

Are We Sanctified by Works or by Grace?

Peter Ditzel

Progressive Sanctification, View One: Grace Plus Works or Cooperation

In this view, grace and works are usually seen as more or less balanced. Theologian Wayne Grudem is one representative of this view. He believes that sanctification is "a work in which God and man cooperate each playing distinct roles" ("Sanctification (by Wayne Grudem)") (<https://www.biblicaltraining.org/library/sanctification-wayne-grudem>). Although admitting that an "initial moral change is the first stage in sanctification" (ibid.), he says "this moral change is actually a part of regeneration [but] we can also see it as the first stage in sanctification" (ibid.). His emphasis is largely on progressive sanctification. He writes, "Sanctification is a progressive work of God and man that makes us more and more free from sin and like Christ in our actual lives" (ibid.). To Grudem, sanctification is not just a work of God; it is a work of God and man.

Grudem later explains that he is "concerned that if we say sanctification is entirely God's work, we can be misunderstood and encourage an excessively passive role on the part of Christians, who may be led to think that they need to do nothing in the process of sanctification in their lives" (ibid.). Grudem seems concerned that people may think their sanctification is entirely in God's hands, which is something he apparently does not believe or think is a good thing. He does not seem to be concerned that his position appears to make man at least partly responsible for his own salvation. Grudem essentially teaches that believers must do something to bring about their sanctification. He goes on to say, "The role that we play in sanctification is both a passive one in which we depend on God to sanctify us, and an active one in which we strive to obey God and take steps that will increase our sanctification" (ibid.). Notice that Grudem does not say that what we do is a result of a completed sanctification God has already worked in us, but that what we do increases our sanctification. The implication is that what God has done is not complete and needs to be finished by man.

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Grudem is typical of those who see sanctification as a mix of a gracious act of God and our works. Our works actually bring about a part of our sanctification. The questions that arise with this view of sanctification are these: Since sanctification is a part of our salvation, if any fraction of our sanctification is accomplished by our works, how can this view avoid the charge of teaching a works-based salvation? Also, how can sanctification be achieved through a mix of grace and works when Romans 11:6 teaches that grace and works don't mix? "And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work."

Progressive Sanctification, View Two: Works Initiated by or Sprinkled by Grace

As I said earlier, few people plainly state that sanctification is entirely a matter of works. Most will teach that sanctification is initiated by grace, and many will even say that our works are helped along or sprinkled by grace. But the emphasis in this category is definitely on human works.

I am personally of the opinion that many Christians come to think they are sanctified by their own works as a sort of overreaction in their early Christian life to their past sinful life and to the sinful world around them. They want to set themselves as far apart from sin as possible, and they become zealous for good works. Unfortunately, this leads them into viewing the Christian life as a list of dos and don'ts. I must study the Bible, pray, and meditate for so long each day. I must perfectly keep the Ten Commandments. I used to watch too much television, now I should watch none, but Christian films, music, and books may possibly be okay. Instead of amusements, I should attend every church meeting and activity, and witness to everyone I meet. I must tithe or even go beyond tithing.

Only by their continual success in their list of good works can these people have any hope that they might be saved. When they fail, they doubt their salvation. They often go into a series of cycles in which they feel good when they believe they are succeeding and depressed when they see themselves as failing. They can never rest in the assurance that they are saved. This kind of thinking can also lead to its adherents looking at the works of others of their brethren and judge their salvation. Unfortunately, in too many cases, what people hear and read from Christian speakers and writers does nothing to lift them

out of the pit into which they have fallen, but instead it reinforces their wrong understanding.

This is what the website *Reformed Baptist Daily* says about progressive sanctification: "Whereas positional sanctification emphasizes God's work, progressive sanctification emphasizes our work or obedience, yet this is not without God's grace" (<http://bit.ly/2s5fWa8>). After emphasizing our work or obedience and giving a nod to grace, the article says, "Progressive sanctification is the process whereby we daily become more and more like Jesus Christ, through the killing of sin in our lives as we endeavor to live according to God's grace in the gospel. While we have been set apart to God in a positional way, we must now live accordingly, growing or maturing in it.... Progressive sanctification is not optional. He who does not demonstrate growth in sanctification shows himself to be a false professor (and he therefore lacks positional sanctification)" (ibid.). I hope you see how such teaching can warp sanctification into a prison that entraps people into an endless cycle of moralistic effort, a falling short of expectations, and then a guilt trip followed by more effort. Since the truth is supposed to set us free (John 8:32), such a view of sanctification must certainly be a lie.

Yet, this position is widespread and promoted by some very well-known teachers. John MacArthur writes, "Sanctification isn't easy—it takes faithfulness, hard work, and self-discipline. And even then, it's not purely a function of your will, but the work of the Holy Spirit in you. It's not manufactured overnight" ("Counterfeit Sanctification") (<https://www.gty.org/library/blog/B121022>). The thing to notice is that MacArthur only says that sanctification isn't *purely* a function of our will. This allows for it to be *largely* a function of our will, but even if just a small part of it is a function of our will, then, according to John MacArthur, we can will our sanctification. He also begins by saying that sanctification takes "hard work" and "self-discipline." Since sanctification is a part of our salvation, then our "hard work" and "self-discipline" are requirements for our salvation.

In the sequel to the article cited above, MacArthur, never saying that he is correcting what he said in the previous article, writes, "True sanctification, according to Scripture, is the process of God's transforming work in your life.... And just as with salvation, sanctification is not accomplished by our will or actions—it's the work of the Lord in the lives of His people" ("What Is Sanctification (and What It Is Not)?") (<https://www.gty.org/library/blog/B121025>). Somehow, MacArthur wants us to believe that sanctification takes "hard work,

and self-discipline" and is partly a function of our will, while at the same time believing that "sanctification is not accomplished by our will or actions." Hmm. If these articles were written years apart, I would say that perhaps he has changed his position, something I can totally understand. But MacArthur apparently wrote them no more than days apart. But wait, there is a third installment.

In "How Do You Measure Up?" (<https://www.gty.org/library/blog/B121026>), John MacArthur writes, "Yesterday we discussed the true, biblical nature of sanctification—that it's the work of the Lord in the lives of His people. However, each of us bears some responsibility for our own spiritual growth, as well. I can't tell you what percentage of the responsibility falls on you.... With that in mind, I want to help you take accurate, biblical stock of where you are in your spiritual growth" (ibid.). He then gives eight principles we can use to gauge our spiritual growth.

Read the article and you will see that each one of these eight principles, even those that speak of God or the Holy Spirit or Christ, is designed to make believers focus upon themselves to determine where they stand in their sanctification. And here I was thinking we are to keep our eyes focused on Christ! How foolish of me. Or, maybe not so foolish, for didn't Peter begin to sink into the water when he took his eyes off Christ? (Matthew 14:30). And didn't the author of Hebrews write, "Therefore let us also, seeing we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising its shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:1-2)?

But aren't we to examine ourselves? Yes, that's true, but let's see what we are to be looking for when we do that: "For he was crucified through weakness, yet he lives through the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but we will live with him through the power of God towards you. Examine your own selves, whether you are in the faith. Test your own selves. Or don't you know as to your own selves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified" (2 Corinthians 13:4-6). When we examine ourselves, what are we to see? Ourselves and whether we are living up to a list of principles? No. We are to see Jesus Christ. For if we are trusting in Christ, He is living in us (John 17:23), and "we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10). Further

reading: "How can I know that I am saved?"
(<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/assuranceQA.htm>).

Am I being unfair; am I the only one who has seen this problem in John MacArthur's theology? No. In "The High Cost of Salvation by Faith-Works" (<https://faithalone.org/journal/1993ii/faith-works.html>), Robert N. Wilkin lists ten points on which John MacArthur has distorted Scripture. The very first one on the list is, "(1) He exhorts people to look within themselves for assurance of salvation, rather than to the only reliable source, the promises of God." And the last one on the list is this: "(10) His view of both justification and sanctification are legalistic and mechanical, lacking a grasp of the personal dynamic of looking to the Lord Jesus Christ as one's Savior, Lord, and Friend."

I had intended to devote more space to other teachers who hold this flawed view of sanctification, but John MacArthur's three-part series in which he takes one view, flips, and then goes back to his first position took more space to honestly evaluate than I would have liked. Nevertheless, I'll quickly mention J.C. Ryle's teaching on sanctification. Many of today's preachers have learned much from Ryle. Unfortunately, not all of it is biblical.

In contrasting justification and sanctification, Ryle writes,

The righteousness we have by our justification is not our own, but the everlasting perfect righteousness of our great Mediator Christ, imputed to us, and made our own by faith. The righteousness we have by sanctification is our own righteousness, imparted, inherent, and wrought in us by the Holy Spirit, but mingled with much infirmity and imperfection.

J.C. Ryle, "Justification and Sanctification, How do they Differ?"

(https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/sanct_just_ryle.html)

So, Ryle here teaches that the righteousness we have by sanctification is *our own righteousness*. Thus, although the Bible says that Jesus Christ is our sanctification (1 Corinthians 1:30), Ryle says that the righteousness of our sanctification is our own, and not Christ's. I suppose, according to Ryle's theology, sanctification is our perfect excuse to be self-righteous.

Ryle then says,

In sanctification our own works are of vast importance and God bids us fight, and watch, and pray, and strive, and take pains, and labour. Justification is a finished and complete work, and a man is perfectly justified the moment he believes. Sanctification is an imperfect work, comparatively, and will never be perfected until we reach heaven.

Ibid.

J.C. Ryle teaches that a part of our salvation called sanctification is dependent on our works—a works salvation. He also says it will never be perfected until we reach heaven.

One more quote from Ryle:

For one thing, let us all awake to a sense of the perilous state of many professing Christians. "Without holiness no man shall see the Lord"; without sanctification there is no salvation. (Heb.xii. 14.)

Ibid.

I have a question for those who believe that sanctification is our own work, for our own righteousness, that we must strive and labor for throughout our lives, and without which there is no salvation. What happens when a brand new believer steps into the street and is struck by a bus and killed? This believer has had no chance to work at salvation, and so, according to Ryle and so many others, this person who has trusted in Jesus Christ as Savior and been justified, *cannot be saved*.

Oh, you say, this person will be completely sanctified in glorification anyway, and, so, will be saved. Okay, if that is the case, that everyone will be completely sanctified in glorification anyway, what is the purpose of long and hard striving for sanctification throughout our lives? Why go through all that effort? Something is obviously seriously wrong with this teaching, and what is wrong with it is that it teaches a salvation dependent on our works, and that our works create our own righteousness.

Those who teach that we accomplish any portion of our sanctification by our works are thus exposed as preaching another Gospel that is not a real Gospel at all (Galatians 1:6-9).

In part 3, we'll finish up by examining sanctification by grace alone.