

What's the Difference Between Justification and Sanctification?

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Most of us expect to get what we deserve. If we're good at our jobs, we'll keep them and maybe get a raise. If we stop at red lights, we'll avoid fines and car wrecks. If we obey God, or at least try our best, we'll have a better life and go to heaven. If we meet the standards, we get the rewards. Even though life is often unfair, we still expect justice.

Justification by faith alone, the heart of the gospel, reverses this natural order. Before we've done anything good—in fact, while we're still God's enemies—God says we're righteous. He promises us all the rewards that righteousness deserves. Then, after this verdict, we become righteous. Justification comes first and sanctification follows.

God Justifies the Ungodly

Disagreement about the relationship between justification and sanctification split the western church in the 16th century. Roman Catholic theologians believed justification was a process: As our lives become more righteous, we're increasingly justified. Faith in Christ begins and sustains this process, but God doesn't render a verdict until the final judgment. Only then will we know if we qualify for eternal life. Righteousness comes first; the verdict follows.

Protestants came to believe the opposite: The Christian life begins with justification. Committed to the final authority of the Bible and aided by the recovery of the Scriptures in their original languages, Protestant theologians saw that justification is not a process. It's a legal verdict. God justifies people when he judges them to be righteous. Sinners can't earn this judgment; they can only receive it by means of faith in Christ: "Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness" (Rom. 4:4–5). God justifies the ungodly, not the obedient. Through faith, not works, we are "counted" as righteous.

So, what's left to earn through a life of obedience? Nothing. Christians don't need to wait until the final judgment to find out whether they're justified or condemned.

So, Is God Just?

"Before we've done anything good—in fact, while we're still God's enemies—God says we're righteous."

But how can God call those who break his law just? Wouldn't God himself be unjust to do this? And if God justifies the ungodly instead of rewarding those who obey him, then why bother trying to do what's right? These aren't strange questions. People ask them today, and in the 16th century Roman Catholics used them to challenge Protestant teaching. The apostle Paul addressed these questions, too (Rom. 3:8; 9:14).

We expect rewards and punishments because God made the world to work this way (Gen 1:16–17; Rom 1:19–21; 2:6–11). Humans, made in the image of God, must reflect God's holiness. That's the only way we can live with God and enjoy him forever. When Adam and Eve disobeyed, God drove them out of paradise. God created consequences, and he is just.

According to this natural order of justice, though, all of us deserve condemnation. Paul writes, "For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin" (Rom 3:9). Since we couldn't earn God's favor, Christ earned it for us. God condemned our sins when Christ died on the cross. He calls us righteous because Christ lived a perfect earthly life (Rom 5:16–19). Christ met the demands of God's justice in our place.

We're Called to Be Holy

Through justification, God accepts us. Through sanctification, God makes us holy. Justification never exists without sanctification, but it always comes first. That's the gospel.

God justifies us for a purpose: "that we should be holy and blameless before him" (Eph. 1:4). His plan has always been for us to be like him and live with him. Through the process of sanctification, we are "renewed in the whole man after the image of God" (Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 35).

Rather than making righteousness irrelevant, justification makes a righteous life possible. If Christ satisfied the law, we're free from the law, but that freedom enables obedience. "But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, not in the old way of the written code" (Rom. 7:6). This freedom gives us new motivations and new power. Instead of doing good to earn our salvation, we serve God out of gratitude for the salvation we've received. Instead of striving to obey in our fallen human nature, we work empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Sanctified by Grace Alone

We have no role in our justification. Even the faith that justifies us is a gift. Our sanctification, though, involves our effort. The apostle Paul tells the Roman church

“The Holy Spirit sanctifies us. He enables all our efforts—by grace alone.”

to pursue holiness: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom. 12:1). God’s law can’t condemn us, but it still guides us. As Christians, we work to grow in every virtue.

Yet sanctification, like justification, is a work of God’s grace. Paul writes, “I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (1 Cor. 15:10). We work because the Holy Spirit works in us. Philippians 2:13 says, “(W)ork out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Elsewhere, Paul says that Christians are saved “through sanctification by the Spirit” (2 Thess. 2:13). The Holy Spirit sanctifies us. He enables all our efforts—by grace alone.

Sanctification remains incomplete in this life. Sin still lives in us, and we face temptation every day. The Spirit and the flesh—our sinful nature—are at war (Gal. 5:15–26). But God will finish his work of renewing us.

The End Is Assured

We’re justified and sanctified because the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ. According to Paul, we’re “baptized into (Christ’s) death ... in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:3–4). Sanctification is a process, but its source is Christ’s death and resurrection. Through sanctification, the Spirit applies to us what’s already finished in Christ and already ours by faith.

The Bible uses the image of marriage to show how Christ both justifies and sanctifies us. Christ “gave himself up” for the church—his bride—on the cross, justifying her so “that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor ... that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:25–27).

Though we feel unholy now, we will one day perfectly reflect God’s holy character. Sanctification can seem messy and slow. But the Bible assures us that Christ will do everything necessary, through both justification and sanctification, to prepare his church for himself.

What Does the Bible Say?

- Justification: Rom. 3:24, 4:6, 5:1, 5:17; 2 Cor 5:19; Gal 2:15–16
- Sanctification: 1 Thess. 4:3, 5:23; 2 Thess. 2:13; Eph. 4:23; Rom. 6:4; Gal. 5:13; Phil. 2:12–13
- The relationship of justification to sanctification: Rom. 7:6, 8:3–4; James 2:14–26; Eph. 5:25–27

Recommended Resources

[Redemption Accomplished and Applied](#), by John Murray

[Extravagant Grace](#), by Barbara Duguid

[Ordinary](#), by Michael Horton

[The Whole Armor of God](#), by Iain Duguid

[Justification](#), by Michael Horton

[Sanctification](#), by Michael Allen