

Sanctification

by H. A. Ironside

IN the first chapter of I Corinthians, verse 30, there are some words that I wish to use as a starting point for our consideration of another great word of the gospel.

But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.

It is that word "sanctification" which I desire to emphasize. It is a wonderful thing to know the blessedness of regeneration, to realize that we are saved through an accomplished redemption, to be assured of our justification; and then that leads us on to ask, "What is meant by the believer's sanctification?"

There are a great many different ideas prevalent among evangelical Christians as to the real meaning of the term "sanctification." Some take it to refer to a very definite second work of grace, as they put it, whereby the one who has already been justified is later on, by making a complete surrender of himself to the will of the Lord, completely delivered from indwelling sin, his whole nature cleansed from indwelling sin, so that he no longer has any inward tendency to evil to hinder him in his Christian life.

Then there are others who, while refusing that view, have the idea that sanctification is the gradual improvement of the old nature, bringing it eventually into full harmony with God. I think, as we turn to various scriptures, we shall see that neither of these views is set forth in the Word of God, but that sanctification is something very different from either of them.

The word itself means to be separated; separation, ordinarily speaking, for a holy purpose. You go back to the Old Testament and it is surprising the variety of things that are said to be sanctified. In the first place we read that God sanctified the seventh day. He recognized the holiness of the seventh day, when He rested from all His work. Then the priesthood in Israel was sanctified, set apart to God. Mount Sinai, where the law was given, was said to be sanctified, for there God in a very special way manifested Himself. The people of Israel were called to sanctify themselves by outward purification, by submitting to certain washings and cleansings, which could not of course affect the state of the heart before Him, but only the cleansing of the body.

There is one scripture in the Old Testament where we read of people being sanctified to do iniquity. That is rather a puzzling holiness. In

the last chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah and the seventeenth verse, the Spirit of God, speaking through the prophet, says: "They that sanctify themselves, and purify themselves in the gardens behind one tree in the midst, eating swine's flesh, and the abomination, and the mouse, shall be consumed together, saith the LORD." Here were people sanctified to unclean practices, sanctified to do things which were abominable in the sight of God, but which were in accord with the practice of heathendom. They were sanctified in this sense to idolatry, so that the word itself really means separation.

Our Lord Jesus was sanctified. "Say ye of him, whom the Father hath sanctified, and sent into the world, Thou blasphemest; because I said, I am the Son of God?" (John 10:36) The Lord Jesus was always the infinitely holy One, but He was the one person of the Godhead who was separated and sent to the world for a special purpose. The apostle Peter says, "Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you" (I Peter 3:15). That is, let God have His place in your heart; let your hearts be separated unto Him.

I want to look at "sanctification" then from three standpoints. First, we read in the Word of God of sanctification by the Spirit; second, of sanctification by the blood of Christ; and third, of sanctification by the Word of God.

First, then, sanctification by the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:16). Paul asks the Christians at Rome to pray for him as he ministers Jesus Christ to the Gentiles: "Ministering the gospel of God, that the offering up of the Gentiles might be acceptable, being sanctified by the Holy Ghost" In old times the Jewish nation was a sanctified people. That people had been separated from the Gentiles to Jehovah. But now the Gentiles as such are said to be sanctified by the Holy Spirit. That is, as one goes to the nations preaching the gospel, it is the Holy Spirit who prepares people to receive that gospel.

In the second chapter of II Thessalonians this comes out very clearly in verse 13:

But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth.

Notice the order there: Sanctification by the Spirit, then belief of the truth. One might say definitely that no one would ever believe the word of the truth of the gospel, unless he were first sanctified by the Holy Spirit. In other words, it is the Holy Spirit who works in the hearts and minds of people, preparing them for the reception of the Gospel. That is why we who go forth to preach the gospel should

spend much time in prayer before we appear in public to present the Word, asking God to prepare the hearts of our hearers that the Word may be as seed sown in good soil. That preparation of the heart which is from the Lord is the sanctification of the Spirit here referred to.

In the sixth chapter of I Corinthians, verse 11, after having told of the wicked lives that unsaved men and women live, the apostle says,

And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.

Notice the order there: washed, sanctified, justified. That is, the Word of God is applied to the heart and conscience for cleansing; the Holy Spirit arouses the man, sets him apart from the mass of mankind, makes him ready to receive the Word; and receiving the Word, he is justified.

I remember a great many years ago I was asked to preach in a mission in San Francisco. I sat there for half an hour, listening to some wonderful testimonies, testimonies such as you may hear in the missions of any city, men who had been down and out, telling how God had come in and given them a new life, made new creatures of them. I was so stirred that when I rose up to preach, I changed my subject altogether and I took this text: "Such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God."

At the close of the meeting a rather melancholy looking, cadaverous brother came up to see me, and beckoned me down to the front of the platform. When I went over to him, he said, "My friend, you had your theology all mixed up tonight."

"Oh, is that so?" I asked. "Set me right then, for I do not want my theology to be mixed."

"Yes," he replied, "you put sanctification before justification. No man can ever be sanctified until he is first justified. Justification is the first blessing, sanctification is the second blessing, and you had it turned upside down."

"Oh," I said, "pardon me, I did not make a mistake like that."

"Oh, but you did; you put sanctification before justification."

"Oh, no," I said, "I did not do that. It was the apostle Paul who did that, guided by the Holy Spirit. It was he who wrote: "Such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God'."

"No, no," he said, "you are all wrong; you are misquoting the Scripture."

"Well," I said, "look at it." I handed him the Bible, and he started to read: "'Such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justi...' Wait a minute, there's a misprint here. Let me get my own Bible." So he went back to his seat and got his Bible, came back, and started to read: "'But ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified.' Does anyone have a Revised Version?" he asked. Someone had, and he turned to it and read the same thing. "Well," he said, "that's the first time that I have ever noticed that, but one thing is sure; the apostle Paul wasn't clear on the holiness question when he wrote that." He would rather condemn an inspired apostle than give up his pet theory.

There you have it in the Word of God: "Ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God." As I have said before, I am speaking particularly to young Christians. You remember only a few weeks or months ago, many of you did not care anything about the things of God. You were entirely occupied with the things of the world. Then you remember how a change began to take place. You found yourself restless, unhappy, troubled, perplexed, burdened by a sense of sin, a longing to get right with God. That was not the work of man. It was the work of the Holy Spirit of God, sanctifying, separating you from the world, and preparing you to receive the Gospel. Then when you heard the gospel preached in the power of the Holy Spirit, your eager soul drank it in; you believed the truth and you were justified. You were made right with God.

The apostle Peter suggests the same thing in his first Epistle, chapter 1, verse 2, "Through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ." When is a poor sinner justified before God? When in the obedience of faith he takes his place beneath the sprinkled blood, like the Israelites of old who entered the house where the blood was sprinkled upon the doorpost and the lintel. But what is it that leads a man to come thus in faith to trust in the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ? It is the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. This is one aspect of sanctification that begins before a man comes to a saving knowledge of Christ. It is a preparatory work, and then the Spirit of God brings the Word home in power, the man believes it and is justified, and now all through his life afterward the Holy Spirit continues the work of practical sanctification, weaning that man's heart more and more away from the world, and occupying him more and more with a risen Christ at God's right hand. As we are taken up with Christ, as our eyes are fixed upon Him, we become like unto Him, and that is practical sanctification.

But there is another aspect of sanctification, found particularly in the Epistle to the Hebrews. In the thirteenth chapter and the twelfth verse we find these words:

Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate.

Here we have sanctification by the blood of Christ. What is this? It is the setting apart of the believer in the Lord Jesus to God in all the value of the atoning work of His beloved Son. In the tenth chapter of this Epistle we are told how our blessed Lord went to the cross and there offered one sacrifice for sin, a sacrifice never to be repeated. We sometimes hear of a priest standing at an altar, offering a continual and unbloody sacrifice for the sins of the living and the dead. There is nothing like that anywhere in Scripture. Our Lord Jesus Christ by one offering, settled the sin question, and no other sin-offering will ever be needed. He has taken His seat now at the right hand of God, having accomplished the will of the Father in settling the sin question on the cross, and we read in the tenth verse of the tenth chapter:

By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

That is, we who have trusted that Saviour are now set apart to God. We no longer belong to a world that is under judgment. We are now children of God. We are redeemed to Him by the precious blood of His Son. We are separated to Himself in all the value of His vicarious atonement.

If you look a little farther down in this chapter, at verse 14, you find this remarkable statement, a statement that some of us would not dare believe if it were not found in our Bibles, given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit:

For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.

Do you believe that? There you have sanctification in its absolute sense. The believer in the Lord Jesus Christ stands before God complete in Christ, perfected forever. No charge can ever be brought against him again. His sins are put away; as far as the east is from the west his transgressions have been removed from him, and he now is in Christ, who is made unto him "wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption."

This is the sanctification that the apostle Paul referred to when he spoke of his call to the ministry, when the Lord said to him, "I am sending you out to proclaim the things that I have already made known to you and that which is yet to be revealed, that you may go to men to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light, and from the

power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith in Christ Jesus." You can't add anything to sanctification. You cannot improve it and, thank God, you cannot take anything from it. It is perfect. It is complete. That sanctification is by the blood of Jesus.

Then there is a third aspect of sanctification. In the seventeenth chapter of John's Gospel we hear our blessed Lord speaking to the Father, engaged in intercession for His own, and He says, in verse 17 to 19:

Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth. As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth.

He who has already been sanctified by the blood of Christ, set apart to God in all the value of Christ's finished work, is now called upon to walk in this world in holiness of life, a life of practical sanctification, daily being separated more and more from the things that defile, the things that are unclean, the things that are contrary to the mind of God. And this practical aspect of sanctification is by the Word of God.

In Ephesians 5, verses 25 and 26, we read:

Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word.

You and I then as Christians, and again I say I speak particularly to young Christians, need to familiarize ourselves with the Word of God. We need to give much time to pondering over what God has told us in this blessed Book. David asks, "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way?" and he answers, "By taking heed thereto according to thy word." The Word of God is for our practical sanctification. This is the agency that the Holy Spirit uses in conforming us to Christ.

I trust you see what I mean. You are reading the Bible, and you come across a passage that condemns something that you have been doing for some time. You had not thought of it before. It had never struck you that there was anything wrong in this particular line of behavior, but you are reading something in the Word. "Oh," you say, "I am wrong there. I must never go on like that any more." And so you go to God and confess the wrong, and then you look to Him for grace to glorify Him in that thing.

I knew a man who was converted, and for some time after he was converted he was a heavy smoker. I know I am getting on dangerous ground here, but I am not saying what you should do. I am merely telling you of his experience, and you can draw your own conclusion. He was an earnest Christian but a heavy smoker. One day he was

pondering over His Bible. He was reading these words, "Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (II Corinthians 7:1). Now I do not know what you would think of that verse in connection with the use of tobacco, but it just went home to his heart. He said "Here I have brought with me out of Egypt a filthy habit that I acquired when I was a poor sinner down there in sin and bondage." He went right to a shelf in his room and took down a box of cigars, a can of tobacco, and an old pipe, and threw them all into the fire. He said, "I am through with these. I want to be clean because I belong to the Lord Jesus Christ." That was what God did for that man. It would be pretty hard for some of you women who are listening to me, but the Lord is able to deliver you from the cigarette habit, if you will yield yourself to Him in sincerity. And so, whatever it is that God's Word shows you to be wrong, you judge that thing and confess it before God, and as you do you will find deliverance from it.

Thus you are being sanctified by the truth, and you can see from this standpoint that it would never do to claim that you are wholly sanctified. If you are thinking of *positional* sanctification, sanctification by the blood of Christ, yes, you are perfectly sanctified. You could not be any more sanctified than you are. But if you are thinking of *practical* sanctification, no one should ever dare to say that he is wholly sanctified until he gets home to heaven, where he will never more be in contact with sin. You see I might be perfectly sure today that I am walking in the will of God as He has revealed it to me. Tomorrow, as I meditate on some portion of His Word, He might show me something in my life that has been displeasing to Him all along. Then, of course, I kneel before Him and confess it. My sanctification goes on, you see—progressively.

And so then, when we think of sanctification, we think of separation, and we are called to that, to be a people set apart to God. We are set apart by the work of the Holy Spirit drawing us to Christ. We are set apart eternally by the precious blood that has redeemed us; and day by day we are being cleansed and separated from the things that are contrary to the mind of God, as we learn His will through His Word and walk in obedience to it.

Copied by Stephen Ross for www.WholesomeWords.org from *Great Words of the Gospel* by H. A. Ironside. (Moody Colportage Library; no. 188). Chicago: Moody Press, 1944. Chapter 5.