

—Westminster Shorter Catechism—
Lesson 31—Our Sanctification, Q. 35

I. What it is

A. To sanctify essentially means two things in Scripture:

1. Fundamentally it means *to separate unto God for His service*. Aaron, his sons, and all the vessels of the sanctuary were *separated* unto God *for His service*, with Aaron having on his turban, “Holy to the Lord”. In sanctification God takes His elect out of the corrupt mass of mankind and sets them apart for Himself, for His service, Ps 4.3; 1Cor 1.2.
2. It also means to *take away pollution*. Every child of Adam comes over to God with a cesspool of sinful impurities which God loathes and cannot abide in His adopted children. The sanctification of the Spirit is His cleansing of the soul from its impurities by breaking the reign of sin and cleansing the heart and life from every mark of it, Eph 5.25-26; 1Th 5.23.

B. *Sanctification unto God* by the Spirit happens *initially and instantaneously at effectual calling or regeneration*. That’s the implanting of a new principle of spiritual life into the soul by uniting us to the principle of life in Christ, 1Jn 3.9; Ezk 26.26. Q. 35 has in mind the *sustaining and developing work* of the Spirit in which He brings all the faculties of the soul more and more perfectly under the purifying and regulating influence of the principle of new spiritual life. And this work lasts through the whole life, never being perfected in this life.

C. It’s a *work*, a work of *God* Himself, by His indwelling, holy Spirit.

1. It’s progressive, taking place over time. In justification we’re delivered from all the penal consequences of sin in an instant, but in sanctification we’re delivered from all the workings and effects of sin over time.
2. We can defile ourselves; but we can’t cleanse ourselves. This is a work for the Almighty God. And being a work that begins and centers on the inside of man, in his heart and soul, it’s a work for the Spirit of God.

D. It’s a work of *free grace*, which is redundant since grace is by nature free, a gift of God. No man deserves it, no man can earn it, no man can purchase it, no man can effect it. It is divine and it is gracious.

II. How it works

A. It works by cooperation. The sinner is *passive* in his being united to Christ in regeneration as well as in his justification and adoption. These are *acts* of God on a passive soul. But sanctification is a work of God involving the head, heart, and hands of a believer, voluntarily and willingly yielded to God, because it’s the actual furtherance and outworking of the changing and sanctifying of the man’s nature and faculties.

1. This is important because it shows that God never treats us as robots or as unsouled and unimaged creatures—like a *rock* (Ex 17.6) or a *locust* (Ex 10.13-15)—but God works with us according to our nature, changing us at our very core so that we *willingly* and *freely will* His will and *work* according to His will—all the while *never* working independently of His Spirit.

B. It runs through the whole man. There’s nothing in an unholy sinner that God likes. When the Spirit gives us new life and moves in with that life, He comes with the goal and purpose to spread that life into every faculty of our humanity and life.

C. It works by exchange, or the tipping of the scales. The Spirit works with an eye to enabling us to increasingly die unto sin and increasingly live unto righteousness—and as goes the one, so goes the other, the old is put away and the new is brought in.

D. Sanctification is the increasing application to us of the death and resurrection of Christ. His death is applied to the mortifying of our old body of sin and His resurrection is applied to the vivifying and quickening of our new Spiritual nature. His crucifixion sucks the life out of our body of sin and His

resurrection increases the life of our new nature. In essence, sanctification is the crucified and resurrected Christ being increasingly formed in you, Gal 4.19.

1. The image of God in Christ is the prototype according to which the Spirit is renewing us.
2. In fact, He's conforming us unto that image by bringing us increasingly and perfectly into participation with it itself. Our sanctification is our sharing in and participating in Christ's image of God and His own holiness being infused unto perfection in us. As in justification His holiness is imputed to us wholly and perfectly, so in sanctification that same holiness is infused, more and more, unto perfection.

III. Where it leads

- A. Once begun, sanctification inevitably leads to glorification. It cannot fall short. It cannot miss its mark, Rom 8.30; 2Cor 3.18.

Reflections

- I. The holiness of a Christian is the work of the Spirit of God. All your faithless vows, resolutions, and works will not make you holy. It's a work of the Spirit, who works in us both the willing and the working (Phil 2.12-13).
 - A. Therefore let us pray for the outpouring of the Spirit. Let us come to every ordinance of worship, every means of grace, every private and family devotion looking for, praying for, and waiting upon the Spirit of God, who sanctifies the elect *by the truth*.
 - B. And knowing how instrumental the means of grace are in the hands of the Holy Spirit, see that you don't despise or slight them. They are the key to your spiritual growth. They are the means to your mature manhood in Christ.
- II. The sanctification of a believer is not the work of a day. It's the work of every day and the work of a lifetime. Don't sit down with any special measure of grace as if you've arrived.
 - A. Keep up the battle. Death is coming for us all, and until it does, we'll never be less than soldiers and we'll never have a moment's peace from either the enemy within or the enemy without.
- III. Those who are not being sanctified have not been saved. The regenerated and justified and adopted are being sanctified. It's an unbreakable chain of redemption because you can't be united to a holy Christ in regeneration and not increasingly partake of that holiness. So examine yourself.
- IV. Don't lose heart in this work. The more sanctified you are, the more sin you'll see in yourself.
 - A. And that's why the grand foundation of the gospel and the grand ground of our hope and assurance is not in our sanctification, which grows by degrees and has many a setback, but in our justification, which is perfect, immutable, and the sure ground of our acquittal on the Day of Judgment.
- V. Don't ever forget that sanctification is God's work. He's committed to it. He's doing it.
 - A. You're going to stumble, fall, and even go backwards. But God won't ever stop moving you forward. Your responsibility is to keep in step with the Spirit, follow His lead, yield to His work, and do all your work in the context of His work, drawing by faith out of Christ's holiness, until it's more and more infused into your life.
- VI. If the Fourth Commandment isn't enough reason for you to be in church every week under the means of grace, then consider this: You need it; because you won't ever be sanctified without it; and the unsanctified will never see heaven, for "without holiness, no man shall see the Lord" (Heb 12.14).

Boston: "In sanctification, sin is gradually carried out of the heart and life, and in its place, grace is planted, actuated, and advanced. This is done by the Spirit of God, who is holy, and who makes the elect holy."

A. Hodge: "In sanctification, the Holy Ghost nourishes, exercises, and develops those holy principles and dispositions which He implanted in the new birth, until by a constant progress, upon death, the subject of this grace is brought immediately to the measure of the stature of perfect manhood in Christ."