

What Is Sanctification?

But like as he who called you is holy, be ye yourselves also holy in all manner of living; because it is written, **“Ye shall be holy; for I am holy”** (*1 Peter 1:15-16*).

“Sanctification” is one of those large theological words easily thrown around but not well understood. Its use in many religious arguments over the past 1,500 years has only added to the confusion. What is “sanctification” according to the Scriptures?

“Sanctification,” or “to sanctify,” are translations of the Hebrew *qadash* and the Greek *hagiazō*, both of which mean “to consecrate, to purify, to make holy” (cf. *Brown-Driver-Briggs, Thayer’s*, etc.). This is why discussions of sanctification tend to involve discussions of holiness. Sanctification, therefore, involves holiness, but what is holiness?

In order to understand sanctification and holiness, we must see how they were described in very physical, concrete ways in the Old Testament and then understand the connection with the spiritual reality as manifest in Jesus and the New Testament.

One significant aspect of sanctification involves separation. In the Old Testament, that which was for God’s use or purposes was to be separated out from everything else. Israel was to be God’s consecrated people, separated out from the rest of the nations of the world for God (*Exodus 19:10*). Within Israel, the priests and Levites were to be further separated for the service of the Tabernacle/Temple (e.g. *Exodus 28:3*). Everything offered to God was dedicated, or separated out for His purpose and glory (e.g. *Leviticus 22:2*). Whatever was separated was understood to be special by virtue of its separation.

The other significant aspect of sanctification involves purity or purification. It was not enough for someone or something to be separated out: it had to be pure or clean as well. Much of the Law of Moses as expressed in Leviticus and Numbers talks about matters of

ritual purity and impurity: creatures were deemed clean or unclean, participation in various activities or certain maladies led to ritual impurity, and so on (e.g. **Leviticus 11:1-15:33**). Standards for cleanliness were even stricter for the priests and Levites ministering in the Tabernacle/Temple (e.g. **Leviticus 21:1-24**).

Through all of these commandments and guidelines God attempted to communicate to Israel what it meant to be holy like God is holy (cf. **Leviticus 19:2**). Holiness or sanctification demanded separation and purity. Israel, as God's people, was separated out and marked off as different from the rest of the nations by their devotion to YHWH as the only God and the marks of the covenant with Him: circumcision, abstention from certain foods, observing the Sabbath, etc. (cf. **Deuteronomy 14:1-21**). Israel was to learn what that separation demanded in terms of purity through careful observance of the laws regarding cleanliness and purification.

But sanctification, or holiness, demanded much more than certain markers of identity and fidelity to certain ritual cleanliness laws: it demanded observance of all God commanded Israel. Holiness did involve avoiding idolatry and maintaining sexual purity, but it also involved taking care of the poor and dispossessed and being free from greed and covetousness (e.g. **Leviticus 19:1-37**). Sadly, many Israelites focused only on the external marks of identity and ritual forms of holiness, neglecting the rest (e.g. **Romans 2:1-29**). Jesus critiqued this hypocritical pretense of holiness: He condemned the Pharisees for it in **Matthew 23:27-28** and the priest and Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan in **Luke 10:25-37**. Jesus showed how defilement is more a matter of one's thoughts and attitudes than these ritual external actions (cf. **Mark 7:14-23**).

Jesus, as the exact imprint of the divine nature, embodies God's holiness (cf. **Hebrews 1:3**). He was willing to contract ritual impurity under the Law in order to relieve and heal according to God's purposes (cf. **Mark 5:25-34**). Jesus was truly holy—separate and pure—but maintained that holiness without being physically remote from the common man. Jesus'

consecration in His life, death, and resurrection came through the power of God (cf. **Matthew 3:15-17**, **Hebrews 7:26-28**), yet was only possible because Jesus remained pure and sinless in thought, attitude, and deed (**Hebrews 4:14-16**).

Through Jesus we can be sanctified and holy before God. Those who follow after Jesus are sanctified, or separated out, from the rest of humanity, although the opportunity to obtain such separation is provided for all (**1 Corinthians 6:11**, **1 Timothy 2:4**). This separation is not designed to remove us from our fellow man but empowers us to love our fellow man as God intended (**Luke 6:27-36**). Through Jesus we can be cleansed from sin and grow in purity, not in terms of keeping away from physical impurities, but the cleansing of the mind, heart, and actions (**Acts 22:16**, **Philippians 4:8**, **1 Peter 1:16-17**).

Sanctification, therefore, involves separation and purification for God's purposes. Let us find sanctification through Jesus and glorify God in mind, heart, body, and soul!