

What 3 Words: Sanctification

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Date: 08 December 2024

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[0 : 00] Every area of life comes with its own kind of set of vocabulary, doesn't it? So love, for example, what love might be what much of the world is looking for, but for a tennis player, right, for a tennis player, love is decidedly bad news, isn't it?

Just one of the reasons that cricket is so great is because you regularly hear quite posh English people speak very seriously about words like googlys and dibly doblers.

A golfer on a bad day might grumble to you about all their bogeys. Doctors and accountants, gardeners, plumbers, they'll all use very different words, won't they, in their day-to-day jobs. Every sphere of life has its own set of vocabulary that might well be kind of maybe a bit meadly meaningless to those who are unfamiliar with it, but is very important for understanding whatever subject might be in question.

Over the last few weeks, we as a church, haven't we, have been looking at a few key Bible words, right, words that we as God's people should be familiar with.

[1 : 18] So justification, adoption, and sanctification. They might well sound like strange words to some, especially if you're new and that's okay, but hopefully what we're beginning to see over these last few weeks, why, why these three terms are so important to have in our Christian vocabulary.

They are not just words, are they, for theologians to kind of bat around in their big books. They are words that every Christian should be familiar with because they describe every one of us where every one of us is here and now in Christ Jesus.

That is why we have spent these last three Sundays looking at each of these terms and this week, this morning, we come to the third and final of those words, sanctification.

I think it's probably worth saying kind of right off the bat, sanctification is a huge kind of topic in the Bible that the Bible spends lots of time speaking about it in one way or another.

So there's simply no way we can kind of cover every blade of grass this morning. I don't need to think that's what's happened when we get to the end of it. But hopefully we'll at least be able to kind of lay a foundation that we can be building on as we come to study God's words in the days and weeks and months and years to come.

[2 : 45] But before we come to our points this morning, let's just start with a really kind of basic dictionary definition. Because, I mean, sanctification isn't, is it?

It's not a word we use every day. If you've not been around here for very long, it's maybe a word you've never even heard before. So what does it mean? Sanctification means, at its kind of very most basic, the word means being set apart.

Sanctification means being set apart. And it's the same words, okay, in our Bibles that is often translated holy or kind of being made holy, holiness.

And it's the same word again, right, if you use it as an adjective to describe people, that our Bibles often translate as saints. So every time you read the word sanctification, sanctified, holy, being made holy, holiness, or saints, that they are all coming from this same kind of root word that both in Greek and in Hebrew means being set apart.

So God in himself is set apart, isn't he? He is holy, holy, holy. We've heard and sung that this morning.

[4 : 13] Completely set apart. There is nothing like him. And when people or things or places are described as holy, as sanctified, that means they too are set apart, but specifically set apart for God.

So things are taken kind of out of their current use and set apart instead for God's use. That's why in the Old Testament you get things like holy plates, holy tables, a holy house, the temple.

All of them set apart for God. So sanctification means for us being set apart for God, set apart for God.

With that kind of really basic definition in mind, we'll build on that as we go. But with that in mind, let me just kind of lay out for you the roadmap this morning.

We're going to kind of take a high-speed express service train through Colossians this morning and see three things as we just stop off a couple of points. One, we're going to see that sanctification is inseparable from justification and adoption.

[5 : 33] Secondly, we see that sanctification is something that has already happened to us. And then thirdly, we'll see sanctification is currently happening in us.

So let's just come to our first point this morning. We are justified and adopted so that we might be sanctified. I wonder if I were to ask you, where you think sanctification, this idea of being holy, holy living, a life set apart for God, where does that fit into the message of the gospel?

Where does a holy life fit into the message of the gospel? What would you say, I wonder? Let me just illustrate how I used to think of sanctification.

We were recently on holiday in Harris. Harris, not Paris. Very big difference. I mean, we were in the Outer Hebrides in the middle of November.

So indoor activities were the order of the day. And in Harris, they have this great little soft play. It's brilliant. If you've not got young children, I'm sorry.

[6 : 54] It means you can't go to soft plays. It's a big loss. Rory loved it. I think I probably loved it a bit more. But best of all, it's free. You don't have to book anything.

There's no one at the door charging you to go in. You can tell it's a small island community. You'd never get off of that in Aberdeen, would you? But inside, okay, inside there is a donation box. And there's a little sign above it that says, kind of, suggested donation is, I can't remember, three pounds or five pounds per family or something. Now, I used to think of sanctification, right, like that donation box.

You have your justification and adoption, don't you? And they are wonderful free gifts from God. And then sanctification is sort of like the donation box he puts up for us, an opportunity for us to give something back if we want.

And so some people maybe look at it and think, I'm not going to bother putting anything in, right? I've got everything I want for free, and if that's free and I don't have to pay anything, I'm not going to. And so they don't bother trying to live a holy life.

[8 : 05] Other people maybe look at the honesty box and kind of begrudgingly put a few quid in because they feel a bit bad about taking everything for free. So you feel like you should at least kind of try and give something back.

So maybe you try and live a holy life because you feel like you'd be kind of taking the mick a bit if you didn't. Other people are really kind of very thankful for what they have, aren't they?

And so gladly pay into the box what they can. Doing everything they can to live a holy life out of genuine gratitude. Now if any of that kind of sounds vaguely familiar, perhaps about how you feel, about holy living, about sanctification.

What I kind of want to do in the short time we have this morning, I suppose, is take a sledgehammer and just knock that donation box clean off the wall. Because what all of those approaches have in common, even the one which sees sanctification as kind of an expression of genuine gratitude, what they all have in common, and what I hope we'll see this morning, what they all have kind of wrong, is that they view sanctification as something we do for God if we so choose.

As if justification is what God does for us, and then sanctification is where we try and give something back to Him. Just come back with me to our first reading in Colossians in chapter 1.

[9 : 37] I mean, part of the problem there, isn't it? Part of the problem with that kind of honesty box idea sees sanctification as an optional extra to the Christian life. Do this if you so wish.

Maybe something for really devout Christians, but not a necessary part of the gospel message. But the way the Bible speaks about sanctification, and I hope what we'll see this morning, leaves no room whatsoever for any sort of idea that sanctification is anything other than an indispensable and completely necessary component of the Christian life.

Colossians, this book that we're kind of diving into for a one-off this morning, is all about the sufficiency of Christ. And as part of that message to the Colossians, Paul shows that the basic gospel message, centered in Jesus Christ, does not only affect our one standing before God, but

affects everything about all of our lives everywhere.

It is all-encompassing. Our first reading reminded us, didn't it, of who Jesus is? They're amazing verses and what we have in Him. And then Paul summarizes what this all means for us there in verse 21 and 22.

Just look there with me. Colossians 1, 21 and 22, where he says, And you, who were hostile, alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless before him.

[11 : 21] Just look carefully at what Paul is saying there. First of all, you were alienated and hostile in mind.

That was our past condition, wasn't it? And it speaks, doesn't it, of what justification and adoption remedy. You were alienated.

You were far from God. You did not belong to Him. You were not His children. In fact, John in his letter makes clear that not only were we not children of God, we were in fact children of the devil.

That is who we used to be. And as children of the devil, we did evil deeds. And so we stood both alienated, far from God, and condemned before the just judge of all the earth.

Alienated and condemned. But what happens, verse 22? Jesus has now reconciled you to God.

Both justified in His sight, declared righteous before Him, and brought near to Him, out of slavery to sin, and into the family of God.

[12 : 33] And so the moment we put our faith and trust in Jesus, we are justified and adopted, and praise the Lord for that. But look at verse 22, and see, that is not the end goal in itself, is it?

Look at what Paul says next in verse 22. In order to present you holy.

Same word as sanctified. And blameless and above reproach before Him. Sanctification is not, is it?

It's not an optional extra.

It's not there if you want it, but don't worry if not. It is the call, the purpose, the end point of our justification and adoption.

God has redeemed you and reconciled you so that you would be set apart for Him. And because that is the purpose, right, for which God has saved you, one is not going to happen without the other.

[13 : 34] Right? Sanctification is, it is the fruit. The fruit that comes from a true faith in Christ, through which we are justified and adopted. If you're going to, if you're to buy like an apple tree and kind of plant it in your garden, and after five years, ten years, it doesn't produce any apples, you're not going to look at it, are you, and think, well, that's obviously still a healthy tree, it's just decided not to produce any fruit.

No, you'd look at it and you'd think, wouldn't it, there's something wrong. That's not what a healthy tree does. If it was healthy, there would be fruit.

Sanctification, holiness, is the real fruit of real faith. In order, Paul says, to present you holy and blameless.

So, how should we think of sanctification? Well, certainly not as an optional extra to the Christian life, but as part of the very purpose that God has saved us for.

And inextricably, like, linked to our justification and adoption. You cannot pull them apart. If you have faith in Jesus, you are justified, you are adopted, and you are and will be sanctified.

[14 : 55] The three are distinct, but there is no pulling them apart from each other. Not one of them is separable from any of the others. Part of the problem with the honesty box idea, isn't it, is that it sees sanctification as an optional extra.

I hope we see now that that's not true. But another part of the problem, isn't it, is that it also sees sanctification as something we do for God.

As if it's kind of our repayment for his kindness in justifying and adopting us. So, let's just think a little bit more about that as we come to our second point.

And see, we are already sanctified in Christ. We are already sanctified in Christ.

As we think about this, this is where the answer that the Westminster Shorter Catechism gives us is so helpful. Because straight away, right, straight away, it tells us something so important about how we are sanctified.

[16 : 07] Listen to how the answer begins. What is sanctification? Sanctification says, Sanctification is a work of God's free grace.

Let me ask you a very simple question off the back of that. Who are you sanctified by? It's not you, is it? It is God.

And in a very real sense, the moment you put your faith and trust in Jesus, that has already happened.

Because the moment God gave you a saving faith, the moment he justified you, he also adopted you and he set you apart for himself.

That is why when Paul is writing to the Colossians, he begins this letter, as he does many others. Just glance up there to verse 2 of chapter 1. He begins by addressing the believers as what in verse 2?

[17 : 15] The saints. The saints in Christ at Colossae. Maybe it's worth just very briefly kind of mentioning here.

The way Roman Catholicism defines saints is really unhelpful. I'd say unbiblical. Because in the Roman Catholic Church, a saint is like some extra special super Christian with miraculous powers that is venerated by the church.

But in the Bible, saints are Christians. All Christians. All Christians are saints.

Because all Christians have been set apart by God for himself. That is why Paul begins this letter and many others with this language.

Not because there was kind of a plethora of miracle workers in Colossae. But because there was a bunch of ordinary believers. Just like you and me.

[18 : 21] People who had been set apart by God. For God. See again, if you just flick over the page to chapter 3 there. We'll spend the rest of our time in this chapter.

Paul says again, doesn't he, to the faithful believers in Colossae in verse 12. What does he say there? Put on then as God's chosen ones. How does he describe them? Holy and beloved.

Holy and beloved. What's he saying there? He's saying, isn't he? Holy is who you are. Now there is a sense, and we'll see this when we come to our third point, that we are becoming more holy.

Theologians are going to describe these two aspects as definitive and progressive sanctification. If you want the fancy words for it. But definitive sanctification, right? What we're thinking about here is that recognition that our status in Christ is already one of holiness.

Saints set apart for God by God. The moment you put your faith in Jesus Christ. Think back to the apple tree again.

[19 : 35] If a gardener kind of plants a tiny little sapling, and then the moment they plant it, the moment they kind of put a seed in the ground, and they put a little label in the soil around it that says, apple tree.

That is a helpful and true and right label, isn't it? You don't look at it and say, well, we can't really call it an apple tree until it's produced some apples.

No, from the moment it's planted, you call it an apple tree because that is what it is. It will show itself to be that by the fruit that it bears in the years to come if it is healthy.

But even before the fruit has appeared, that sign is accurate, isn't it? Well, so too with us as God's justified children.

We have been declared holy. Set apart for God to live holy lives. That is who you are now in Christ Jesus.

[20 : 44] A saint, holy. And beloved. Because God knows. And he knows and is sure because it is his work.

That that is what we are. And so holy fruit is what we will bear as we mature. And we are declared holy because of the faith that we put in Christ.

The same faith that justifies us, sanctifies us. You don't need to do kind of one thing to be declared righteous and then another later on to be made holy. No, in putting our faith in Jesus Christ alone.

We are united to him and so lavish simultaneously. With every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. So we are already sanctified in Christ.

But that status that we have. It calls us, doesn't it, to act in a certain way. To live up to our calling.

[21 : 54] So let's just come to our third and final point this morning. We are being sanctified to be like Christ. Because we have been sanctified, we are to live sanctified lives.

We are made holy so that we would be holy. The Old Testament temple was full of holy objects.

Because they were all, each and every one of them, set apart for God. But each item, right, a table, a lamp, some breads. It was set apart, not just for the sake of it.

But it was set apart for a particular purpose. And so in order to fulfill its holy status, it had to be used for its particular holy work.

Everything set apart as holy is set apart to carry out a certain holy duty. What does that look like for us? As a holy people, saints set apart for God.

[23 : 06] Well, Paul gives a great summary there that we read in chapter 3. And the heart of the matter, I think, is there in verse 10. He writes, having put off the old self.

Have put on the new self which is being renewed after the image of its creator. That's what we were thinking about with the children earlier in the service.

This is sanctification. It means us becoming more and more like Jesus. Holy living looks like setting yourself apart from sin.

And setting yourself for Christ-likeness. That is what we have been set apart to do.

To die to sin. And live to righteousness. That we might be made more and more in the image of our creator. How do we do that?

[24 : 10] Well, not by looking to ourselves. Not by trusting in our own strength. But by looking to Jesus. Paul tells the Colossians to be rooted and built up in him.

To set your minds on him. Because he, verse 4, chapter 3. He is where your life is. Your life is hidden in Christ.

Christ. And so, in putting off the old self. And putting on the new self. As Paul instructs us to do here. He's not saying. Okay.

He's not saying. You need to. You need to try and improve yourself. It's not that at all. That's often kind of people's. I think perception of religion. Isn't it? It's just like a bunch of rules to follow.

So that you can. You can try and make yourself a better person. In giving us these instructions. God is not calling you to become something you are not by your own effort.

[25 : 12] He is calling on you to live in Christ. And so become more and more of what you already are in him.

Here's how C.S. Lewis puts it so helpfully. He says. Out of ourselves and into Christ we must go. Your real new self will not come as long as you are looking for it.

It will come when you are looking for him. Seek the things that are above. Set your minds on the things that are above.

Made holy. To be faithful image bearers by living in Christ Jesus. And we see, don't we, when we're presented with this beautiful picture of it.

There's not a kind of restriction on our freedom. It's not a dampener on our lifestyle. It is quite literally living out who our creator has made us to be.

[26 : 20] He knows what he's doing. He knows why he's telling you it. And it is Christ at work in us by his spirit as we look to him and not ourselves each and every day.

When we set our hearts and minds in him, we will grow. We will be ever more sanctified as we put off sin and put on love and compassion and kindness and humility and patience.

As we let the word of God dwell richly in our hearts, we will be shaped more and more to be like Jesus. That's why God has saved us.

That's why God has saved us. To remake and renew us. To be the image bearers of God we were always created to be. There's a glorious vision, a glorious calling that God places on our lives.

Let's just draw this together as we close. But I think for a moment, why is Paul saying all of this and using all this language for the Colossians here in particular?

[27 : 26] Here was a church who knew the forgiveness they had in Christ, but they thought there might be something, maybe something more to gain.

As if there was kind of another level to Christianity, something beyond faith in Christ that they were missing and hadn't quite reached yet. But Paul wanted them to know and wants us to know that in Christ we have everything.

We have everything we need and I mean called to be like Christ. As maybe ordinary and mundane and unimpressive sounding as the callings and instructions of chapter 3 might be.

There is no higher or more complete calling we can find in this world. Turning from sin, loving one another, embedding ourselves in God's words, singing his praise.

It sounds fairly ordinary, doesn't it? But look at the language Paul weaves throughout and see that this is what it means to be set apart for God.

[28 : 47] To be chosen to be set apart for God. To be chosen to be holy in Christ. To be remade in the image of your creator. This is what it looks like.

And suddenly we begin to see, don't we, that this ordinary Christian life that Paul is calling them to live out. Suddenly that the highest and most glorious and most beautiful calling anyone could ever have.

And there's a calling that he works out in us. As we put our faith daily in Christ Jesus.

Remember that donation box on the wall? Sometimes we might see our kind of holy living as a genuine expression of our thanks to God.

But I hope now we can turn that around. And realize that actually thankfulness is how we should respond to God sanctifying us.

[29 : 53] He has promised us everything in his son Jesus. And he has promised to make us like his son Jesus as we work out the salvation he has given us.

And so, our hearts are filled with thankfulness for, say, whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Giving thanks. Giving thanks to God the Father through him. Because there is nothing more that we or anyone could add to our salvation.

There are no more possible blessings we could earn. Because we have everything in Christ Jesus. In our justification, our adoption, and our sanctification, we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

He simply calls us now to live out that life. Not so that we will earn anything more from him. But so that we will enjoy him forever.

[31 : 06] That is God's will for your life. That is the duty of man. To glorify God and enjoy him forever. Not so that we can gain anything more.

There is nothing more to gain. But so that we can rejoice and give thanks as we enjoy what he has given us. And what he is doing in us.

And because it is. Praise the Lord. It is God who is at work in us. Because our justification, our adoption, our sanctification is God's work in our lives.

We can rest assured, can't we? That he will preserve us to the end. He who started a good work in us will bring it to completion.

He does not justify us and leave us to sanctify ourselves. Rather, those whom he predestined, he also called. Those whom he called, he also justified.

[32 : 12] And those whom he justified, he also glorified. Praise God for his gracious work in us. And let us give thanks to him now in prayer and in praise.

Let us pray. Father, we thank you and praise you.

For who you are. And for what you have done for us in Christ Jesus. In blessing us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. We thank you that you have justified us.

You have adopted us. You have sanctified and are sanctifying us to be ever more like your son. We praise you for your glorious grace. In the name of Jesus we pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.