

Definitive and Progressive Sanctification

In Romans 4–5, Paul argued that the gospel is a free gift of grace, received by faith, apart from works of the law. Abraham was justified by faith before circumcision, and believers are justified not by law-keeping but through faith in Christ. Paul then presses the contrast between Adam and Christ: through Adam came sin, condemnation, and death; through Christ comes righteousness, justification, grace, and life. He even says, “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Romans 5:20). Romans 6 anticipates the obvious objections: if salvation is by grace apart from the law, and if grace abounds where sin increases, does obedience still matter?

Q1. What names can we give the two objections in Romans 6?

1. Romans 6:1 — “Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” is an example of: _____
2. Romans 6:15 — “Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace?” is an example of: _____

Q2. To whom do you think Paul was speaking in this passage: Jewish Christians, Gentile Christians, or both? Why?

Think about:

- Paul’s discussion of Abraham, circumcision, and the law in Romans 4–5.
- Paul’s contrast between Adam and Christ in Romans 5.
- Paul’s language of baptism, slavery, obedience, and grace in Romans 6.

1. Definitive Sanctification

Definitive sanctification refers to the once-for-all change in status, identity, and lordship that happens when a person is united to Christ. The believer is no longer in Adam, no longer under sin's dominion, and no longer enslaved to sin as master. The believer now belongs to Christ.

The Westminster Confession of Faith (Art 13.1) gives an especially helpful description of the decisive break with sin's dominion:

*Those who are at one time effectively 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 various lusts of it are weakened and put to death more and more; those who are sanctified are given life and strengthened more and more in all of the saving graces, to the practice of true holiness, without which no one will see the Lord.*

This is exactly the logic of Romans 6. Paul's answer is not merely, "Stop Sinning." His deeper answer is: *you have been united to Christ; therefore you have died to sin and have been raised to new life.*

Q3. What does "union with Christ" mean?

Read Romans 6:1–14 and consider how often Paul speaks of believers as sharing in Christ's death and resurrection.

For each reference below, explain what Paul is saying about union with Christ.

- **Romans 6:2 — “We died to sin.”**

What does this mean?

- **Romans 6:3 — “All of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death.”**

What does it mean to be baptized into Christ and into his death?

- **Romans 6:4 — “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death.”**

Why does Paul describe burial with Christ?

- **Romans 6:4 — “Just as Christ was raised from the dead... we too may live a new life.”**

What does Christ’s resurrection mean for our "death to sin?"

- **Romans 6:5 — “If we have been united with him in a death like his...”**

What kind of union is Paul describing?

- **Romans 6:7 — “Anyone who has died has been set free from sin.”**

In what sense has the believer been set free from sin?

- **Romans 6:8 — “If we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.”**

What is the connection between dying with Christ and living with Christ?

- **Romans 6:11 — “Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.”**

Why must Christians count this as true?

- **Romans 6:14 — “Sin shall no longer be your master.”**

How does this relate to point (1) above?

Q4. What does it mean to be “united with Christ”?

Is it merely to be affiliated with Christ? Identified with Christ? Allied to Christ? Or is Paul describing something deeper?

Q5. How does this relate to the comparison between Adam and Christ in Romans 5?

Q6. How many times does this definitive sanctification take place?

What about “The Baptism of the Holy Spirit”?

Some Christian traditions speak of “the baptism of the Holy Spirit” as a second experience after conversion. This is worth considering briefly because Romans 6 teaches that every believer has already been brought into union with Christ.

1. Classical Pentecostal view

Many classical Pentecostal churches teach that baptism with the Holy Spirit is a distinct experience after conversion, usually associated with empowerment for witness and often evidenced by speaking in tongues.

2. Charismatic or non-tongues second-blessing view

Some charismatic, holiness, or “higher life” traditions teach that believers may have a second experience of the Spirit after conversion, but do not always insist that tongues are the necessary evidence. This may be described as Spirit baptism, a second blessing, entire consecration, or entry into a deeper victorious life.

3. Classical Reformed view

The Reformed view is that every true believer is united to Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and incorporated into the body of Christ at conversion. Christians do need ongoing filling, strengthening, repentance, and growth by the Spirit, but not a second baptism that gives them a new level of Christian identity.

Q7. Where in Scripture do you think second-stage views of Spirit baptism are based?

Q8. Is a second-stage view possible given what we are learning in Romans 6?

If every believer has died with Christ, been raised with Christ, and been set free from sin's dominion, can there be "ordinary Christians" and then a higher class of "Spirit-baptized Christians"?

Summary:

Union with Christ and definitive sanctification happen once, at the point of salvation. There are no half-saved people. Every true Christian is united to Christ, indwelt by the Spirit, dead to sin's dominion, and alive to God.

2. Progressive Sanctification

Romans 6 teaches that sin is no longer our master. But it does not teach that sin has disappeared from our lives. We know that the Christian life involves an ongoing fight. Sin's dominion has been broken, but sin's presence remains.

This prepares us for Romans 7:15, where Paul describes the painful struggle:

| *"For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do."*

Clearly, this raises the problem of ongoing sin and human inability. Romans 6 tells us that believers have died to sin; Romans 7 reminds us that the struggle with sin is still painfully real.

The Wesleyan, Methodist, and Holiness View

The Wesleyan and Methodist traditions, drawing from John Wesley, have often emphasized the possibility of "entire sanctification" or "Christian perfection." Later Holiness movements developed this further, sometimes teaching that believers can enter a state of full sanctification through a definite act of consecration, faith, or spiritual method.

These traditions ground themselves to Romans 6 because Paul speaks so strongly about freedom from sin, death to sin, life in the Spirit, and victory over the flesh.

The Reformed tradition agrees that Christians should pursue holiness seriously and expect real growth. However, it denies that believers become sinlessly perfect in this life. Sanctification is real, but incomplete until glorification.

Q9. Is it realistic to aim for perfection, or total sanctification, in this life?

Why or why not?

Q10. What is a realistic expectation of sanctification?

Should Christians expect change? Victory over particular sins? Ongoing struggle? Increasing repentance? Greater love for God? All of the above?

Is there a "method" for progressive sanctification?

Actually, there is! Paul encourages believers to respond to sin in three ways:

1. Know our identity in Christ. (Romans 6:3, 6)
2. Reckon that identity as the reality in which we live. (Romans 6:11)
3. Act in line with that new identity. (6:12-13)

This pattern is important. Paul does not say, “Change so that you may become acceptable to Christ.” Rather, he says, “Because you are united to Christ, live accordingly.”

Q11. What does it mean to really “know” this union with Christ? Where do we find this knowledge?

Q12. What does the word “reckon” mean here? What might that look like in temptation? In shame? In challenge?

Q13. What does it mean to act "free from sin"? How does habit, choice and discipline help or hinder us

Q14. How should this shape the way we encourage, reprove, and disciple people around us?

Summary

Romans 6 teaches that union with Christ makes libertinism impossible. The Christian has died with Christ and has been raised to new life. This is definitive sanctification: sin's dominion has been broken once for all.

But Romans 6 also teaches that Christians must actively fight sin. We must not let sin reign. We must not present ourselves to sin. We must present ourselves to God. This is progressive sanctification: the ongoing, Spirit-enabled growth by which we increasingly live out our new identity in Christ.

The Christian life is therefore not an attempt to become united to Christ by obedience. It is the daily practice of living out the union with Christ already given by grace.