

What Is Sanctification?

by J.I. Packer

Sanctification is a universal, ethical renewal that is a progressive work, with a real change in the man's nature and character, brought about by the work of God, the Triune God.

Duration: 1:12:19

Scripture: Matthew 22:37, 1 Thessalonians 5:23

Topics: "Sanctification", "Christian Living"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes four important reminders for believers regarding their sanctification. The first reminder is that believers are human beings created with a mind, will, and affections. The mind is the leading faculty of the soul, guiding and directing the will and affections. The second reminder is that believers must recognize the ongoing presence of indwelling sin in their hearts and the need to continually put it to death. The preacher warns against the danger of claiming perfection and emphasizes the need for daily self-denial. The third reminder is that in order for divine truth to effectively impact believers, it must first be communicated to the mind before appealing to the emotions. The preacher emphasizes the importance of starting with exposition and understanding of truth before engaging the affections. The fourth reminder is that the Christian minister and preacher must begin with the exposition of God's word and the declaration of truth, and then call believers to react to it with their affections and will. The preacher highlights the Puritan tradition's condemnation of emotionalism and the importance of using the power of will to respond to truth.

Transcript

is to try and clear the way to your receiving the same benefit. So let me say first this, that our task, as we consider the Puritans, is one of application, not imitation. It is never, I believe, right simply to imitate the past.

It's always an unrealistic thing to do. It's also a very unpuritan thing to do. The Puritans were not men who imitated those who'd gone before them, but they lived most emphatically in the present.

Imitating the Puritans, imitating slavishly their style of speech and their way of doing things, could be a new legalism. And if such a thing came to be, it would be very unspiritual indeed. I say this because we have in fact had a little of it in England, in certain circles, during this past ten years.

People who have discovered the Puritans and got thrilled by the Puritans, and then being betrayed, Satan is subtle and he fits the temptation to the person, they've been betrayed into simply trying to ape the Puritans in the way that they speak in public, in the way that they write. And this of course undercuts the whole thing that God has been doing. Imitation of a bygone age is thoroughly unspiritual because it's thoroughly unrealistic.

What we have to do as we study the Puritans, is what we have to do when we study any part of our Christian heritage from past days. That is, to seek to bring what is valuable in these old divines into our present, and apply it there. This is the principle of fellowship.

Fellowship isn't just a principle operating between Christians who live in the same age. Fellowship is also a principle that operates between Christians of one age and another. What is fellowship? Well it's *koinonia* in the New Testament.

It means having things in common. It means giving and taking. To be sure, when those with whom we're in fellowship lived hundreds of years before us, we can't give them anything, but we can take from them for our benefit.

God doesn't give everything to everybody. None of us are self-sufficient. God has so made us that we need humbly to receive and profit from what other Christians, both in our present and in days before our time, have learned, learned of God, put down on paper, recorded for our instruction.

By this means we grow strong, our understanding is increased, and we learn more of the way to love and serve our God. So this must be our approach to the Puritans, that we go to them and we study them in order to take from them what we find that we need, and what we find there that will help us for the service of our God today. Not imitation then, but application here and now in our present.

And the second introductory thing that I want to say is this, that our task as we study the Puritans is one of evaluating and discriminating, not of swallowing the whole thing neat, in an indiscriminating way. It should be said right at the outset that the Puritans had their weaknesses, and some of the Puritans had more weaknesses than others. We don't glorify God by reproducing their weaknesses.

Their expository style, for instance, was often too complex to be clear. In their quest for thoroughness in expounding the plan of God, they sometimes lost the sense of proportion, the relative importance of one theme as compared with another, and you can't gain that from reading their writings. If you don't bring it to their writings, you could lose your own sense of proportion going through their material.

Then again, it must frankly be said that some Puritans, by Puritan standards, were second raters and not first raters. In every fellowship you find that. The Puritans, in quite an amazing way, were a school of thought, and you find that the doctrine taught by one and another is substantially the same doctrine.

Historians have often marveled at the unity of theological outlook and emphasis and testimony that you find in the Reformers in the various countries of Europe. Well the same can be said of the Puritans. They were a school of thought, they taught the same doctrine, they minded and proclaimed the same thing, but at the same time not all of them were as brilliant and profound as expositors of God's Word as others of them were.

I hope you'll not think it, I hope you'll not take it amiss if I say that I think that in fact the greatest of all the Puritans were those of, were found in England rather than in New England. Such comparisons I know are

invidious, but there it is. There's nothing improper, indeed it's demanded, it's highly proper, it's necessary that we should distinguish the best Puritans from those who were not quite so good, and that we shouldn't reproduce their mistakes.

Our task is one of evaluating and discriminating. On this particular subject of sanctification, which is going to concern us now, I believe that the Puritan testimony is of supreme value. I believe that it is indeed classical in the whole history of the Christian Church.

When B.B. Warfield wrote, the work of the Holy Spirit is a Reformation doctrine, and more particularly a Puritan doctrine, I think he spoke the truth. I think this was the great contribution which God enabled the Puritans to make to the life of the Church in their day, and in all days after. I think we shall find, as we study this doctrine, that it has a profound scripturalness, and equally a profound practicality, and equally a deep grasp on the New Testament mood of Christian living, that new mood of humble and yet triumphant joy, and at the same time a therapeutic quality, that is, the quality of enabling you to diagnose spiritual need in yourself and others, and when you've diagnosed it, to treat it.

I think we shall find that it has all these qualities in a way that it's just matter-of-fact to state no other body of doctrine, body of teaching about the Christian life, wherever you look for it in the heritage of the Christian Church can show. And I shall try to expand it in what I may call a biblical historical style, which will bring out both its scripturalness and its practicality. But I shall try to do so in a way that discriminates, and that's why I'm going to take illustrations for the points that I'm going to make, chiefly from one Puritan, John Owen, whom I honestly regard as the greatest of the Puritans, overtopping them all, a tremendous theologian, a tremendous expositor, and a most devout and humble Christian.

He wrote a whole series of works on what a later writer once called the life of God in the soul of man. You have his classic discourse concerning the Holy Spirit, and you have his smaller works on indwelling sin, and the mortification of sin, and temptation, and spiritual mindedness, and communion with God. And when you've gone through these works and digested them, you find that the whole sum and substance of Puritan testimony on the Christian life has been given you there.

So I shall be drawing primarily on John Owen for illustrations of the points that I'm going to make. And now let's move directly to our subject, the first of my three talks on sanctification. This one simply entitled, What is Sanctification? Its purpose being to give a general view of the Puritan doctrine as a whole.

And then tomorrow we shall focus on one particular feature of this doctrine, and my title will be The Fight. And on Thursday morning we shall focus on another particular feature of the doctrine, and my title will be Assurance and Conduct. But now, what is sanctification? Let's seek to get a general view of the Puritan understanding of this great scriptural theme.

May we begin by glancing at the testimony of the Westminster Standards on sanctification. The Westminster Confession, in addition to being, as B.B. Warfield called it, the ripest fruit of reformed creed-making, is also a thoroughly typical articulation of Puritan faith. If you want to know the heart of the Puritan understanding of any issue, turn to the Westminster Standards and there you'll find it.

So let's begin by looking through them. Begin with the shorter catechism, question 35. What is sanctification? Answer, sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin and live unto righteousness.

Three ideas I'd ask you to note there. First, sanctification is renewal, God making men new. Second, this renewal is universal, it's the renewal of the whole man, body and soul and the whole of life.

Thirdly, this renewal is ethical, and that thought is expressed in both the positive and the negative way. The result of the sanctifying process is that a man more and more dies unto sin and more and more lives unto righteousness. Less sin, more righteousness.

Ethical renewal. So far the shorter catechism. The larger catechism reproduces this definition with certain amplifications, then it goes on in question 77 to make the point that though justification and sanctification are inseparably joined, yet nevertheless, whereas justification is relational and complete, sanctification on the other hand is a real change in the man that admits of degrees.

Justification in other words puts one into a right relation with God straight away, it's given in a moment, it's complete in a moment. Sanctification is a change in the man's nature and character, a real subjective as distinct from a merely relational change. And you can have more or less of it, and question 77, the answer to question 77 finishes, it is not in this life perfect in any, but growing up to perfection.

And that's another point that we must add to the picture. A universal ethical renewal in process, but never complete in this life. The life of heaven waits for heaven, and ethical perfection is a part of the life of heaven, which we aspire after here, but don't receive in this world.

From the catechisms we move now to the confession. Let me read you chapter 13 of the Westminster Confession on sanctification. This goes over the ground, we've already covered, and adds some important new ideas.

It's divided into three sections, here's the first. They who are once effectually called and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, to the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, by his word and spirit dwelling in them. The dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified, and they more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces, to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.

Here is added to what we've seen already, first the thought of the spirit indwelling, second an explicit statement that sanctification is a progressive work, the loss of sinful nature more and more weakened and mortified, and saving grace is more and more quickened and strengthened. Third, there's a particularising of the work. It's not simply sin in general, it's specific lusts, specific weaknesses of character and wrong desires.

It's not only spiritual life increasing in general, it is specific graces and virtues, all saving graces, all the different aspects of Christian character. This particularises the thought of universal ethical renewal. Each part of the character, every aspect of the life affected.

Then the second section of this chapter goes on to speak as follows. This sanctification is throughout in the whole man, yet imperfect in this life, there abiding still some remnants of corruption in every part. Whence arises a continual and irreconcilable war, a flesh lusting against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh.

There's a further thought. The life of sanctification is a life of war. There is battle in progress the whole time, and the fighting is not all on one side.

The flesh, indwelling sin, lusts against the spirit. The spirit, the regenerate part of man, or man as he is indwelt and animated by the Holy Spirit, lusts against the flesh, fighting therefore continually. And the third section of the chapter reads as follows.

In which war, although the remaining corruption for a time may much prevail, yet through the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying spirit of Christ, the regenerate part doth overcome. And so the saints grow in grace, perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord. And here in this section of the chapter, we have the pattern of the Christian life.

Battles, long fought and hard fought perhaps, but ending in victory. The regenerate part doth overcome. Overall therefore, constant advance, growing in grace, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

Thus far the Westminster standards. And this is the characteristic Puritan conception of sanctification, which one finds in all their writings. Always this emphasis on the dynamism of the indwelling spirit.

Always this emphasis on the ethical quality of the renewal. It's precisely unto righteousness that we are renewed, say the Puritans again and again. And always this emphasis on the conflict.

That every advance in holiness is an advance against opposition. And every progress in righteousness involves fighting, resisting, seeking to mortify sin. And it's not only the Puritan conception, these are the emphases of Calvin's treatment of the Christian life.

These emphases too could all be reproduced from the writings of modern reformed divines like Kuyper and Berkoff. And I say, putting it as a question, are not these the emphases of the New Testament? Are not these the emphases which would spring to the simple, unprejudiced, open-minded reader of the New Testament? Aren't these the things which the Apostle Paul in particular is constantly stressing and laboring? And yet I think we have to ask ourselves, whether we, in our day, apprehend these things as clearly as did the Puritans. Whether we are able to expound them as clearly and masterfully as did the Puritans.

Whether in fact we are not more than a little confused in our day about this issue of sanctification. And whether in fact the typical emphases of our modern preaching and teaching about it do in fact conform, not primarily to the Puritan standards, but more importantly to the New Testament standards themselves. We need, I think, to take a closer look at the Puritan exposition of sanctification.

No doubt, we've all of us agreed with what we've heard thus far. But there's more to be said yet. Yes, let's sharpen the focus and come a little clearer to the subject to see what they made of these emphases and how they opened up this theme in their preaching and their teaching and their theology.

And here we shall begin to draw heavily on the writings of this man John Owen, of whom I spoke to you a moment ago. His great discourse concerning the work of the Holy Spirit, published in 1674, chiefly to fill a gap. For he wrote in the preface, I know not any who went before me in this design of representing the whole economy of the Spirit.

This work is, as I said earlier, a classic. And its sections on regeneration and sanctification, in particular, seek to be full and exhaustive and, in my judgment, come as near being full and exhaustive as treatments of the biblical principles and the main biblical passages on sanctification, as does any writing, any piece of writing produced by the Puritans or any later divine. Owen is a biblical type of systematic theologian, just as Calvin was.

He carries on his topical exposition by the opening and applying of texts, particular biblical passages, just as in the Institutes. He's a thoroughly biblical theologian and, from this standpoint too, he is attractive and helpful for our study and he certainly is a good guide in this whole field. So I'm going to lean heavily on Owen's help as we proceed, sharpening the focus to see how the Puritans expounded in detail this great theme.

And there are five topics here which, with Owen's help, I'm going to attempt briefly to open up. The agent of sanctification, the subject of sanctification, the nature of sanctification, the measure of sanctification, and the means and method of sanctification. First, the agent of sanctification.

Owen insists, as scripture indeed shows, that sanctification is the work of God, or the Triune God, or Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. For the scripture, in fact, as Owen points out, ascribes sanctification in a different context to all three persons of the Holy Trinity. It's ascribed to the Father in 1st Thessalonians 5 and verse 23, the first text that Owen expounds in his section in the Discourse on the Spirit concerning sanctification.

It's Paul's prayer that God of peace sanctify you wholly, and I pray God that your whole soul and your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved entire to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Owen dwells on the phrase, the God of peace, pointing out that in the Bible, peace is a rich word, embracing in itself the whole of God's blessing to his people. And he makes the point that sanctification is a part of God's covenant blessing to his people.

Then too, sanctification is spoken of as the work of the Son. In 1st Corinthians 1 and verse 30, we are told that Christ Jesus of God is made unto us, not merely righteousness, but also sanctification. Owen handles this text too, expounding it in terms of the thought that first, our Lord Jesus, by the Father's appointment, is the procurer of sanctifying grace through his high priestly death and intercession.

And second, that he is by the Father's appointment the medium of sanctifying grace, because it flows to us through our union with him. Unlike some 17th century divines, Calvin reproduces in all its strength that deep Reformation insight that all Christ's blessings come to us through union with him. We have them by, through receiving him.

And here though in applying that thought, it is exposition of 1st Corinthians 1 verse 30, Christ is our sanctification because he is the medium, the one through union with whom all grace, justifying grace, sanctifying grace, every blessing and every benefit flows to us and is bestowed upon us. And equally of course the New Testament speaks of sanctification as the work of the Spirit. The phrase, sanctification of the Spirit, that is sanctification wrought by the Spirit, appears in 1st Peter 1 verse 2 and again in 2nd Thessalonians 2 verse 13.

And Owen starts until this point and he works it into the preliminary definitions of the work of sanctification that he gives towards the beginning of his discourse. See there are two of them and here they are. Sanctification is the immediate work of God by his Spirit upon our whole nature, proceeding from the peace made for us by Jesus Christ, whereby being changed into his likeness we are kept entirely in peace with God and are preserved unblameable or in a state of gracious acceptance with him according to the terms of the covenant unto the end.

That's one and here's the second definition. Sanctification is an immediate work of the Spirit of God on the souls of believers, purifying and cleansing of their natures from the pollution and uncleanness of sin,

renewing in them the image of God and thereby enabling them from a spiritual and habitual principle of grace to yield obedience unto God according unto the tenor and terms of the new covenant by virtue of the life and death of Jesus Christ. Well these are the definitions which Owen proceeds to work out.

Sanctification of the covenanted work of the Spirit bestowed upon those who are Christ, springing from the mediatorial work of Christ, keeping them in the way of godliness to the end of the road. So that sanctification if you like is the path which believers are called and enabled to tread from the point at which grace finds them to the glory which is their goal. And holiness, the expression of sanctification in life is consequently according to Owen's definition thus, obedience unto God by Jesus Christ according to the terms of the covenant of grace from the principle of a renewed nature.

Thus Owen describes sanctification as a work of God in those who have come to Christ and found life in him. And it's evident from this that sanctification is indeed as Owen stresses a gospel mystery. I take that phrase from the title of another Puritan treatise on sanctification, Walter Marshall's Gospel Mystery of Sanctification, a book devoted entirely to showing that sanctification is not just a matter of mere morality as the Sassanians of Owen's day and liberals of our day would have us believe.

It's not a human achievement of keeping the law of Christ and following the code of Christ. Though man is active in sanctification it is emphatically not his work it is God's work. It is a gospel mystery, it is a work of God in the hearts of to whom the gospel has come.

It is a mystery both in the sense that it's one of the secrets revealed in the gospel and also in the sense that it's one of these things as all in indeed all the operations of God are that are not completely pervious to the human understanding. Owen compares it with physical growth. Do you understand the mystery of your own physical being and its life asks Owen alluding to Psalm 139 and then when he's drawing the conclusion no of course you don't he goes on to say well don't you see it's just the same in spiritual growth too.

There is more to what's going on than you understand. It is in that sense a gospel mystery. Yet says Owen it's a glorious thing.

It's a glorious work of God. It's the life of heaven begun on earth. It is that I quote his very phrase the first fruits of heaven.

To the extent to which a man is sanctified he is tasting the life of heaven and more than that exhibiting the life of heaven. Right Owen? There is in this holiness a ray of eternal light, a principle of eternal life and the entire nature of that love whereby we shall eternally adhere to God. The divine nature, the new immortal creature, the life of God, the life of Christ are all comprised in it.

It represents unto God the glory of his own image renewed in us and unto the Lord Christ the fruits of his spirit and the effect of his mediation wherein he sees of the prevail of his soul and is satisfied. There is therefore and this point I want to underline it's central to the Puritan view. There is therefore nothing more to be abhorred than those carnal low and unworthy thoughts which some invent of this glorious work of the Holy Spirit.

Men who would have it wholly to consist in a legal righteousness or a moral virtue. I think at this point we need to stop and search our hearts. I trust that none of us here have been betrayed into the mistake of naturalizing sanctification and dealing with it and teaching it and treating it as if it were simply a matter of

human effort to keep the law.

But I think we need to ask ourselves whether all the same we may not have been guilty of undervaluing sanctification and treating it as something less important than the scripture declares it to be. Do we treat it as important in our own thinking in our own ministry? If so why? For man's sake or for God's? Do we teach holiness and preach holiness as the way to acquire conscience and peace of mind and stop there? Or do we go on and take the argument right up to what's its true destination the glory of God in the holy living of his people. Owen is concerned to underline that holiness and sanctification are for the glory of God.

God is the agent God is the end. God works sanctification God is glorified by sanctification. Sanctification is his requirement and it's his promise and it's his gift and as such it's a glorious thing and a thing to be valued and desired and a thing to be magnified and a thing to be urged and pressed on people for the Lord's sake.

Not just so that you may escape from the trouble of conscience and the sense of shame that comes when you give way to this or that particular sin. Not so that you may be comfortable inside. In fact true sanctification in that sense doesn't make you comfortable inside anyway so this this line of teaching is a double mistake.

But the motive ought to be the glory of the God who saved you and who calls you to holiness of life. I don't think we make this point stand out in our preaching and our teaching in these days the way that we should. But I must hurry on.

So much for the thought of the agent for the theme of the agent of sanctification. Sanctification as a work of God wrought by him for his own glory. Move on now to our second theme the subject of sanctification.

The subject of sanctification as we've already seen is precisely the Christian believer. The man whose whole life is or should be motivated by thankfulness to God for the salvation he's received. Concerned to please God by obedience to his law.

Concerned to glorify God by the life that he lives here on earth. He's not seeking holiness and sanctification in order to earn his passage to glory. He's seeking it in order to show his gratitude to the God who saved him and in order to bring praise and honor to that God whom he loves.

And this Owen repeatedly comes back to as the necessary motivation of sanctification it just isn't scriptural sanctification if this is not the motive behind it says Owen. But he has more to say than this about the believer who's the subject of sanctification. There are four things which he is constantly reminding the believer about himself.

Things which the believer forgets or disregards at his peril. They're basic Owen would say to a right and a successful Christian life. And we must be very clear about them and here they are.

First said Owen to the Christian remember that you are a man. Well this sounds pretty basic but this is where Owen starts. You're a man.

Which means that God made you with a mind and a will and affection. And he created you for rational action. I quote Owen.

The mind or understanding is the leading faculty of the soul. Its office is to guide, direct, choose, and lead. It is the eye of the soul.

The will, the capacity for action, ought to be guided by the mind. Guided that is by truth. And the affections, the various emotional drives that are part of our being, these should, if man is as he should be, these should center upon the things that reason knows and judges to be good and right.

To be desirable if you like. Then our affections if they're rightly ordered will center upon them so that in our hearts they are actually desired. And we want them.

And so the whole man in the integration of his nature goes after them. Well you can see what follows from this. If this is human nature and this is how God meant human nature to work.

If divine truth is to be communicated effectively to man you've got to start with the mind. And you mustn't take a shortcut and start with the emotions. Emotionalism, the attempt to play directly on the affections without appeal to the mind and the judgment first, is something which the Puritans eschewed and would have condemned.

God treats us as rational. God addresses us by his word. And the Christian minister and preacher teaching any part of God's revelation must begin with exposition, with the manifesting of truth, with the declaring of truth, the insinuating of truth into the mind.

And then when truth is understood he must summon the man to react to it. To react to it on the level of affection and to react to it by deliberate choice, by using his power of will. And this is the way that the teaching of sanctification must go, just as it's the way that the preaching of the gospel must go.

You must deal with man as man, says Owen. And furthermore you must deal with yourself as a man. And if you were growing grace your first aim and objective must be to understand God's truth, to learn his mind, to grasp the message of his word, and then to turn it over in your mind by meditation, by reflection, by thought, until you understand it right the way through, until you're clear on it, until you see its meaning and its application to yourself.

And there's no deviating from that method of procedure. Emotionalism, let me say again, is out. Emotion, to be sure, is in.

Truth is meant to appeal to the affection, just as it's meant to appeal to the will. There will be strong emotion in the Christian's life. But always reason will be leading, always the understanding will be in control, the affections will go the way that the understanding knows to be right, the understanding will the understanding will seek to take emotion in hand if it strays out of that particular path.

And it's never a case of following the lead of emotion. Never a case of following feelings. Feelings there are and must be, but feelings follow the mind, the understanding, the truth.

And this is very important, Owen would tell us, for the teaching of sanctification particularly, because this is the field in which spiritual experience and a good deal of emotion is involved. Particularly when you come to self-denial and the mortifying of sin, which is compared by our Lord, as Owen says, to the plucking out of an eye, the cutting off of a leg, it's a painful business, you don't like it, your emotions are against you as you do it. Always remember, says Owen, that those feelings and emotions must never be taken as a lead in themselves.

They must follow where the understanding leads. Man is to be governed by his understanding of God's truth and his grasp, his mental grasp, of God's will. This is the old reformed intellectualism put into the context of practical Christian living.

It seems to me it's a very important point in our day, just as it was a very important point in the days of emotionalism and enthusiasm and all kinds of religious aberration in which Owen lived. But then Owen had more to say than this. The second thing that he had to say about man, the subject of sanctification, is that he must always remember he's a fallen man.

He's a man, he's a sinner, and sin has not only alienated him from God, but it's alienated him from himself, and brought disorder into the soul, disintegration into the character, and inharmonious action in the different faculties or capacities of human nature. The faculties, writes Owen, move cross and contrary one to another. The will doesn't choose the good, which the mind discovers.

Commonly the affections get the sovereignty and draw the whole soul captive after them. So that fallen man's life is no longer a rational life at all. It's unstable, it's inconstant.

Man is distracted by conflicting passions, blind impulses, and in all this he is just without strength to obey God, as Paul puts it in Romans 5 and verse 6. Sin, the principle of sin, has got a hold of him. And the root of this principle of sin is an ingrained disaffection and antipathy towards God and his law. A carnal mind is enmity against God, Romans 8 verse 7. Owen wrote of indwelling sin, its nature and formal design is to oppose God.

God as a lawgiver, God as holy, God as the author of the gospel. These things, and the way of salvation by grace and not by works, are all the direct object of the law of sin, unquote. And ungodliness, unrighteousness, unbelief, heresy, perversity, are its natural forms of self-expression.

It darkens the mind, it allures our affections into what Owen calls sensuality, and it implants in our hearts what he calls a loathing of and aversion from that which is good, and it's continually putting itself upon us in inclinations, motions, or suggestions to evil, unquote. Now, when the grace of God comes to the heart, when regeneration takes place, indwelling sin is dethroned. No longer is it the ruling principle, but it's not eradicated or expelled, it's still there.

And still doing what is in its nature, opposing the way of God, and the work of God, and the will of God, lusting against the regenerate part, as the Confession calls it, the regenerate part of the man, which is now the real man. The Puritans were quite clear on this. The regenerate part of me is not distinct from me, now it's the real me, the real I, is I renewed.

Renewed by grace. The I that delights in the law of God after the inward man. The I that now seeks, most of all, to please God and glorify God.

But still, in me, that is in my flesh, dwells no good thing. In me, that is, in my flesh, dwells this principle of sin. And so, the Christian is never, never dare forget, at any stage in his Christian life, that he is a fallen man.

Sin is still there in him. Not the dominant thing, but seeking always to be dominant. And seeking always to oppose the way and the will of God.

So, says Owen, self-aborrence and self-distrust ought to be basic elements in the temper of the Christian man all his life. Self-confidence and self-satisfaction argue self-ignorance. It means that a man isn't reckoning with the virus of indwelling sin that still inhabits him.

And so, Owen writes, constant self-abasement, condemnation and abhorrence is another duty that's directly opposed unto the rule of sin in the soul. A constant due sense of sin as sin, of our interest therein by nature and in the course of our lives, is the soul's best posture. A Christian man ought always to be a humble man and a self-distrustful man because of the sin that dwells in him.

Now, the third thing is that he is a redeemed man. And therefore, the root motive of his life must be love and thankfulness to God. That's the point we've made already, so we won't spend time stressing it again.

And the fourth point that Owen makes about man is that as a regenerate, as a regenerate, he must grasp the fact that sin really has been dethroned in him now, as we indicated a moment ago, that if sin does, in fact, control any part of his life, well, this is a usurped dominion which, as a Christian man, he ought not to allow for a single moment. By repentance, the Christian formerly dissociated himself from indwelling sin and all its ways. Now, to be sure, he finds that sin has taken on, as it were, a life of its own.

Right, so in Paul likens indwelling sin, and here he's thinking of Romans 7, to a person, a living person, called the old man, with his faculties and properties, his wisdom, craft, subtlety, and strength. And indwelling sin is always at work in the heart, and a temporary lull in its assaults means not that it's dead, but that it's very much alive. Right, so in sin is never less quiet than when it seems to be most quiet, and its waters are, for the most part, deep when they are still.

And the strategy of sin, this devilish alter ego, second self, that the Christian finds within himself, is constantly to induce the false sense of security as a prelude to a surprise attack. So, and Owen writes, by sin we are oftentimes, there we are aware, carried into distempered affections, foolish imaginations, and pleasing delightfulness in things that are not good nor profitable. When the soul is doing quite another thing, sin starts that in the heart that carries it away into that which is evil and sinful.

Yea, to manifest its power, sometimes when the soul is seriously engaged in the mortification of any sin, it will by one means or another, lead it away, that is, lead the soul away into a dalliance with that very sin whose ruin it is seeking. I know no greater burden in the life of a believer than these involuntary surprisals, writes Owen. I would put in, no more do I. Owen, it seems to me, is going right to the heart of the matter here.

This is how indwelling sin does operate in the life and the heart of a Christian man. And the Christian has got to reckon with the fact that this power which is constantly labouring in all these ways and by all these devices to dominate him, is, for all the seeming strength, all the seemingly invincible strength with which it comes on him, nevertheless a deceived foe. And he's got to set himself against it, and day by day he's got to give himself to the task of mortifying it, or putting it to death.

And says Owen, it's dangerous ever to suppose that while you're in this life, this law of sin, this demonic operation of indwelling sin in your heart will ever come to an end. Writes Owen, upon some sweet enjoyment of God, some full supply of grace, some return from wandering, some deep affliction, some thorough humiliation, the poor soul begins to hope that it shall now be freed from the law of sin. But after a while, sin acts again, makes good its own station, its old station, and the man who claims perfection is self-deceived and writing for a fall.

Alexander White, an old Scottish preacher in the Puritan tradition in the last century, once told this congregation, you'll never get out of the seventh of Romans while I'm your minister. He said that with reference to a particular doctrine about the Christian life that was current in his day. But of course all that he was doing in saying that, was recalling his congregation to scriptural realism.

The Christian is there in Roman seven. Sin is in him as long as he's in this world. If he pretends to be out of Roman seven, well he's simply deceiving himself, and he's asking for trouble.

So remember these things about yourself to go into the Christian. You're a man, so seek that truth which must lead and sanctify you. You're a sinner, recognize the damage that sin has done to your nature.

You're a redeemed man, so make your life a business of loving your savior and showing your thankfulness. You're a regenerate man, so realize that the principle of sin, however strong it may seem, is not the dominant principle. You can mortify it.

Go to work then, you must mortify it. This is the calling of God. Now the clock is beating me and I must be rather brief in finishing off this exposition.

Run on thirdly to our third theme, the nature of sanctification. We can be short here. Sanctification, says the Puritans, is to be thought of as progressive transformation into the image of Christ.

This is the thought which the Westminster standards gave us. This is the scriptural thought. Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, we are changed or transformed in his likeness. From glory to glory, as by the Lord the Spirit. Progressive transformation, often pictured in the scriptures, says Owen, of growth.

Growth in grace. He knows indeed that sometimes in the scripture the words sanctify and sanctification are used relationally, of a relation of separation to God, and without any direct reference to any real change in the nature of the man so separated. It's interesting to notice that Owen regards relational sanctification as the consequence of real sanctification.

That is, a man who's regenerated, in whom the Spirit of God has begun the sanctifying work, consecrates himself to God. That's the order. In modern teaching, the order has sometimes been reversed.

But this is the way that Owen saw it, and it's worth considering whether Owen wasn't nearer to the heart of the scriptural thought. The Holy Spirit then works constantly in a man, transforming him, producing the fruit of the Spirit, Galatians 5. Enabling him to will and to do according to God's good pleasure. Philippians 2 verse 13.

But this he does through the means, through the means of grace. And if the means of grace are neglected, or a particular sin is indulged, then the whole work of sanctification is set back. And Owen believes that this can happen and be a real tragedy in the life of a Christian man.

That he can go far in the way of, in the path of sanctification, and then through indulging some particular moral fault, some particular sin, some particular lust, as Owen would say, can put the whole process into reverse, and destroy the work of God in him at point after point. Owen will not take it on himself to say just how much damage can be done to a man's Christian life as a whole, if he indulges one particular sin in

this way. Analyzing the scriptural conception of the nature of sanctification, Owen points out first, that the basic notion under which sanctification is presented in the New Testament, is of purifying and purging from pollution.

Sin pollutes, because it's antithetical to the holiness and law and good pleasure of God, and God hates it. And it's a defiling thing, making you unsit for his company, prompting him to the kind of recoil, to which we are prompted when we see dirt, uncleanness, in a place where cleanliness ought to be. Dirty linen, dirty plates, we don't like them, we recoil from them.

That's our reaction when we see uncleanness, where cleanliness should be. And similarly, says Owen, God recoils, as it were, from our sin. It's a defiling, an unclean thing to him, it's a pollution, it's antithetical to his holiness.

But in regeneration and sanctification, says Owen, God by his spirit progressively cleanses us from these things that defile. So that more and more our lives become actually pleasing in the sight of God. And Owen expounds the scripture passages which speak of the Spirit of Christ doing this, and of the blood of Christ.

That is, the virtue of the cross of Christ, applied to our lives by the Spirit, as the power whence it all flows. The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin. Then, having expounded this general concept of sanctification, of purifying, he subdivides, and he says there are two aspects of this work of progressive transformation that should be treated separately.

There's the positive work of the Holy Spirit, implanting and strengthening what he calls habits of obedience, and love, and faith, and hope, and righteousness, Godward. By habits, he's not, when he uses that word, he's not introducing a metaphysic. He simply means the inclination, the disposition, the capacity to act in a certain way.

And, says he, the Spirit who implants the habitual characteristics of behaving in a certain way, the fruit of the Spirit, to give them their biblical name, then strengthens us on each particular occasion when we, to use his language, act the habit, and actually behave in the way that our new inclination of Spirit prompts us to do. Some Puritans, not Owen, call this side of the work of sanctification vivifying, bringing us more and more into the life of God. It's in connection with this work of the Spirit that Owen expounds all the texts of the New Testament which speak of Christ in a man, and of our being able to serve him only as we abide in him, John 15, and Christ being our life, and Christ dwelling in us, Colossians 3.3 and Galatians 2.20. Christ is in us, says Owen, by his Spirit, and in us by his Spirit, he prompts and enables us to display more and more these habitual characteristics that make up Christlikeness, and more and more to do the things whereby God is honoured and glorified and his law is kept.

That's the positive side of the work. And the negative side, of which we shall say more tomorrow, is mortifying the killing of the old man, the using of the means of grace, and the power of the Spirit and blood of Christ, progressively to put to death, to drain the life out of, we might say, the sinful inclinations, the manifestations of indwelling sin that are still popping up and shooting up all over our life and our character. Verifying and mortifying the two sides of the purifying work of rooting sin out of us.

Warfield's phrase, gradual eradication, is the right phrase here. God really is rooting sin out of us, progressively, as he transforms us more and more into the image of Christ. And it has this positive and this negative side.

You can see then what Owen would have said about what I may call second blessing doctrines of sanctification, which suggests that by a particular crisis subsequent to conversion, a man can somehow enter into sanctification, receive it as a single blessing, become perfect overnight, and enjoy a life of complete holiness thenceforth. It just doesn't happen that way, Owen would say, that's not how the scriptures present it. Owen, I think, would have had no fault to find with the doctrine that if, through defective instruction, when a man became a Christian, his repentance had been delayed, so that he never in fact had understood, for want of true teaching, that as a Christian he must now give the whole of his life to God.

Well, I say Owen would have no fault with the doctrine that if that has happened, then it may be that a man must come to a very definite commitment of himself after conversion, but if that happens, Owen would say, understand it's an abnormal thing in itself, this is simply delayed and defective repentance at last being put right. But if it were further suggested that by this kind of consecration crisis, he can enter into, in a special way, into a new grade of sanctification, receive sanctification and become, as I said, perfect overnight, then Owen would sadly have shaken his head and said, this is not scripture doctrine, this is enthusiasm. Here the wish is farther to the thoughts.

Christians, to be sure, long for perfect holiness in this life. Satan betrays them into believing they can receive it, and the idea is so delightful that they go for it. But what a tragedy, Owen would say, because that when you've gone for it, you'll think you've received it.

And Satan may persuade you to feel you've received it, and then if you go through life thinking you're perfect, oh you're heading for trouble and trouble there'll be. You're self-deceived, and this is the road to disaster. Well, I say this simply to draw out how the Puritan doctrine questions and challenges some of the things that some of us have been saying in recent years.

The nature of sanctification is that it's a progressive work of the type described, and it mustn't be represented, therefore, in this way. Any more than the thought of the indwelling of the Savior in the Christian must be expounded as if it meant the obliterating of the human personality, and the Savior, as it were, becoming the active subject in the Christian. One has sometimes heard that type of thought developed, but that, if you said it would be a mistake, Owen would tell us, the personal distinction between me, the saved sinner, and the Savior who by his Spirit enables me to be holy, must never be obscured.

Those thoughts about Christ in me, Christ living in me, must be understood in terms of the life I live, being lived by faith in the Son of God, by his power and by his strength. For if I ever allowed it to be supposed that the Lord Jesus personally had taken over, in such a sense that my human personality was now obliterated and gone, well, whatever I might say, the fact is that before the end of the day I should have fallen again into sin and fallen short of perfect righteousness, and then you'd have to press the question against me, oh, well now, who has done that? Is this the failure of the Lord Jesus who's taken over inside you? And this, of course, shows the impossibility of holding to this type of doctrine. My failure is precisely my failure, not his.

And we must always be careful, surely, to teach the Christian life in a way that will make this plain, and not encourage people to blame human failure onto the Savior who is supposed to be controlling the life. Well, time is more than gone now, so I'll only give you headings for the other two points. This Puritan weakness of falling behind the clock is something that is very difficult to overcome.

Fourth aspect of sanctification, the measure of sanctification, the law. It is an ethical transformation. The law of God, and not the feelings of the Christian, are the measure of it.

How far it's got, and how far it still has to go. The Puritan faith, antinomianism. There was antinomianism in England in the 1640s, in New England too, at the same time.

The Puritans diagnosed antinomianism, the doctrine that a Christian need no longer be guided by the law, but can simply take his guidance from inner spiritual impulse. They diagnosed this doctrine as fundamentally a reaction from legalism. Legalism says, you must attend to the law, and have your eye on the law, and seek to keep the law to earn your salvation.

The Christian delivered from that, knowing now that he doesn't have to work for his salvation, if tempted, said the Puritans, to run to the opposite extreme of error, and say, well now that I don't have to keep the law, and have my eye on the law, and relate my conscience to the law, in order that by law keeping I may earn my salvation, now I've got no reason for bothering about the law at all. And so I magnify the grace of God by ceasing to bother about the law. Ah, this is a mistake, said the Puritans.

The mistake is to forget that the law of God is more than a system of salvation, and the delusive system of salvation from which we are redeemed. The law of God in its precepts is precisely a transcript of the image of Christ. It expresses the will of God for human life.

And we need the law to set us our ideal and our standard. Even though we know that we are saved apart from the law, because the penal side of the law has been satisfied through the cross of Christ, and we are accepted on the ground of his righteousness and his bloodshedding. Still though, the law has its work to do, showing us what God's will for our life is, and will betide us, said the Puritans, if we forget that.

Let me just slip in here a little story which gives you the very heartbeat of Puritanism, and it'll only take about 60 seconds to tell. One of these early, the early English Puritans, was out riding one day when he met the Lord of the Nanner. This was the days in which the Puritans were called Precisions, because of the preciseness of their testimony regarding moral and ecclesiastical issues.

The Lord of the Nanner began to upbraid this fellow for his preciseness. And he said, why are you so precise in your religion, so pernicky, so fussy about details? Why so precise? And he received the unanswerable reply, oh sir, said the Puritan, I serve a precise God. And that's why the law of God must be taken very seriously by the Christian man, as expressing God's ideal, as setting God's standards.

And however exalted you may feel inside, at your peril you neglect the duty of examining yourself by the ideal of God, to see really how far you have got, and really how far you have yet to go. The humbling but necessary duty of self-examination. But it is a Puritan's keeping the law of God is not legalism.

For not merely are we doing it from, not merely are we not doing it to earn our salvation, we are doing it because we love to do it. The law, remember, is written on our hearts in regeneration and sanctification, they said. And obedience to the law is now the Christian's highest delight.

Prove it in experience, the Puritans challenged us, the Christian will never have so much joy as when he's enabled to keep the holy law of God. And finally, the method and the means of sanctification, sanctification from God's side is wrought by the indwelling spirit, from man's side it's wrought by faith. Faith in prayer, faith acknowledging impotence, faith looking to Christ for power.

And faith which, having prayed, then gets up from its knees and sets itself to work at the task in hand, believing that God is going to answer prayer and give the strength. Faith that works, in other words. There's no passivity, no quietism here.

Active faith, acknowledging impotence, praying for strength, and then in confidence going to work. Kuyper chimes in with the Puritan testimony here when he writes as follows, apropos of the text where Paul sets this out, Philippians 2 verse 13, work at your salvation with fear and trembling, it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. When we are called to speak, act, or fight, right Kuyper, we do so as though we were doing it all ourselves, not perceiving that it's another who works in us both to will and to do.

But as soon as we finish the task successfully and agreeably to the will of God, as men of faith we prostrate ourselves before him and cry, Lord, the work was thine, as were the prayers in which we sought God's help for it, and the praises which we now render for what he enabled us to do. More about faith and sanctification tomorrow, I just mention it now to round off the exposition. Well, as you see, this is a line of teaching which at some point does deviate a little from ideas that have had currency in more recent years, and it raises some questions.

Here they are, just one sentence as we close. Isn't this, the Puritan teaching, the true doctrine of victorious life? Isn't this Puritan teaching the true doctrine of Christian liberty? Isn't this Puritan teaching the true doctrine of deliverance from sin? Isn't this Puritan teaching the true doctrine of Christian living? Some of the ideas which we meet in these days I've already mentioned. Sometimes a further idea that's introduced is sometimes the doctrine, new form of the old doctrine of the double standard.

But you can be a second grade Christian if you like, your reward won't be so great, but it's up to you. Well is this, we must ask, a true doctrine of the Christian life? Or weren't the Puritans nearer the mark when they told us that we're all of us called to holiness? All of us indwelt by the spirit that we might be holy? All the resources of Christ are available to us, and we as men set free from the dominion of sin, by the power of renewing grace, have a real responsibility now to walk humbly with our God in faith, in prayer, in self-examination, in humility, in fighting against sin, into the victory of advance in this war. Isn't this real Christianity? And don't we need desperately to relearn it in all its fullness today? Let us pray.

Oh Lord, write thy word in our minds and implant it in our hearts, that we may see and know the way of holiness, and that seeing and knowing it, we may teach and follow it, for the praise and the glory of our Savior. Amen.

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/3/SID3752.mp3>

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/ji-packer/what-is-sanctification/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net