

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

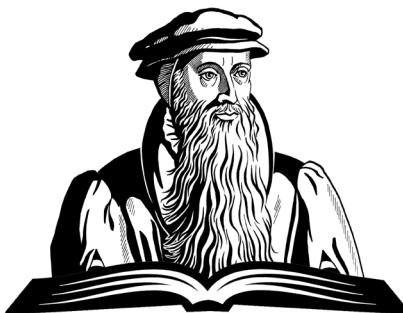
Module 5:

SOTERIOLOGY—

THE DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

Lecture 8

THE DOCTRINE OF SANCTIFICATION



The John Knox Institute
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Module 5 ~ The Doctrine of Salvation

1. Introduction
2. The Doctrine of Union with Christ
3. The Doctrines of Effectual Calling & Regeneration
4. The Doctrine of Saving Faith
5. The Doctrine of Repentance
6. The Doctrine of Justification
7. The Doctrine of Adoption
- 8. The Doctrine of Sanctification**
9. The Doctrine of Good Works
10. The Doctrine of Perseverance of the Saints
11. The Doctrine of Assurance of Grace and Salvation

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Module 5 ~ Lecture 8

The Doctrine of Sanctification

Members of a family share many things in common. They have the same roots, or origins—they have the same family tree, if you will. They also have shared life experience together. But more specifically, we also identify members of the same family by their shared name, which distinguishes them from members of other families. Now all of those things you can see on paper. We can study a person's family tree, or see the differences between names, and so on. But there is something more that distinguishes a family—something you can actually see. Well, what is that? They have a shared physical resemblance. So when you look at them, you can see the family likeness. People will sometimes say, "You look like your mother," or, "I can see your grandfather" in a particular facial expression. Sometimes it can even be seen from a distance, in a person's posture and gait—the way they walk.

Well, the impact of salvation carries a similar effect in God's people. Yes, they have the same spiritual lineage. Those who are in Christ are heirs with Christ, and come from the seed of Abraham. It doesn't matter whether you're Jew or Gentile, we have a shared history. And yes, each child of God is given a new name—they bear the name of God. These, and many other components, come with belonging to God's family or household. But there is more. God works through the gospel to re-create, in each of his children, the family likeness. He sends his Spirit to change believers, so that they look more and more like their elder brother, the Lord Jesus Christ. Well, this process of coming to share in the family likeness is called, Sanctification.

This series of lectures in this fifth module on Systematic Theology is devoted to the doctrine of Salvation. And the purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about how the Spirit applies the redemption of Christ to the individual soul of the believer. In this present lecture, we will consider the doctrine of Sanctification. And so, first of all, we'll begin by considering a passage of Scripture, to open up our consideration of the doctrine of Sanctification.

We read in 2 Corinthians 3, verse 18: "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord." And notice a handful of things here. First of all, Paul speaks of an "open face," in contrast to a veiled face, or a covered face. If you look at the preceding verses, he's talking about those who have a "vail" over their hearts, over their faces. So that refers to unbelief. Unbelief is like a veil that prevents sinners from seeing spiritually. Their minds are blinded, as verse 14 says. And by God's grace, the believer has that veil removed. They're enabled by God to see. God regenerates them and gives them faith to behold and understand what God has revealed.

Well, what exactly is it that the believer sees? The passage tells us they behold "the glory of the

Lord.” So the glory of God, as it is seen in the face of the Lord Jesus Christ, as we look at all that is to be learned about Christ in his incarnation, coming as Emanuel—God with us, in all of the works and teaching that he gives us in the gospel, but especially in the great acts of redemption—in his humiliation, and death upon the cross, and his burial, and his resurrection and ascension. In all of that, we see the glory of God. We learn things about who God is. In the next chapter, 2 Corinthians 4, verse 6, it says: “For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” So what they see is the glory of God.

And the next question is, Where do they see it? Well, the passage says, “beholding as in a glass”—or it could be translated, “beholding as in a mirror.” So they behold the glory of God in this mirror. The mirror is the Scriptures. Again, if you look at the preceding verses, it’s talking about the glory of the Old Testament, and the greater glory of the new covenant and New Testament era, and so on. So it’s this mirror of the Scriptures. Remember that Romans 10 tells us that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. So the believer beholds the glory of God, as it’s revealed in Scripture. It’s not apart from the Word, but through the Word that this change—which is going to be described—occurs. Jesus says, in John 17:17, “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.”

Well, what effect does this sight have? We’re told, they “are changed into the same image from glory to glory.” That is, they’re transformed into the image of the Lord Jesus Christ—that glory that they have been beholding. They are made more and more to look like him. And you’ll notice, this is a process—“from glory to glory.” From one degree to another, they’re being re-created, re-shaped, transformed into the likeness of Christ. That’s a description of what we call, in theological terms, Sanctification. So the effect of beholding the glory of God in the Scriptures is to be transformed into Christ’s likeness.

Lastly, you’ll note that this is not something that the believer does on their own. They can’t do it to themselves. Verse 5, of that chapter says, “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God.” Who is it that brings about this change? Well, look again at verse 18—God does. It says, “even as by the Spirit of the Lord.” So this is the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit works by, and with, and through the Word—the glass, the mirror—in order to sanctify his people. So the Spirit, who inspired the Scriptures, reveals Christ in those Scriptures, and in the process, he changes the believer into the likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Well this introduces us to God’s work of Sanctification in the soul. We see a few threads here that are being woven together—some of the components of this doctrine. Well we need to further open up the details, and to clarify some important distinctions. So in the remainder of this lecture, we’ll explore what the Scriptures teach us about the place of Sanctification within the doctrines of Salvation.

And so that brings us, secondly, to considering a doctrinal exposition of Sanctification. So we turn, first of all, to the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 13, paragraph 1, which introduces us to what the Bible teaches about the nature of Sanctification. Paragraph 1 says this: “They who are effectually called and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through 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.” Well, that’s pretty long—it’s a long description, but it’s helpful because it gives

us a number of the things that the Bible teaches.

The English word “sanctification,” or the verb “to sanctify,” comes from a root word related to holiness. And so it includes the idea of being set apart, or being consecrated, and it includes the idea of being made pure. So this is holiness. This is the work of being made holy, or Sanctification. It’s a work of God’s Spirit that takes place within the life of a believer, wherein they are dying more and more to sin, and growing more and more in Christian maturity, in Christ’s likeness, enabling them to perform good works, to God’s glory and by God’s grace. And so, you can think of it as growth in godliness, and growth in godliness is really growth in God-likeness. That’s what Sanctification is.

So let’s think about the theological context. So we take this doctrine of Sanctification—how does it fit within everything else that we’ve learned about the doctrines of Salvation? Well, first of all, think back to Union with Christ. This benefit, Sanctification, this benefit of Salvation comes through Union with Christ. Really, Romans, chapter 6 is focusing on this—the connection between Union with Christ and Sanctification. So in verse 6, it says, “Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.” And so, by virtue of being united to Christ by the Spirit, all that Christ is, and all that he has accomplished is applied to the believer. By Christ’s death, we die to sin. By Christ’s resurrection, and his resurrection power, we are brought to newness of life.

Think in terms of the connection to Predestination. God’s sovereign and gracious election included the purpose of ultimately re-creating believers into his own likeness. Romans 8, verse 29, “For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son.” Predestinated to the end of being sanctified.

Think about it in relationship to Regeneration. Sanctification follows and flows from Regeneration. God, having created a new heart and spirit within his people, then transforms the believer into Christ’s likeness. You’ll see this in 1 Corinthians 6, verse 11. Therefore, the unbeliever is incapable of growth in godliness. He’s not born again; he’s not regenerated. They must first be born again. Any and all attempts at moral change in life are impossible without first being indwelt by the Spirit, because sanctification is a work of God’s Spirit. If you don’t have the Spirit, you can’t be sanctified.

You can also think of the relationship with Justification and Sanctification. Well Justification is a one-time, forensic act of God’s grace. Sanctification is an ongoing process in the life of the believer. You’ll notice an important difference in the definitions, in the Westminster Shorter Catechism. It says that “Justification is an act of God’s free grace; then you go to the next question, “Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace. So Justification is an act, Sanctification is a work, an ongoing thing. Justification is a legal change in the believer’s status before God, giving him acceptance and access before the Lord. Whereas Sanctification is a re-creative work within the inner life and character of the believer. It’s not just changing him legally, it’s actually changing who they are—the very person, their behavior, and so on.

We can also think of the relationship of Sanctification to Glorification. Glorification refers to the completion of redemption at the culmination of the last day. It is only then that the believer will be without all remnants of sin, in soul, and in the resurrected body for all of eternity. But Sanctification in this life remains incomplete. While there is growth, and development, and dying unto sin, sin is never completely eradicated. The believer contends with sin all life, all life long, in a perpetual warfare, having to confess sin, and repent of sin, and to strive after new obedience. You’ll see Paul describing this in Romans 7, in verse 14 and following.

Well, all of this helps clarify the theological context of Sanctification. But next, we should think about the nature of Sanctification itself. And the first thing you'll note is it's absolute necessity—the necessity of Sanctification. Hebrews 12, verse 14 says, "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord." Holiness is indispensable to Salvation. True saving faith can never be fruitless, can never be a fruitless faith. Whenever God works, by the gospel, salvation in a soul, there'll be evidence of his work. There will be the fruit of it that's seen in the transformation of their character. Well that means, based on Hebrews 12, verse 14—no holiness equals no heaven. No one will go to heaven without having the evidence of holiness in their life.

We also need to note that this is, Sanctification is the supernatural work of the Spirit. We saw that in 2 Corinthians 3:18 at the beginning: "even as by the Spirit of the Lord." The Lord's the One, the Spirit's the One who's bringing about this change. Man cannot sanctify himself. He cannot do this on his own. It's not as if you're justified, by the grace of God, and so on, and then you're left to kind of a legal labor, where you're on your own, in your own strength, trying to bring about this moral reformation. No, the Bible says quite the opposite. In 2 Corinthians 4, verse 7, we're told, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us." So it's the work of the Spirit that sanctifies the believer.

And it begins in the inner man. It begins there, and it works its way out through the whole life and behavior of the Christian. So they're transformed from inside out, if you will. It will affect the way they think, and feel, and speak, and the things they do, and so on. We can think of Sanctification as, there are two sides to the coin. On one side, there is what we call mortification, and on the other side, we have what's called vivification. So if you think of mortification—it's actually a word in the Bible. The word "mortify" means, to kill—to die. And so, it's speaking about sin—sin dying—Romans 8, verse 13: "For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live." You see the same thing in Galatians 5, verse 24, and Colossians 3, verse 5, and many other places. So mortification is referring to dying unto sin, seeing the Spirit killing sin in the believer. And as I said, it will result in a change in our behavior. It will result in a change in old habits. So, sinful thoughts, sinful words, sinful deeds that previously characterized the Christian, those things will slowly begin to decay—they'll be put to death. They'll begin to think more like Christ, and speak more graciously, and do what is in obedience to God's will, and so on. That's maturity—it's growing up in holiness.

The other side is vivification, and that comes from the word for "life." So it's speaking about being renewed, or newness of life. Again, in Romans 6, verse 4, "That like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." You see the same thing in Colossians 2:12, and Colossians 3, verse 1 and following. So this is the work of not only dying unto sin, but living unto righteousness—living unto Christ's likeness. And it will be seen in the fruit of the Holy Spirit. In Galatians 5, Paul's drawing this contrast between the flesh, and the works of the flesh, and that fruit of the flesh, and the Spirit—the Holy Spirit, and the works of the Spirit, and the fruits of the Spirit, and so on. Well, as the Spirit is at work sanctifying the believer, there will be fruit that's born in them—the list of the fruit of the Spirit. We often refer to it, from Galatians 5. This is the work of vivification, of the Lord bring newness to life in the soul of the believer.

We should also think about the relationship of Sanctification to the means of grace. When we say "means of grace," we're speaking about the instruments or vehicles that God has appointed, through which he communicates grace—namely, the Word, the sacraments, and prayer, as a means

of grace. So this work of Sanctification takes place by the Word and the Spirit. So the Spirit's working through the Word—they work together. You don't have Sanctification with the Word without the Spirit, and you don't have the work of the Spirit separated from the Word. Remember, Jesus prayed, "Sanctify them by thy truth, thy word is truth." So there's a connection here. In 1 Peter 1, and verse 22: "Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren." And so, when we think of the gospel being preached to the unconverted, we know that the Lord uses the preaching of the Word, in order to bring about a saving change in the souls of men—they're converted. That can continue to be the case, in relationship to the believer. As they sit under the Word, God is using that Word to shape them and mold them, to press them into the mold of Christ's likeness, instructing them, and enabling them to walk in holiness. It's true of the written Word. It's also true of the visible Word in the sacraments. So you think, for example, of the Lord's Supper—the Lord's Supper is all about spiritual nourishment. The Lord is coming in the sacrament, Christ is coming by the Spirit, and strengthening the faith of God's people, enabling them to feed by faith on Christ, enabling them to grow in grace, to die unto sin, and live unto Christ's righteousness, and so on. So the Lord's Supper has an influence as well, in sanctifying the believer. And of course, we have prayer. We are to seek from the One who alone can give us this blessing. We are to cry out to him, and that exercise of the soul in prayer is a means by which we lay hold of the Lord in his promises, and they're applied to us. We fetch grace from heaven through this means that God's given. So there's a connection between Sanctification and the means of grace.

Thirdly, we need to consider this doctrine polemically, so we need to answer a few errors that sometimes arise in connection with this doctrine. First of all, there are those who speak about having Jesus as Savior, without having him as Lord. So, you can pray and ask the Lord to forgive your sins, and so on, and then continue to live as you've always lived, not having Christ as Lord of your life, exercising Lordship over you. Well, this notion needs to be utterly rejected as unbiblical.

First of all, it would be dividing Christ. You can't rip Jesus in two, and say, Well, I'll have him as Savior, and not have him as Lord—that's terrible. Furthermore, you can't divide Christ from his benefits. So you can't say, Well, I'll take the forgiveness of sins and the deliverance from hell—that's his benefits—without having Christ himself to reign over us. No, these things belong together. Those who come to him as a Savior come to him as Lord. You can't live as you've always lived. Where there's no fruit in a person's life, it's evidence that there's no saving faith in that person. There has to be a change that manifests itself.

Secondly, there are those who think of man, of the believer, as passive, as purely passive in sanctification. So you'll hear language like, "Let go, and let God." So, the way in which we're sanctified is to rest in the Lord, is to somehow get out of the way, and to get as passive as possible, so that the Lord can do his work. That's not what the Bible teaches. Man is active in Sanctification. You see the work of God and the work of the believer brought together in places like Philippians 2, verses 12 and 13: "Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence"—listen—"work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." So there, he's saying the believer is to be active in pursuing something: "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." But it goes on: "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." So the believer is active in pursuing Sanctification, conscious of the fact that it is God himself, by the Spirit, who is working in the believer, through the appointed means, to bring about these things. So that's why this notion of man being passive flies in the face of all that we see in Scripture. Scripture describes the Christian life as a warfare. No one's passive

on the battlefield. You have language of striving, and of wrestling, and of fighting, and of watching, and of laboring, and so on. It's the language of the Christian life, and the work of Sanctification. And so, man is not passive.

We also need to recognize that there's no such thing as perfectionism. Some people will say, "Well, yes, in your sanctification, you can reach the point where you no longer sin. You reach a state of perfection." This is not what the Bible teaches. We're to be striving toward perfection, but we do not reach it in this life. That only happens at death, and ultimately on the last day. When the Bible says, "Be ye perfect"—like in the Sermon on the Mount—"be ye perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect," the language of "perfect" means "complete;" it means "mature." We're striving toward that absolute perfection, and it reflects a measure of growth and maturity. You say, "Well, Pastor, what about 1 John 3, verse 9?" because we read there, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin." Well, the answer to that is this—in the Greek language, it's actually more of, it's literally, "Whosoever is born of God does not continue to sin," or, "continue in sin." So that the tense of the verb is this idea of continuing on in sin. Yeah, those who are regenerated are not going to continue as they were before. They're not going to continue to be merely in the path of sin. And we know that's the case, because John can't contradict himself. Earlier, he said, in 1 John 1, verses 8 and 10: "If we say that we have no sin"—he's speaking to the believer—"we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." In verse 10: "If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." And so, the idea of reaching a state of sinless perfection in this world is not what the Bible teaches us.

Lastly, and briefly, we can now draw some practical application to ourselves about the importance of Sanctification in Christian experience. Remember the words of Jesus, in John 15, verse 4? "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me." This emphasizes dependence. The believer, in this work and process of Sanctification, is absolutely dependent on the Lord Jesus Christ, absolutely dependent on the ministry of the Holy Spirit. That means we need close communion with Christ—we need close communion with him. We need to be near him, and beholding him, beholding his glory, as in a glass. We need to be seeking to draw from his resources, drawing on the mediation of the Lord Jesus Christ; asking, seeing, and relying on the grace that is to be found in the Lord Jesus Christ. We walk in dependence.

But there's also hope. Philippians 1, verse 6 says, "Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." So we can become discouraged. We are in this war with sin, and we see sin coming up, and there are some things that are slow to die in us, things that we continue to struggle with, and we can become discouraged in that. The Lord gives us hope here. He says, look, you can be confident. With the Lord, with the good work that he's begun, he will bring it to completion—he "will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." And we can take hope in that, that there is a day coming, not only in this world, where we continue to become more like Christ, but ultimately on the last day, when we will be without sin, and forever with the Lord.

And in that hope, we need to have reinforced diligence in the use of means. If the Spirit works through the means of grace, then we need to be super diligent about the use of those means. That's true privately, in our personal walk—Bible reading, and prayer, and meditation, and memorization of Scripture. It's true in terms of family—keeping up family worship, in the Word, singing God's Psalms, and so on, as well as the priority of public worship. The Lord has given to us the ordinance of preaching, as an important means for growing in grace. And so, we need to prioritize. It's the

pivotal force in forming the piety of God's people—being in public worship, twice on the Lord's Day, in the middle of the week, whatever it may be—the preaching of God's Word, the reading of God's Word, memorizing it, meditating upon it, the singing of Psalms, prayer, the sacraments—all of these, we need to really be diligent in using them, in dependence upon the Lord for growth in grace.

Lastly, what is the end of Salvation? The end of Salvation, as we've seen over and over, is God's glory. "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." And God is most glorified when his glory is produced and seen in the life of believers. This is what Jesus says, in that passage in John 15, verse 8: "Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples." The end of Salvation is God's glory. And the fruitfulness of this growth in grace and transformation into the likeness of Christ is the means God has appointed to gather glory to himself.

Well, in this lecture, we've considered an introduction to what the Bible teaches about Sanctification. We've noted that God causes his children to grow up into spiritual maturity, by the grace of his Spirit. That raises the question, How does this growth relate to the fruit of good works in the Christian life? Well, in the next lecture, we'll consider, with the Lord's help, the doctrine of Good Works.