

"What is sanctification? What is the definition of Christian sanctification?"

By Bob Young

The New Testament Words

The Greek root word is the noun, *hagios*. This word is translated as holy (over 100 times), as saint in the plural noun form (62 times).¹ The resultant state, *hagiasmos*, is translated as holiness (5 times) and sanctification (5 times). The verb, *hagiazo*, is translated sanctify (26 times); in addition one finds the translation hallow (2 times) and be holy (1 times, in the passive voice). Various other forms based on the same root use translations such as purity, purification, and purify. The basic meaning is to set apart for a specific or specialized use.

Three Dimensions of Sanctification

Jesus spoke about sanctification in John 17:16, "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world;" this is before His request: "Sanctify them in the truth: Thy word is truth." **In this text, sanctification is positional, referring to a state of separation unto God; all believers enter into this state when they are born of God:** "But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30). This is a once-for-all separation unto God. It is a part of our salvation, our connection with Christ (Heb. 10:10).

Sanctification also refers to the **practical experience of our separation unto God**, being the effect of obedience to the Word of God in one's life, and is to be pursued earnestly by the believer (1 Pet. 1:15; Heb. 12:14). As the Lord prayed in John 17, sanctification has in view the setting apart of believers for the purpose for which they are sent into the world: "As Thou didst send Me into the world, even so send I them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth" (vv. 18, 19). That Jesus set himself apart for the purpose for which He was sent is both the basis and the condition of our being set apart for that for which we are sent (John 10:36). His sanctification is the pattern of, and the power for, our sanctification. The sending and the sanctifying are inseparable. Therefore they are called saints (Greek *hagioi* means "sanctified ones"). Whereas previously their behavior bore witness to their position in the world in separation from God, now their behavior bears witness to their position before God in separation from the world.

A third dimension of the word sanctification is reflected in 1 Thess, 5:23, "The God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved entire, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul wrote of "the hope which is laid up for you in the heavens, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the Gospel" (Col 1:5). He then speaks of Christ as "the hope of glory" (Col 1:27) and mentions that hope when he says, "When Christ, who is our Life, shall be manifested, then shall ye also with Him be manifested in glory" (Col 3:4). **This glorified state is our ultimate separation from sin.** "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" (1 John 3:2).

¹ These numbers are based on the KJV, as tabulated in *Young's Analytical Concordance*.

To summarize, sanctification is the same Greek word as holiness, from the basic root “hagios,” meaning a separation. There are three basic ideas: first, a once-for-all positional separation unto Christ at our salvation; second, a practical progressive holiness in a believer’s life while awaiting the return of Christ; third, we will be changed into His perfect likeness—holy, sanctified, and completely separated from the presence of evil.

New Testament Uses of the Word “Sanctification”

There are 25 occurrences of the word in the New Testament. We have previously cited John 17:17, 19; 1 Cor. 1:30; 1 Thess. 5:23; Heb. 10:10.

A number of occurrences simply describe Christians as sanctified, that is, sanctified is used to describe the early Christians of the church (1 Cor. 1:2; 6:11; 2 Tim. 2:21; Jude 1). In Acts 20:32 and 26:18, the word is used to describe those who receive the inheritance.

Sanctification is accomplished through the word (John 17:17-19); by the word of his grace (Acts 20:32); by faith in Christ (Acts 26:18); through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 15:16; 2 Thess. 2:13; 1 Pet. 1:2); by the washing of water by the word (Eph. 5:26). These likely refer to what we have described as positional sanctification, the result of our initial obedience to the word of God, the gospel.

In 1 Thess. 4:3, 4, sanctification refers to the practical aspect, abstaining from fornication and living in purity (possessing vessel, referring either one’s own body or one’s spouse).

The multiple uses of the word in the book of Hebrews show that sanctification was an Old Testament concept but was accomplished imperfectly (9:13). Under the New Covenant, only Jesus completely sanctifies, in the sense of positional separation to or for God. This he does through offering his body and shedding his blood (2:11; 10:10,14,29; 13:12).

The reference in 1 Cor. 7:14 represents a unique use of the word where the idea is that the marital relationship and the children of the marriage are “holy” in the sense of being acceptable to God, not in the sense of being saved. Likewise, in 1 Tim. 4:5, one’s food is sanctified in the sense of being acceptable. The reference in 1 Pet. 3:15 is also unique, that the Christian can sanctify (set apart) Jesus as Lord, in heart, in word, in manner of life.

A Listing of the New Testament Passages

- John 17:17, Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.
- John 17:19, And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth.
- Acts 20:32, And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified.
- Acts 26:18, To open their eyes, and 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 that is in me.
- Romans 15:16, That I should be the minister of 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.
- 1 Corinthians 1:2, Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both their's and our's:

- 1 Corinthians 1:30, But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption:
- 1 Corinthians 6:11, 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.
- 1 Corinthians 7:14, For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy.
- Ephesians 5:26, That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word,
- 1 Thessalonians 4:3, For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication:
- 1 Thessalonians 4:4, That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour;
- 1 Thessalonians 5:23, And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- 2 Thessalonians 2:13, But we are bound to give thanks always 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:
- 1 Timothy 4:5, For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.
- 2 Timothy 2:21, If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work.
- Hebrews 2:11, For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren,
- Hebrews 9:13, For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh:
- Hebrews 10:10, By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.
- Hebrews 10:14, For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.
- Hebrews 10:29, Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden underfoot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?
- Hebrews 13:12, Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate.
- 1 Peter 1:2, Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, be multiplied.
- 1 Peter 3:15, But 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 with meekness and fear:
- Jude 1:1, Jude, the servant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James, to them that are sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ, and called: