possibilities of growth in knowledge, joy, and love. Truly now believers only see as “in a mirror dimly” (NKJV) but then there will come a time when they will be “face to face” and with Paul will then be able to say “then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12). Maranatha!

## SUMMARY

So what does it mean to be a perfect believer in Christ? First of all, it means to be fully submitted to the lordship of Christ in life—perfectly committed to do His will as one consistently draws the mighty draughts of His concerted convicting, justifying, and sanctifying grace. It means to be growing into the likeness of the loving Christ by being daily filled with the fruitful work of the Holy Spirit of God. To be pardoned, forgiven, or justified means to legally stand perfect in Christ and to be no longer under the condemnation of the holy law of God. Such a perfectly forgiven believer will never presume on the grace of God through sins of willful premeditation or indulge in attitudes of excuse for any known sin or sinful propensity, be it inherited or cultivated. This attitude of full, daily loyalty to Christ will also be open to obedience by grace no matter what the earthly cost may be. And for those who live through the last great testing crisis described in Revelation 12–14, they will aspire to experience the apex of perfection that character and nature change which will be bestowed with the finishing touch of immortality at the second coming of Jesus. And then it will be their supernal purpose to grow in the likeness of Christ’s loving and righteous character for all eternity in the blessed heavenly realm. *Even so, come, Lord Jesus, and do whatever is needed to bring about such a glorious eventuality!*