

# It is God's Will that We Must Be Sanctified

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“For this is the will of God,  
even your sanctification”  
(1 Thessalonians 4:3a).

The church of Thessalonica was founded by Paul during his second missionary journey. He had spent three Sabbath days ministering at the synagogue, preaching and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 17:1-4). Some Jews and God-fearing Gentiles believed in the Gospel. However, a riot instigated by Jewish opponents resulted in Paul and his team having to take premature leave of Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-10).

Despite the ejection of the missionaries from Thessalonica, the work of God continued unabated. A few months later, Paul sent Timothy to enquire about the state of the Thessalonian church. The report from Timothy was generally positive. However, there was some confusion in the church concerning Christ's second coming. The first epistle to the Thessalonians was therefore written to address this issue.

One of Paul's desires was for the Thessalonians to please God in their walk with Him (1 Thessalonians 4:1). Therefore, Paul exhorts in 1 Thessalonians 4:3a – “For this is the will of God, even your sanctification”.

## The Doctrine of Sanctification Defined

The term “sanctification” comes from the Greek word *hagiazō*, which means “to make holy”, “to set apart for God”, “to consecrate” or “to purify”. When applied to the believer, it refers to the work of God that takes place in order to make the believer pure before Him.

There are three aspects of sanctification:

### Positional Sanctification

This refers to the cleansing and redemption of the believers by the Blood of Christ upon conversion. At this point, they are set apart by God and are henceforth called “saints” (*hagiois*), i.e. “holy ones” or “sanctified ones”. It is this aspect of sanctification that is emphasised in Hebrews 10:10, “By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” Jude 1 also states that believers are sanctified when they are saved: “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”.

Positional sanctification teaches us that when a believer is saved, God sets the believer

apart to serve Him according to His will and His desire. Other passages which highlight the positional aspect of sanctification include Acts 20:32, 1 Corinthians 1:2 and 1 Corinthians 6:11.

### Progressive Sanctification

This is the ongoing and experiential aspect of sanctification. It is the continual process of consecration and forsaking of sin, resulting in the believer becoming more and more like Christ. Peter exhorts the believers to “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). Paul adds in 2 Corinthians 3:18, “But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.” As the believer is progressively sanctified, he will conform more and more to the image of Christ.

Progressive sanctification is effected through the Word of God. “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth” (John 17:17). The Holy Spirit that indwells every believer will cause the believer to know and understand the truth, empowering him to obey the Word of God. When a believer is convicted by the Word of his sins, he can confess his sins to Christ who will sanctify and cleanse him of his sins. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

This aspect of progressive sanctification is well-expressed in the answer to Question 75 of the Westminster Larger Catechism: “Sanctification is a work of God’s grace, whereby they whom God has, before the foundation of the world, chosen to be holy, are in time, through the powerful operation of his Spirit applying the death and resurrection of Christ unto them, renewed in their whole man after the image of God;

having the seeds of repentance unto life, and all other saving graces, put into their hearts, and those graces so stirred up, increased, and strengthened, as that they more and more die unto sin, and rise unto newness of life.” As C. H. Spurgeon put it, “If he gives you the grace to make you believe, he will give you the grace to live a holy life afterwards.”

### Permanent or Ultimate Sanctification

This refers to our final perfection, whereby our glorified and sinless bodies will be received at the coming resurrection. We will be presented faultless and without blemish in the presence of God. “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” (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

### The Doctrine of Sanctification Applied

Paul tells the Thessalonian Christians that the will and desire of God is their sanctification (1 Thessalonians 4:3a). How would these three aspects of sanctification come into play in the Christian’s walk to please God?

Firstly, the Christian is already positionally sanctified in Christ and is thus called a “saint” or “sanctified one”. It is therefore necessary for him to walk worthy of the high vocation and position to which he has been called. What a travesty it would be for one who is called a “holy and sanctified one” to be found in habitual sin and wickedness!

Secondly, a Christian is expected to be progressively sanctified. Since progressive sanctification is effected by God’s Word, a Christian should read God’s Word daily and walk in its precepts. He should also pray fervently that God will mould him to be

more Christ-like. He ought to have a strong desire to separate from sin and to manifest the fruit of the Spirit (cf. Galatians 5:16, 22-23).

Lastly, as the Christian has the sure hope of being perfectly sanctified, he should then all the more strive for purity and holiness during his time on earth. "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure" (1 John 3:2-3).

Paul then proceeds to apply the doctrine of sanctification with respect to sexual purity. Since God demands sanctification and holiness, it is imperative that a believer must abstain from fornication (1 Thessalonians 4:3b). The Greek word for the

term "fornication" is *porneia*, where we get the English word "pornography". It denotes all forms of sexual immorality and sin. The Christian knows that he is set apart for God's service. He must then keep both his body and soul pure for the Lord's use, and to be a vessel clean and honourable before the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:4).

## Conclusion

God's desire for our sanctification ought to cause us to be more circumspect in our walk with God, for He has called us unto holiness and not unto uncleanness (1 Thessalonians 4:7). Therefore, let us take heed of God's will to present ourselves as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable unto God, which is but our reasonable service. Amen.



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