

"SANCTIFICATION"

(Romans 6:15-23)

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What Sanctification Entailed for Paul and His Readers

[Throughout the New Testament] Paul tells his readers specifically what "sanctification" means for them in their first-century, Greco-Roman contexts. They were to stand apart from their culture in their approach to sex, religious practice, property, money, alcohol use, and speech, for example (1 Cor. 6:9-11; 1 Thess. 4:3-7). Unlike so many of their neighbors in Thessalonica, Corinth, and Rome, they were not to use any honor or power they might have for their own selfish ends but were to practice cooperation, love, nonretaliation, submission, and self-control (e.g., Rom. 12:1-2, 3-21; 1 Cor. 6:1-4; 8:1-3; 10:23, 31-33; 13:1-13; 1 Thess. 4:6, 9). When Paul spoke of being enslaved to righteousness (Rom. 6:13, 16, 18-19), he probably used the term to summarize these virtues. The task of living this way must have seemed mammoth in the face of the habits and ways of life that the mostly gentile Christians to whom Paul wrote had absorbed since childhood (Rom. 13:13-14; 1 Thess. 4:3-8; Eph. 4:17-19).

Later in Romans Paul will make clear that God has not left his people to live holy lives by their own power but has given them the Holy Spirit to help them (Rom. 7:6; 8:1-17, 26-27). Here in Romans 6:15-23, however, he focuses on the important role that believers themselves play in willing to do what is right.

Paul has emphasized in previous sections of his argument that human beings apart from God's intervention are in bondage to sin. The tendency of their lives is to rebel against God (Rom. 1:18-3:20; 5:12-14, 17a, 20a-c, 21a). In 6:15-23 he says that God has now broken the power of sin to enslave believers and that they are able to live righteously. Their minds, hearts, abilities, and opportunities belong to God, and so they should place themselves at God's disposal for him to use for his just, fair, compassionate purposes.

Sanctification Today

Systematic theologians in the Reformed tradition have often expressed concern about any separation of sanctification from God's grace and concern about any notion that human beings can achieve perfection in this life. Even those who have been justified by faith remain too sinful to produce righteous works that might merit a reward from God, and they remain too sinful to expect great progress toward perfection in this life. Claims to perfection or near perfection are based on a failure to take the rigor of God's law seriously. These are helpful emphasis, derived both from a close reading of Scripture and a perceptive understanding of the errors into which Christians have sometimes fallen when they have embraced a less-than-biblical view of God's grace. As the



exegesis above has shown, Romans 6:15-23 begins and ends with God's grace: the believer is under grace rather than law (6:15), and eternal life, which is the end of a fruitful life of obedience to God, is God's free gift (6:23).

Even so, it is important when applying Paul's teaching in 6:15-23 to the church to leave the emphasis where the apostle himself places it, and that is on the necessity that believers present themselves to God for the purpose of living righteous and holy lives. This obedience arises from grace and so should never be the cause of pride in the believer, but it nevertheless involves the believers effort and will. In his letter to Titus, who was training church leaders in the rough culture of Crete, Paul tells his coworker that "the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age" (Titus 2:11-12). The term "training" here (παιδευουσα) refers to teaching and education and so connotes discipline and effort for the one being taught. As Paul says only a few clauses later, Christ redeemed his people that they might be "zealous for good works" (Titus 2:14).

Christians, then, should certainly rest in God's grace if they are anxious about whether they are at peace with God, but they should also discipline themselves to do what is right toward people around them, tending to the needs of the poor and oppressed, proclaiming the gospel to the unevangelized, and worshiping God according to his word and with his people.