

Study Guide #7: Living a Holy Life

Introduction

Receiving the imputed righteousness of Jesus and thus being in a saved relationship is not the end of the story for the genuine Christian. God has a larger purpose for our lives. He wants to transform our character to become more like His. This is the work of sanctification—living a holy life.

Question #1: What is the ultimate purpose of God’s plan of salvation?

Answer: The ultimate purpose of salvation is to have our lives transformed into those which better reflect God’s character. This is true because ultimately, He wants to prepare us to be happy in our lives with Him for eternity. This requires much change in the way we live in contrast to the world’s selfish principles. Remember that Mary was told to call her son’s name **“Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins”** (Matthew 1:21, NKJV)—not *in* their sins. Ephesians 2:10 is more explicit: **“For by grace you have been saved through faith...For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works”** (NKJV).



The Baby Jesus

Question #2: Can a Christian really live a holy life?

Answer: The word for “holy” means that something or someone has been “set apart” for a special use. In fact, the Greek words for “holy,” “sanctified,” “sanctification,” and “saint” all stem from the same root. Christians have been set apart from the world to reflect God’s character. The apostle Peter put it this way: **“but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy”** (I Peter 1:15, NKJV). This means that saints are not super-good Christians who have more righteousness than they need in order to mediate some of their extra for others. Saints are all those who are committed to Jesus. This isn’t perfection, but it is a life that is lived differently from those whose principles are worldly ones.

Question #3: Does sanctification describe what a Christian is or what he does?

Answer: It describes both because there are 2 aspects of sanctification: (1) *positional*—being set apart to act in a different way; and (2) *progressive*—the work of becoming more like God’s character. Positional sanctification is the reason the Scriptures state that believers **“have been sanctified”** (past tense)—Acts 20:32; I Corinthians 1:2; 6:11; II Timothy 2:21; Hebrews 2:11. Christians are said to (1) be **“in Christ,”** that is, in a relationship with Him (Romans 8:1; 12:5; I Corinthians 1:2; II Corinthians 1:21; 5:17; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:6) and (2) have been **“adopted”** by God (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:5; Ephesians 1:5).

This new position is symbolized by baptism, which refers to a spiritual birth (born again)—see Explorer II, Study Guide #10.

Progressive sanctification is necessary because if we are set apart for service to God, then we certainly need to *act* in service toward Him. Moreover, the New Testament uses words derived from the Greek words for “**growth**” (I Peter 2:2; II Peter 3:18), “**sanctification**” (I Thessalonians 4:3; 5:23), and “**holiness**” (Romans 6:19; II Corinthians 7:1; Hebrews 12:10, 14; I Peter 1:15-16; II Peter 3:11) to describe the believer’s way of life.

Question #4: Does progressive sanctification mean that the believer is becoming more and more righteous?

Answer: Theologians speak of progressive sanctification as the *imparted* righteousness of Jesus. But we must be careful to distinguish between becoming *internally* righteous and developing a righteous *character*. The former is impossible before the 2nd Coming of Jesus (Philippians 3:20-21; cf. vv. 12-16) because even our good deeds (“**righteousnesses**”) are like “**filthy rags**” (Isaiah 64:6, NKJV). On the other hand, character is defined by our habits—the spiritual direction of our lives—which are formed from the thoughts, words, and actions of a person over time. Therefore, we should not speak of becoming more and more righteous, but as developing a character more and more like God’s character. The latter is both possible and necessary.



Filthy Rag

Question #5: How can a Christian live a holy life in a world that generally follows Satan’s principle of selfishness?

Answer: Jesus is the key because He Himself declared that “**without Me you can do nothing**” (John 15:5, NKJV). Yet the apostle Paul added that “**I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me**” (Philippians 4:13, NKJV). More specifically, Paul teaches that a Christian is “**to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man**” (Ephesians 3:16, NKJV). Not only does God provide the *power* to live a holy life, He also gives us the *desire* to do so, “**for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure**” (Philippians 2:13, NKJV).

Question #6: How can a person appropriate God’s power to live a holy life?

Answer: In Explorer II, Study Guide #3, Question #4, we showed that a Christian is like a walking civil war in which his sinful nature battles against the spiritual nature represented by the Holy Spirit living in us (Romans 7:15-23; I Corinthians 6:19; Galatians 5:17). While the Holy Spirit will supply the power to live a successful holy life, we must learn to starve the sinful nature and feed the spiritual nature. To do this, we must recognize that the mind is the real spiritual battlefield. Therefore, we must “**be transformed by the renewing of your mind**” (Romans 12:2, NKJV), which is the opposite of being “**conformed to this world**” (also Romans 12:2, NKJV). In practical terms, it means we should focus on spiritual things while

not neglecting our secular duties to ourselves, our families, and our workplaces. In fact, it helps to view our secular duties in life as being done *with, to, and for* Jesus!

Question #7: What practical things should we do to feed our spiritual nature?

Answer: Spiritual things must replace our natural, sinful focus in relationship to music, reading material, visual material, conversations, and environments that naturally would unduly expose us to worldly influences. Furthermore, we should spend some time each day focused on the character/life of Jesus, for it's a human as well as a spiritual principle that we gradually become what we habitually *behold* (II Corinthians 3:18). Finally, we must actually study the Scriptures at least a few minutes each day because the Psalmist testified that **"Your word I have hidden in my heart, That I might not sin against You"** (Psalm 119:11, NKJV), and Jesus prayed for His apostles, **"Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth"** (John 17:17, NKJV). [NOTE: There are no shortcuts to living a holy life. It takes time and effort.]

Question #8: In practical terms, how can we actually overcome temptation?

Answer: It's really important to remember a few principles. *First*, overcoming temptation is a 2-part process that's summarized by James 4:7: **"Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you"** (NKJV). People fail in their Christian walk when they try to resist the devil without being in submission to God. That's like flooring the gas pedal on a race car when there's no gasoline in the tank. Review the responses to Questions #6 and #7 to make certain you have "gasoline" in your spiritual gas tank. Sometimes people fail because they remain submitted to God but then don't resist the temptation itself, apparently expecting God to resist *for* them. The apostle Paul clarifies the secret to success this way: **"work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure"** (Philippians 2:12-13, NKJV). The context there is sanctification, not how one is saved (see vv. 5-16). The believer here is told to work *out* what God works *in*. That is, He works in us to give us the *desire* ("will") and *power* ("do"), but we must exercise that will and power that actually results in obedience to His will.

According to I Timothy 6:9, 11-12, we must exercise our free will (a) to flee from temptation as soon as



Crossing the Raging Jordan River

we recognize it, and (b) to pursue the righteous course of action. When we exercise the free will, God supplies the power to do the right thing. This exercise of the free will is an *act of faith* that God's power will supply our success. In Joshua 3:13-17, when the priests believed God and put their faith into action by stepping into the raging Jordan River, only then did God part the river so that His people could cross into Canaan. It's vitally important to remember to take this step even when you don't feel like it. Faith is not about feelings, but about *acting* on God's promises!

Finally, we should implement the Replacement Principle—that overcoming a bad habit is much more successful when a person replaces it with a good habit. We know this from our own experience and from Jesus' parable of the woman who swept her house clean, representing the sweeping of the mind, and thus allowing for more demons to later occupy it (Luke 11:24-26).

Question #9: Are there any other Scriptures to help me understand this process of progressive sanctification?

Answer: The Bible reinforces our conclusions by using at least 5 different metaphors to describe the sanctified life:

- *Growth Metaphor*—Jesus compared a believer to a branch on a grape vine (John 15:1-5) and to lilies of the field (Matthew 6:28). Although plants naturally produce fruit without effort, they need sunshine, air, food, and water in order to grow in healthy ways. Jesus is the Sun of Righteousness (Malachi 4:2; cf. II Peter 1:19; Revelation 22:16). The Holy Spirit is the air (John 3:5-8). Jesus is our spiritual food as the Bread of Life (John 6:35; cf. I Peter 2:2-3). Finally, Jesus is the living water (John 4:14). A gardener who wants healthy, productive plants will make certain that they receive all of these things. Likewise, the Christian needs to work to acquire these spiritual things in order to grow successfully and produce good fruit.
- *Walking Metaphor*—Several passages describe the Christian life as a walk with the Lord (Romans 6:4; 8:1; II Corinthians 5:7; Galatians 6:16; Ephesians 4:1; I John 1:7; and I John 2:6). Persistent, continual walking requires real effort.
- *Running Metaphor*—Several passages speak of the Christian life by using the running metaphor (I Corinthians 9:24-27; Galatians 2:2; 5:7; Philippians 2:16; and 3:14). A runner needs physical conditioning and exercises many muscles in order to run successfully.
- *Boxing Metaphor*—In I Corinthians 9:26-27, Paul describes the fact that a boxer requires training and discipline in order to be successful.
- *Fighting/Warfare Metaphor*—Several passages describe the Christian life in terms of a soldier who fights in a war (I Corinthians 9:25-27; 10:4; Ephesians 6:11-17; I Timothy 1:18; 6:12). A soldier requires much training and discipline in order to be successful.



Boxers

These 5 metaphors all indicate that the believer has an active role to play in the process of progressive sanctification. Unlike justification (see Explorer II, Study Guide #5), which is received as a finished declaration by God that he's perfectly righteous because of what Jesus has already accomplished, progressive sanctification demands that the believer actively work together with the Holy Spirit to work *out* what He works *in*.