

Distinct but Inseparable Series, No. 3 “Justification and Sanctification”

Acts 26:12-20

August 26, 2018

We are considering pairs of biblical truth and corresponding existential realities that while clearly distinguishable must never be separated from one another. We have so far considered 1) *historia salutis*, the once for all accomplishment of salvation by Jesus Christ, and *ordo salutis*, the outworking of that salvation in an individual’s own space and time; and 2) law and gospel, the moral obligations that God has imposed on the life of mankind and the message of deliverance from sin and death through Jesus Christ. Today we take up justification and sanctification – two fundamental, supremely important biblical topics and Christian experiences. I chose for my text a section of Paul’s defense before Agrippa in which he relates his encounter with the risen and ascended Christ on the road to Damascus and the ministry that resulted from that encounter.

Acts 26:12-20

v.18 By “sanctified” is meant “set apart to be holy, to live a holy life, to serve God in holy ways.” We typically use the word “sanctification” for the process of growing in holiness, purity, and love, a process that proceeds gradually, in fits and starts, throughout a Christian’s life. However, more often than not in the New Testament the term “sanctification” is used not of a life-long process but of a once-for-all definitive transformation of a person who is translated from darkness into light. Paul characteristically uses the term in this way. It is another way of saying, as he says in Romans 6, that when we became Christians “we died to sin.” Our nature and our identity were changed at the root. That is, we were transferred from the realm of sin and death into the realm of righteousness and life. This sanctification is a decisive and irreversible break with the world and its sinful principles and powers; it is the granting of a new identity among the saints, the holy ones of God. [John Murray, “Definitive Sanctification,” *Collected Writings*, vol. 2, 277-284] The ongoing process of moral transformation in a Christian’s life stems from this once for all transformation and is mentioned in v. 20.

In biblical usage, the term *justification* ordinarily means the forgiveness of sins and the declaration of a person’s righteous status before God. It is a declaration that God himself makes as our Judge. It is, especially in the usage of Jesus and Paul, the language of the courtroom. The Judge has acquitted us and declared us free of guilt and innocent before the bar. The righteousness is not ours, of course, but the righteousness of Christ that is reckoned to us because Christ lived and died on our behalf and because by faith we are united to him.

The term *sanctification*, on the other hand, has typically been understood as the process that begins as soon as we are justified, a process that continues throughout our lives as the Holy Spirit works within us to bring our new identity more and more into expression and, at the same time, to weaken more and more the remnants of our old nature, our old sinful habits and desires.

Typically, justification has been defined, as it is in our *Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms* as an *act*: that is, once-for-all; while sanctification is defined as a *work*, that is, a process that continues over time. There is no difficulty in distinguishing justification and sanctification understood in this way. Justification is the forgiveness of our sins; sanctification is the gradual transformation of our thinking, speaking, and acting. Justification is a divine act that alters our status before God, from guilty to not guilty; sanctification is a divine work that alters the way we live over time.

It is easy enough to see how important it is to keep these two different aspects of salvation bound tightly together. Though this has been denied by many who should have known better, it is clear in the Bible that everyone who is justified will be and must be sanctified. There can be no such thing as a person whose sins have been forgiven but who continues to live the same sinful life he or she was living before. In the same way, there can be no sanctification, no moral transformation of life that is not founded upon the forgiveness of sins. God will not give his Holy Spirit to someone whose sins he has not forgiven and upon whom his condemnation still rests. Whenever justification and sanctification have been separated in Christian teaching or preaching fundamental mistakes regarding the nature of salvation inevitably proliferate. We've seen that proliferation in our own day as before in previous generations. Of course people would love to be able to enjoy God's forgiveness without having to undertake the difficult task of living the Christian life, so it should come as no surprise that throughout history there have been many in the church who have imagined that such a thing were possible. They were content simply to be forgiven; they had no wish to be holy or to repent of their sins or to serve Jesus as their Lord and Master. But as Paul reminds us here, the gospel he was given to proclaim was a message of both forgiveness and transformation, of both liberation from the guilt of sin and liberation from the power and influence of sin. It requires of us both faith and repentance; trusting in Christ for our salvation and turning from sinful thoughts, words, and deeds to a life pleasing to God.

All of that is true and important. But it is overly simple. The biblical picture is more complex and requires still greater effort on our part fully to appreciate both justification and sanctification and so both their distinctive natures and their inseparable relationship.

Let us begin with justification. When we trust Christ for our salvation our sins are forgiven; our slate is wiped clean. We are no longer subject to the condemnation of God's law or liable to be punished for our sin. Do you have any idea what an extraordinary thing your forgiveness actually is? No; you don't; nor do I. We have only a glimmer! How do I know that? Well think with me about this. God sees and knows it all. He knows your commissions and omissions far, far better than yourself. He knows your pettiness, your cruelty, your indifference to him and to others, your sinful desires, the words you speak and the words you should speak but do not. He knows your ridiculous pride. He knows how in your heart and mind the entire world revolves around your pipsqueak self. He put you into this world to love him and to love your neighbor as much as you love yourself. That is your *raison d'être*, the purpose of your existence. But how much have you really loved God? And name the neighbor – not twenty neighbors; not five – name the single neighbor who would say that you love him or her more than you love yourself. God also knows your ingratitude. He has given you the most extraordinary gifts and has given them to you knowing full well how little you would do with them. And once he has poured his

love into your heart he has watched you sin and sin and sin some more, as if his gifts and love mean little or nothing to you.

And what is still worse, he knows how little you practice forgiveness yourself. He has wiped your slate clean of endless sins, but then you carefully keep a record of other people's wrongs. He remembers your sins no more; but you remember theirs; he separates your sins as far from you as the east is from the west, but you keep the sins of other people very close to your heart. He has forgiven your great sins committed against him, the Majesty on High, but you haven't forgiven even the little sins that have been committed against your little person. Given how God himself has forgiven us, you and I should love forgiveness; we should love to forgive; we should be champions of forgiveness; we should never hold a grudge, never remember a slight. But we demonstrate every day how little we really cherish and appreciate and understand the forgiveness that God has extended to us. We take his forgiveness for granted – of course he's forgiven us, it's his job! - and it makes little impression on us.

But still he forgives you; still he treats you as if you had never sinned nor been a sinner, as if you had been as obedient as Christ was obedient for you. Extraordinary! So now ask yourself: how does that remarkable forgiveness happen. How do we receive it? Paul certainly teaches a once-for-all justification. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." All our sins – past, present, and future – wiped off the books in one fell swoop. *But*, at the same time, we are told that if and only if we continue to confess our sins will they be forgiven. We are taught to pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors." And you remember in the Lord's parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector how the Tax Collector plead with God, "Be merciful to me a sinner." Jesus said of that man he went home justified. Same word, same usage: "justified." Not for the first time, certainly. We have no reason to believe that. The Tax Collector went to the Temple a believing man, but he was justified on account of his humble confession and his plea for forgiveness. That is what Jesus said of him, *he went home justified*, forgiven, because of his humble prayer for forgiveness.

However this is understood – and theologians have suggested a number of different ways to understand how the once-for-all forgiveness of our sins is, at the same time, a day by day forgiveness – I say, however this is understood or explained, *justification also is something of a process*. It is worked out over time. As we sin and confess our sins, day after day and week after week, our sins are forgiven. Indeed, in the Bible, even in the writing of the Apostle Paul, the champion of once-for-all justification, our justification is not only a present but a future reality, not yet present. It is not complete, not final until we are at last in heaven. As Paul writes in Galatians 5:5:

"For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness."

"Hope of righteousness"? What is that? Are we not already righteous in the righteousness of Christ? Is this not what Paul taught us in Romans 3-5? But here he says that we are not fully and finally righteous, entirely justified, until we are in heaven, until we have endured the examination of the last judgment. The Lord Jesus said a similar thing if you remember. He said that "on the Day of Judgment...by your words *you will be justified*, and by your words you will

be condemned.” These and other texts remind us that justification is an act, a once-for-all definitive verdict rendered by the Lord when first we became Christians *and* a process that continues throughout our lives and is not complete until the Last Day.

If this confuses you, wait a moment. There is more to come. If justification is an act *and* a process, *so is sanctification*. As we saw in v. 18, sanctification is also a definitive, once-for-all act, a profound, immediate, even sudden change of nature and status. In a moment, the apostle Paul became a different human being. It is a process that continues through the Christian life, to be sure, but it is also a once-for-all definitive transformation of that person’s nature. This “definitive sanctification” is a relatively new thought in Reformed theology, the result of a more careful examination of the use of the word “sanctification” in the New Testament. In our circles it was especially the work of Professor John Murray, a 20th century systematic theologian justly famous for his careful study of the biblical text, that alerted us to this dimension of sanctification that had been largely overlooked in Reformed theology. Prof. Murray published an article in 1967 entitled “Definitive Sanctification,” arguing for this once-for-all dimension of sanctification, this decisive moral and spiritual transformation of human nature, and since then there have been few of our men who have not been persuaded by his argument. It is what the Bible says here and in a large number of other places.

Indeed, I would suspect that most serious Christians, if they thought about it at all, would agree that this definitive sanctification, this moment in which we “died to sin,” in which we were set apart to be holy, produced a greater, a more profound change in us than all the years of growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord that followed. Definitive sanctification changes us root and branch, gives us a completely new identity, and places us among the saints of God. Sanctification as a process is a series of ups and downs, of fits and starts, and of progress and relapse. Christians know this all too well. We often feel that we are losing ground rather than gaining it. And, alas, the Bible, church history, and our own observation of life provide us with many examples of people who seem to finish their Christian lives at a lower level of devotion, love, zeal, and obedience than they had once attained. They remain Christians, we don’t doubt that, but they finish with a sigh, not a shout of triumph. Think of David or Asa or Hezekiah. I know people like that; you probably do as well. Such is sanctification as a process. Definitive sanctification gave us a new identity; indeed, a new life. It changed our loves and hatreds, our desires and longings, and our purpose in life. Sanctification as a process gives manifold expression to that new identity but still leaves us battling the flesh till the very end.

It is precisely the imperfection of sanctification that tempts us to fail to appreciate what a fabulous gift it is! You are becoming, slowly to be sure, but you are becoming a person so wonderful, so pure, so full of love, so good in every way, that when the process is complete you will scarcely recognize yourself! You have only the vaguest idea of what a perfect human being will be, *and you will be such a perfect human being*. Do you think about that? Do you ponder that? Do you anticipate that? Do you wonder what that’s going to be like? This is wonderful beyond words. This is a gift greater than any that can be conceived. And God has given it to you. He first planted the seed in that definitive sanctification that changed your identity, he is cultivating the young plant as the days and years pass; by instruction, by example, and by testing and trial he is maturing that new life; and some day it will blossom into the full flower. Then, at that moment, you will realize how extraordinary God’s grace and power actually are and what

love he has showed you. You know why God puts up with so much crap in your life? Because he knows what you are someday going to become! That is both why he endures you and why there is so much suffering and pain in your life: God is changing you in the only way sufficient to effect the change!

We were taught to distinguish justification as an act from sanctification as a work or process. But now it is accepted that justification is also a work, or a process and sanctification is also an act. They are still different things – forgiveness is not the same thing as the transformation of life – but the difference between them is not precisely what we thought it was. Justification remains the removal of guilt, the forgiveness of sins, liberation from punishment, and the declaration of our righteousness before God because, by faith, we are united with Jesus Christ the righteous one; his righteousness, his sinlessness, and his sacrifice for sin are counted as ours.

“For our sake [God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

That is wonderful beyond words. But is not the most wonderful thing. We must never think that our forgiveness is the most wonderful part of our salvation. It is not. Justification is wonderful, but Robert Murray McCheyne, the saintly Scottish pastor, was right to say that “sanctification is the better half of salvation.” The great object of our salvation, Paul says, is that we might at last be conformed to the likeness of Jesus himself; that we might, as Peter put it, partake of his nature; or as John put it, that we might become like him. We will not be sinning and being forgiven in heaven. All our sinning and its forgiveness happens here, in this world. But our living for Christ, our serving God in faithfulness, our gratitude, our joy in salvation, our purity, and our humility -- our being the human beings we ought to be, our fellowship with the Triune God and the saints in perfect love – *that will last forever!* These are the two great gifts that we are given because of the saving love and work of Jesus Christ: a sinful record completely and perfectly expunged (our justification) and a life finally transformed into perfect goodness (our sanctification). But the one is the means to an end; the other is the end itself!

We will remain forever grateful to God for our justification. As Martin Luther put it with his characteristic emphasis: “Sinner is my name, sinner is my surname; sinner is the name by which I will always be known.” We will never cease to know ourselves as forgiven sinners or to love God for his forgiveness. But we will not have to be forgiven in heaven as we must be on earth. But we will not only be forever grateful to God for our sanctification – for our holy heart and our obedient life, for our pure and powerful love for God and for our neighbor – we will be living that life, we will be experiencing that pure heart and that mighty love every moment of every day through eternal years. *That is what God was after in our salvation;* that is why he paid such a terrible price to accomplish it: he wanted us to be the people he made us to be; he wanted us to be capable of loving fellowship with himself. Forgiveness was a necessary step in that process, but our moral and spiritual transformation was what he was after.

Let there be no thought of justification separated from sanctification, of justification without sanctification. The two are inseparable. That is clearer now than ever it has been in the history of Reformed theology. It was always a mistake to separate justification and sanctification, but an easier mistake to make when the two were distinguished from one another as they once were.

Forgiveness, understood simply as a once-for-all gift of God given to those who believe in Jesus, seemed to be one thing. Sanctification, a process of growing in grace and holiness throughout one's life, seemed to be a quite different thing. And so, it did not seem so strange to imagine a person's sins being forgiven but his life being transformed only a very little or not at all. It did not seem impossible that a person could have one part of salvation without having the other, or, as it has sometimes been said, to have Jesus as one's Savior, but not as one's Lord.

But now that we see forgiveness not just as a once-for-all declaration of God, but as a process that continues throughout the Christian life we realize that there can be no forgiveness without continuing confession of sin and that full and final forgiveness cannot be obtained until the Last Judgment, when the final verdict is rendered according to the life we have lived in the world, as the Bible says time and time again. *Now it becomes altogether clearer that living the Christian life is necessary even for the forgiveness of our sins.* Who will confess his or her sins with honesty and earnestness except the person who is living the Christian life, who feels the wrong of his or her sins and feels the need to confess them to God? Who can confess his or her sins so that they may be forgiven except the person who is repenting of his or her sins? Confession without repentance is hypocrisy. The Lord Christ taught us, for example, that if we don't forgive those who have sinned against us, our Father will not forgive us when we ask for forgiveness. Does that not mean, does it not absolutely require that we be living a Christian life in order to obtain the forgiveness of our sins? And how can we stand in the Last Judgment if that judgment is to render a verdict on the lives we have lived unless we have lived a Christian life?

And so, it is with sanctification. If sanctification is a once-for-all, definitive transformation of our nature and our identity as human beings, if we have been changed from sinners into saints, if we have died to sin, if, as Paul writes here, we have been "sanctified by faith in Christ" – past tense – then the forgiveness of our sins, our justification, is part and parcel of the transformation of our lives. They both occur at the very beginning, they both are the fruit of our union with Christ through faith, and they both are acts that lead inevitably to processes that will and must continue throughout our lives. It is all of a piece, we are changed and forgiven, and then continue to be forgiven and changed.

True enough, forgiveness and transformation are not the same thing, but they are the same salvation, they come at the same time, they continue throughout the same life, and each depends on the other. There can be no forgiveness without faith and no faith without the definitive, once-for-all sanctification of the soul. There can be no continuing transformation without continuing forgiveness, because if God does not forgive our sins he will certainly not continue to sanctify our lives. The two dimensions of this salvation are intimately interconnected.

Distinct but inseparable. Woven together in the tapestry of the Christian life. Forgiveness and transformation; transformation and forgiveness. It is impossible even to tell which comes first; and each is happening day after day in each and every Christian life and each is drawing its strength from the other.

The Christian who thinks this through, who understands the wonder of both his or her forgiveness and the radical transformation of his or her heart and life – together with all that this portends for the future – is the Christian who will appreciate how much he or she owes to the

love of God, how important it is and must be to be seeking forgiveness every day, how wonderful it is to receive it, and at the same time to be seeking to grow in the grace and the knowledge of the Lord, anticipating the moment when you will become like Jesus himself because you will see him as he is.

Justification and sanctification mean both that you can live in the freedom of full and free forgiveness – God will forgive you if you ask him; he will always forgive you – *and* that you have a life to live, a life chock full of the promise of splendid things to come. You already have the identity, the new heart, a place among the saints: now do something with all of that! Repent, turn to God, and perform deeds in keeping with your repentance. And when you stumble, confess your sin, rejoice in your forgiveness, and renew once more your repentance and your good works.

Justification by itself or sanctification by itself leaves you with neither forgiveness nor a godly life. Put them together and you get both!