



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 12.2 – The Doctrine of Sanctification

The Connection between Justification and Sanctification

At the very moment that the Holy Spirit brings a person to faith in Christ, that person receives the total gift of forgiveness of sins and the righteousness of Christ that Christ won for all sinners by His life, death, and resurrection. Unbelievers receive none of this gift of forgiveness, even though the gift has been won for them too and is offered to them in the Gospel. Through faith in Christ believers receive 100% of the forgiveness available to them and are thus considered totally holy and righteous in the sight of God. They are justified (declared not guilty) by faith in Christ and have peace with God (Romans 5:1). Jesus said to His disciples: **“You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you”** (John 15:3). But He also said: **“You are clean, but not all of you”** (John 13:10). **“For He knew who would betray Him; therefore He said, ‘You are not all clean’”** (John 13:11). As far as justification is concerned, a person is either 100% clean by faith in Christ, or he is totally unclean because there is no connection between him and Christ by faith.

Jesus compared the connection between Himself and His believers to the attachment of branches to a vine. He said: **“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing”** (John 15:5). The branches that are attached to the vine, the believers in Christ, have complete forgiveness of sins; they are justified. As soon as they are believers in Christ, they become branches bearing good fruit. The bearing of this good fruit is sanctification, and sanctification is never 100% in this life because the believer retains a sinful flesh that constantly hinders their production of good fruit. That is why Jesus said: **“Every branch that bears fruit He (the Father) prunes, that it may bear more fruit”** (John 15:2). But notice that there can be no fruit at all unless there is a continuing attachment to the vine. **“As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me”** (John 15:4).

Thus, the attachment or connection with the vine must come first; after that the fruit will come. In this way we understand that justification must precede sanctification. Jesus explained the connection between justification and sanctification by saying: **“Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit”** (Matthew 7:17). God creates the good tree by bringing someone to faith through the Gospel. That is justification. The good tree then, because it is good, bears good fruit. That is sanctification. A tree does not become good by bearing good fruit. A tree is first good, and then it bears good fruit. Thus, sanctification is the result of justification. Justification comes first, and sanctification follows. It is never the other way around: that a person first does good works, and then, because of their good works, God declares them righteous. No, first God declares a person righteous, and then they bring forth fruit.

Jesus and His apostles frequently admonished and encouraged Christians to bring forth good fruit, that is, to live godly lives, lives worthy of the Gospel. These words of encouragement are always based on the justification and forgiveness that is already theirs. In other words, they are not encouraged to save themselves or win forgiveness by the good things they do. But they are encouraged to do good things because of what God has already done for them by giving them forgiveness and pronouncing them holy through Christ.

Jesus' apostle John explained this in very simple language. He wrote: **“In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live**

through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:9-11). God’s love for us come first. Our love follows. We dare not reverse this, so that we say: We love one another; therefore, God loves us. No! God’s love for us is not a result of our loving Him, as though we could earn His love by our love for Him. Most simply John says: **“We love Him because He first loved us”** (1 John 4:19).

Jesus’ apostle Peter explains that first God calls us out of darkness into His marvelous light, and then we proclaim His praises. And since we are now the people of God, he earnestly pleads with us that we should **“abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul”** (1 Peter 2:9-11). In fact, all of the apostle’s admonitions in the verses that follow (1 Peter 2:11 ff.) are based on the prior fact that God has made us His people through the Gospel.

James, the brother of our Lord, follows this same pattern. First comes a reminder of what God has done for us, and then comes his admonitions to live a Christian life. **“Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures. So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath”** (James 1:18-19). First comes our conversion through the Gospel; then comes the behavior worthy of the Gospel.

Notice how the apostle Paul presents justification first, as the basis for his encouragement for sanctification in the following examples:

- **“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works”** (Titus 2:11-14).
- Having reminded Titus and us that we have been **“justified by His grace”**, Paul calls on Titus to encourage sanctification: **“These things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works”** (Titus 3:7-8).
- To the Christians in Corinth Paul writes: **“Purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us”** (1 Corinthians 5:7). The leaven is the sin in their lives that they are to get rid of. Why? Because they already are unleavened, that is, without sin. They have been forgiven in God’s sight, because Jesus made the sacrifice to take away their sin. Justification is perfect: you are unleavened. Sanctification is imperfect: keep on getting rid of that leaven.
- In the second major section in his letter to the Romans Paul encourages the living of the Christian life. But he introduces this section by reminding his readers of what God has already done for them in His mercy. **“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service”** (Romans 12:1).

Unbelievers always tend to think that we must do good things first, and then God will reward us for the good we do. This is natural man’s tendency to work-righteousness – salvation through our own efforts. The Gospel of free forgiveness in Christ is, in their eyes, license to sin, and therefore should not be proclaimed. Their argument is that no one will do good works if they do not need to do them in order to earn eternal life. They just cannot understand the Gospel. **“The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned”** (1 Corinthians 2:14).

But the fact is that a godly life is possible only for those who appreciate God’s love for them in Christ. For only the obedience that flows out of faith in Christ and love for a loving God is pleasing to God.

“Without faith it is impossible to please Him” (God) (Hebrews 11:6). Those who believe in Christ and His gift of forgiveness have the proper incentive to please God in their lives. “He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again” (2 Corinthians 5:15).

Notice how it works in real life: Paul says: **“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ has loved us and given Himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savor”** (Ephesians 4:32 – 5:2). First God forgives us, and then we forgive one another. First Christ loves us by giving Himself for us, and then we walk in love – reflecting and responding to His love for us.

First God makes us His children by bringing us to faith in Christ. As His adopted children who love Him, we begin to behave like children of God. **“Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure”** (1 John 3:2-3). We begin to purify ourselves because of the sure hope for eternal life we have through Christ. Paul assures the Corinthians: **“You are the temple of the living God. As God has said: ‘I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people.’ ... Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God”** (2 Corinthians 6:16-7:1).

Is it possible for a person to believe in Christ and never bring forth any fruit? The branches attached to the vine, which is Christ, will always bring forth some fruit – some more, some less. **“Faith without works is dead”** (James 2:26) and is not faith at all. Sanctification without justification is impossible. Likewise, the one who is justified by faith in Jesus will always bear fruit. Jesus said: **“Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away. ... If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned”** (John 15:2,6). Thus, justification and sanctification are inseparable. The presence of sanctification points to the reality of justification. The absence of sanctification is evidence of the absence of justification.

In summary, justification is a declaration of God by which He **imputes** to the individual sinner a righteousness that is **outside of the sinner**, namely, the perfect righteousness of Christ. Sanctification is a **medicinal** act of God performed **within a person**, by which God begins to produce in that person a righteousness of life (**incipient** righteousness as opposed to imputed righteousness). Both justification and sanctification happen at the same time: the moment of conversion. Yet justification comes first as the cause, with sanctification as the effect.

It is dangerous, even fatal, to reverse the order and think of sanctification as the cause and justification as the effect. Such a reversal leads to the loss of faith and a return to heathenism with its hypocrisy or despair. Remember the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable who figured that the good life he was living was earning for him favor from God. He boasted of his good life, saying: **“I am not like other men – extortioners, unjust adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.”** But what did Jesus say of him? He said he was not justified: **“This man (the tax collector) went down to his house justified rather than the other (the Pharisee)”** (Luke 18:9-14). The Pharisee thought he could gain justification by his sanctification. But this is impossible. The justification must come first, and then sanctification is the result.

Questions

1. At what point does a person receive total forgiveness from God?
2. When was that total forgiveness won for that person by Christ?
3. Who are the only ones who can bring forth good fruit?
4. What enables them to bring forth this good fruit?
5. Which is correct: "Good fruit makes a tree good", or: "A good tree brings forth good fruit"?
6. What is the difference between justification and sanctification?
7. In the passages from Paul's letters above (Titus 2, Titus 3, 1 Corinthians 5, Romans 12), underline the words that refer to justification, and circle the words that refer to sanctification.
8. What is it that leads a Christian to love God?
9. What is it that motivates a Christian to do good works?
10. Why would an unbeliever think they should do good works?
11. How do we become children of God?
12. How can we show in our lives that we are children of God?
13. What is the proper connection between justification and sanctification?