

*Edited by*

John Piper &  
David Mathis

# Acting the Miracle

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*God's Work* and Ours in  
the Mystery of Sanctification

*Contributions by*

Kevin DeYoung, Ed Welch,  
Russell Moore, & Jarvis Williams



“I love this book. One meets real holiness here, and it has real drawing power. C. S. Lewis said it well when he quipped, ‘How little people know who think holiness is dull. When one meets the real thing, it is irresistible.’ The content in these chapters awakened within me a deeper hungering and thirsting for righteousness. I pray it will cause those same hunger pangs to spread so that many more will taste and see that the Holy One himself is an irresistible treasure.”

**Jason C. Meyer**, Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis

“The Reformed view of sanctification has resonated with me for a long time. More importantly, it is biblically rooted, realistic, and hopeful, and it doesn’t fall into the error of perfectionism. Now we have a wonderfully accessible presentation of the Reformed view of sanctification. The scriptural support for a progressive view of sanctification is persuasively made. The realistic struggle that characterizes our lives is set forth, and the hope we have in Christ Jesus is proclaimed. I was encouraged and convicted in reading this work.”

**Thomas R. Schreiner**, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville

“A great combination of theological insight and practical advice on one of the most important of all Christian doctrines.”

**Douglas J. Moo**, Wessner Chair of Biblical Studies, Wheaton College

“The Reformed and evangelical mind has recently concentrated much attention on the doctrines of justification and adoption, with many salutary effects. In some instances, however, concentration has degenerated into myopia, resulting in the distortion of the doctrine of sanctification. The present collection of essays is a helpful remedy to this situation. With chapters that are richly biblical, Christ-centered, and humane, *Acting the Miracle* refocuses our attention on the place and purpose of sanctification among the manifold works of the triune God. Readers will find this book both theologically and pastorally satisfying.”

**Scott R. Swain**, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and Academic Dean, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

“This book is theologically informed and pastorally wise. It helpfully distinguishes and defines definitive and progressive sanctification, and it shrewdly shows how to approach Christian living without being reductionistic.”

**Andy Naselli**, Assistant Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology, Bethlehem College and Seminary, Minneapolis

*Acting the Miracle: God's Work and Ours in the Mystery of Sanctification*

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# Contributors

**Kevin DeYoung** is pastor of University Reformed Church in Lansing, Michigan, where he has served since 2004. He is a council member of The Gospel Coalition and author of *Just Do Something: A Liberating Approach to Finding God's Will*, as well as (on the topic of sanctification) *The Hole in Our Holiness: Filling the Gap between Gospel Passion and the Pursuit of Godliness*. Kevin and his wife, Trisha, have five children (Ian, Jacob, Elizabeth, Paul, and Mary).

**David Mathis** is executive editor at Desiring God and an elder at Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis. He is a graduate of Furman University, Greenville, South Carolina, and is completing a distance degree with Reformed Theological Seminary. He is editor of *Thinking, Loving, Doing: A Call to Glorify God with Heart and Mind* and *Finish the Mission: Bringing the Gospel to the Unreached and Unengaged*. He and his wife, Megan, have twin sons (Carson and Coleman).

**Russell Moore** is president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. He is author of *Adopted for Life: The Priority of Adoption for Christian Families and Churches*, as well as *Tempted and Tried: Temptation and the Triumph of Christ*. He is married to Maria, and they have five sons.

**John Piper** is founder of and teacher for Desiring God and chancellor of Bethlehem College and Seminary in Minneapolis. For over thirty years, he was senior pastor at Bethlehem Baptist Church. He is author of over fifty books, including *Desiring God*, *The Pleasures of God*,

*Don't Waste Your Life, Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ*, and (on the topic of sanctification) *Future Grace: The Purifying Power of the Promises of God*. John and his wife, Noël, have five children and twelve grandchildren.

**Ed Welch** is a faculty member at the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation (CCEF) and has been counseling for almost thirty years. He has written extensively on depression, fear, and addiction, and his books include *When People Are Big and God Is Small* and (most recently) *Shame Interrupted*. Ed and his wife, Sheri, have two married daughters and four grandchildren.

**Jarvis Williams** is associate professor of New Testament interpretation at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He is the author of *One New Man: The Cross and Racial Reconciliation in Pauline Theology* and *For Whom Did Christ Die: The Extent of the Atonement in Paul's Theology*. He is married to Ana, and they have a son (Jaden).

*Introduction*

# The Search for Sanctification's Holy Grail

David Mathis

Sanctification talk is notorious. If you've made the rounds in Christian circles for long enough, you know. You know.

Gather a dozen thoughtful, biblically and theologically informed Jesus followers. Steer the conversation in the direction of *sanctification*—*what* it is and *how* you pursue it practically. Then take a step back, watch, listen, and give it some time.

If you let the discussion go long enough, and it gets into just about any detail, you'll soon be able to discern a dozen distinct perspectives on the nitty-gritty of sanctification.

*Opinions on sanctification are like elbows, some might say. Everybody's got 'em.*

## Sanctification Gets Personal

As much as any Christian doctrine, sanctification gets personal—indirectly when we talk about the *what*, and then in particular when we address the *how*. As soon as we're saying what sanctification is, it's inevitable that the lines soon must be drawn to how we live. And the more defensive we are about our way of life, the less open we tend to be about having Scripture revise our notions about sanctification.

At the level of definition, as John Piper will explain in more detail

in chapter 1, the fancy English word *sanctification* is simpler than it sounds. It's built on the Latin word *sanctus*, meaning "holy." *Sanctification* is the modest theological term we Christians typically use to refer to the process of being made holy.<sup>1</sup> For the Christian, whose standard of perfect human holiness is Jesus, the God-man, sanctification is essentially becoming more like Jesus—"conformed to the image of his Son," as Romans 8:29 puts it.

Another way to talk about sanctification is Christian growth or maturation. It's a big word for the little-by-little progress of the everyday Christian life. It encompasses how every professing Christian should be living, where holiness is heading, how fast the progress should be, and how it happens in real life.

Look up. Can you see the controversies swirling overhead?

### It's Just Complicated

Not only is it personal, but sanctification talk also gets prickly quickly because it immediately involves so many massive realities in the Christian worldview and their coming together in daily life: grace and works; law and gospel; faith and the Holy Spirit; Christian obedience and pleasing God; love and good deeds. The stakes are high. Weak spots in our theology will turn up, before long, in our understanding of sanctification. It doesn't take long before a wacky doctrine elsewhere begins to mess with our doctrine of holiness. True, Christian theology is a seamless garment, and every doctrine eventually relates to every other, but sanctification calls the question faster than the others and has the tendency to accentuate our problem areas.

But the fact that sanctification gets personal so quickly, and theologically complicated so fast, doesn't mean sanctification talk is to be avoided. On the contrary, it means that it's all the more important. We neglect careful, biblically informed reflection on this doctrine to our detriment, to the minimizing of our love toward others, and to the

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<sup>1</sup>More below on "two types" of sanctification: definitive and progressive.

diminishing of the glory of God. Difficult as it can be, we must venture to speak about these things. We must talk sanctification.

## Two Types of Sanctification

To make things a touch more complicated, the New Testament has two ways of talking about sanctification. For starters, we should clarify that this is a book mainly about the sanctification that theologians call *progressive*. Even though the biblical texts bear out two types, Christians throughout the centuries have found it most helpful in theological discussion to refer to the progressive type as simply “sanctification.” But the Scriptures also teach us about a kind of sanctification we can call “definitive.”

Definitive sanctification is the status of holiness we receive simultaneously with conversion and justification.<sup>2</sup> It is the setting apart of believers, reliant on the holiness of Jesus, such that even the most unholy of those who truly have faith can be considered “saints” (holy ones, Rom. 1:7 and 1 Cor. 1:2) because they are “in” Jesus, the Holy One. “Sanctify” is used in this definitive sense in Hebrews (9:13–14; 10:10; 13:12), as well as in Paul, who says to the Corinthians, “you were sanctified” (1 Cor. 6:11). It is this definitive sanctification that marks the clean break with sin we hear about in Romans 6:11 (“Consider yourselves dead to sin”), Galatians 2:20 (“I have been crucified with Christ”), and Colossians 3:3 (“you have died”), among other texts.

But sanctification is also progressive. We are increasingly “set apart” as we progress in actual holiness, which flows from the spiritual life we have in Jesus by faith. This is the way the term *sanctification* is typically used theologically, and this is the focus of this book.

Piper will add more in the first chapter, but for now, suffice it to say that we are aware of, and greatly appreciative of, the often overlooked

<sup>2</sup>Perhaps we should be clear here about what is meant by “justification.” Justification is God declaring the believing sinner to be righteous, through faith alone, on the basis of Jesus’s righteousness alone. For more on justification, see John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003) and John Piper, *The Future of Justification* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007).

doctrine of definitive sanctification. We lament with David Peterson that “definitive sanctification is a more important theme in the New Testament than has generally been acknowledged,”<sup>3</sup> but for our purposes in this book, take *sanctification* in the normal theological parlance of progressive sanctification, unless otherwise noted.

### Beware of Slogans

Because of the inherent complexity of sanctification, involving not only these two types but also all these moving pieces (Jesus’s person and work, the Spirit’s work, faith, our works, grace, law, gospel, obedience, and more), there is a great temptation to oversimplify things. Because sanctification with all its tentacles feels like an octopus larger than we can comfortably tame, we may prefer our own little theological house pets that we can train and remain captain of. It’s nice to have a slogan that can keep it simple for stupid humans and make us feel like we’re in control.

Enticing as it sounds—and convicting as it may be to hear about if you’ve tried it—the well of sanctification reductionisms soon runs dry. “Let go and let God”—it won’t be long before that creates some problems. “Simply obey”—that won’t do it either. Nor will attaining some “second work of grace.” “Just get used to your justification”—attractive, yes, but there’s another reductionism at work here.

It’s as if we find the biblical data to be just too numerous and complicated, and what we really need is to search for sanctification’s holy grail. *It must be out there somewhere—surely, there’s some quick fix, some theological secret to discover, some doctrinal key that unlocks what holiness really is and how to have it.*

But if there’s any key to sanctification, it’s this: abandon your search for the key. At least abandon the search for a shortcut. Let your quest for the holy grail of sanctification end right here and right now

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<sup>3</sup>David Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 14. Peterson’s work highlights “the foundational importance of definitive sanctification” (13), and we would recommend his book as a fine place to begin in considering how definitive sanctification serves “as a basis and motivation for holy living” (14).

and commit to a sanctification not of *only*, but of *all*—all the Scriptures, all of Christian theology, all the Bible’s salvific pictures, and, most ultimately, all of Jesus.

### Simply Getting Used to Justification?

For one, let’s take a reductionism prevalent in the broadly Reformed community with which many readers of this book associate: the holy grail of justification by faith alone. One Lutheran spokesman, whom some Reformed would happily echo, says that sanctification is “*simply the art of getting used to justification.*”<sup>4</sup>

Just off several years’ fighting back a fresh assault on justification from various new perspectives on Paul, this precious doctrine, which became the occasion for Martin Luther to pioneer a sorely needed reformation, has become especially dear to many of us. So justification as a silver bullet for sanctification is enticing to those of us who love double imputation, Jesus’s “alien” righteousness, and making much of God’s free grace toward the ungodly.

The best possible meaning of such a slogan would have in view not just justification but the full panoply of initial and ongoing graces applied to the believer at the outset of the Christian life—new birth, faith and repentance, justification, definitive sanctification, adoption, and more. It would be better to say that progressive sanctification is based on definitive sanctification. Christian growth means learning to live like who we already are in Jesus, living out in and through us the holiness that is already ours in him.

But even on this best possible reading, there is so much more to be said, and this epithet for sanctification ends up betraying a sloppy understanding of justification or sanctification or both. Justification by faith alone is a beautiful, wonderful, essential doctrine, worth defending to the death. If we had the space, I’d love to give some extended ef-

<sup>4</sup>Gerhard Forde, “The Lutheran View,” in *Christian Spirituality*, ed. Donald L. Alexander (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 13; emphasis original.

fort here to celebrating this vital doctrine. True Christian theology can't do without it and must not minimize it in any way. It is an essential aspect of our relationship to Jesus. But it's not the whole. The Scriptures have much more to say to us than simply *get to know your justification*. That way of saying it is careless at best, if not tragically misguided. What we need for practical sanctification is not one Christian doctrine, but all of them. Not one or a handful of Christian Scriptures, but every one. Not part of Jesus, but the whole Christ.

### Union to the Rescue?

In response to such a reductionistic fixation on the doctrine of justification, a fresh wave of voices claim to have found the grail in another place, perhaps even more pious than justification, believe it or not. They rightly emphasize the reality and importance of our union with Christ. The best of these voices will not play union over and against justification, but note that union with Christ is “the big category” for the Holy Spirit's application of Jesus's redemptive work to us and that justification, sanctification, regeneration, adoption, and glorification are “aspects” of our union with Jesus by faith. Yes.

Since union with Christ “may be the most important doctrine you've never heard of,”<sup>5</sup> and since sanctification is one aspect of our union with Christ, it may be helpful here not to assume your familiarity but to provide a brief introduction to this important doctrine.<sup>6</sup>

Simply put, *union with Christ* is the theological term for the believer's being joined to Jesus by the Holy Spirit through faith. In fulfillment of God's ancient promise, *I will be your God, and you will be my people*, it is “the most general way of characterizing Jesus's work of

<sup>5</sup>Kevin DeYoung, *The Hole in Our Holiness: Filling the Gap between Gospel Passion and the Pursuit of Godliness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 94.

<sup>6</sup>There's not enough space here to say all that should be said about union with Christ and its relevance and importance for sanctification. For more, see, among others, chapter 43 in Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994, 2000), 840–850; chapter 4 in Anthony Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989, 1994), 54–67; and especially chapter 11 in Sinclair Ferguson, *The Christian Life: A Doctrinal Introduction* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1981), 104–14; as well as Ferguson's chapter “The Reformed View,” in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, ed. Donald L. Alexander (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1989), 47–76.

salvation.”<sup>7</sup> The way in which all that Jesus accomplished for us gets applied to us is through our being connected to Jesus, our being “in” him. The occasion of this connection is faith, and the agent of this connection is the Holy Spirit. Our union with Jesus is part and parcel of the covenantal relationship between Jesus and his bride in which the two become one—and what God truly has joined together, no man may separate.

Again, our faith union with Jesus is how the objective accomplishments of his life, death, and resurrection two millennia ago come to be subjectively applied to other humans, whether Peter, Paul, Mary, Augustine, Luther, Spurgeon, or believers in the twenty-first century. John Murray memorably captures this important distinction of the objective and subjective in the title of his book *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied*.<sup>8</sup> Our redemption was accomplished by Jesus in the past, and it is applied to us by the Spirit in our present.

Keep these two categories clear: Jesus’s objective achievement and our subjective reception by faith through the Spirit. To put it simply and generally, our union with Jesus by faith is the way in which all that he has purchased for us is given to us. Specific aspects, then, of this general union include regeneration, justification, sanctification, adoption, and glorification. In a book on sanctification, it is important to see that sanctification is one aspect of our union with Jesus, alongside other vitally essential aspects.

## Joined to Jesus

The apostle Paul alone references our being “in Christ” in some form over 160 times. Draw in the apostle John and his own way of saying it, and you have well over two hundred references, in just these two writers, of believers’ being “united” to Jesus.

The two prevailing ways in which the New Testament speaks of our

<sup>7</sup>John Frame, *Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, forthcoming), n.p.

<sup>8</sup>John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1955).

union with Jesus are (1) our being *in him*, and (2) his being *in us*. Paul says in Ephesians 1:3 that it is “in Christ” that Christians have “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places”—including sanctification—and that the Father “chose us *in him* before the foundation of the world” (v. 4). In 2 Corinthians 5:17 Paul says, “If anyone is *in Christ*, he is a new creation.” He says in Philippians 3:8 that he has “suffered the loss of all things and count[s] them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found *in him*.” It is “in him” that we “become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21), and only “in Christ Jesus” do we have “wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30).

But union with Christ means not only that we are “in him,” but also that he is “in us.” Paul writes in Romans 8:10, “If Christ is *in you*, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness,” and he declares in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives *in me*.” When Paul challenges the Corinthians, “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith,” he tells them, “Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that *Jesus Christ is in you*?” (2 Cor. 13:5). In Colossians 1:27 he celebrates “the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is *Christ in you*, the hope of glory.”

Since union with Christ means not only that the believer is “in” Jesus but also that Jesus is “in” him, it should be no surprise to find several passages from John that combine both ideas.

By this we know that *we abide in him and he in us*, because he has given us of his Spirit. (1 John 4:13)

Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood *abides in me, and I in him*. (John 6:56)

The classic passage may be from John 15. In the words of Jesus,

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. (John 15:4–7)

## The Help and the Hitch of Union with Christ

So there's just a taste of the bigness and biblical prevalence of union with Christ. But the specific topic before us is sanctification. So let's make some connections. Sinclair Ferguson claims, "Of all the doctrines surrounding the Christian life this, one of the profoundest, is also one of the most practical in its effects."<sup>9</sup> How is it that the doctrine of union with Christ is so practically helpful in our progressively becoming like Jesus?

Again here's Ferguson:

When we are joined to him there is also a sense in which his life and power become available to us to transform our lives. We may even go as far as to say that when we are united to Christ, the whole of his past life is made available to us, not simply to compensate for our past (by way of pardon) but actually to sanctify our present lives, so that our own past may not inescapably *dominate* our present Christian life. We, who in the past have marred the image of God by sin, may gaze into the face of Christ and discover that the power of our own past sin may not destroy us in the present.<sup>10</sup>

There is a fullness in our union with Jesus that provides a richness of resources for our blessing and worship and growth. There is a multi-dimensionality to this union, as it is fleshed out in its various aspects, that meets us where we are in our process of becoming more like Jesus and helps move us forward.

And there's more. This is Anthony Hoekema:

<sup>9</sup>Ferguson, *The Christian Life*, 114.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, 111.

## 22 Introduction

One of the ways in which the doctrine of union with Christ is helpful is in enabling us to preserve a proper balance between two major aspects of the work of Christ: what we might call the *legal* and the *vital* aspects. The Western branch of the Christian church, represented by such theologians as Tertullian and Anselm, tended to emphasize the “legal” side of Christ’s work. . . . The Eastern wing of the church, however, represented by such theologians as Irenaeus and Athanasius, was more inclined to stress the “vital” or “life-sharing” side of Christ’s work.<sup>11</sup>

Union with Christ helps us to see and be reminded that Jesus isn’t just our righteousness but also our holiness—he is “the Holy and Righteous One” (Acts 3:14). And he is not just our holiness but also our life. And he isn’t just our life but also our righteousness. Union reminds us to embrace the whole Christ for all his benefits rather than just picking a favorite and crafting a slogan. You can’t have him for justification without having him for sanctification.

So this often neglected but practically powerful doctrine of the believer’s union with Jesus is vital for sanctification. Then have we found our silver bullet? Was the warning above about avoiding sanctification sloganeering and reductionisms issued prematurely? Might union with Christ be the holy grail?

Here’s the hitch. Union with Christ ends up being a very non-descript way of talking. Perhaps you’re already sensing this from what I’ve written (or not written) in this introduction. As theologian John Frame observes, union with Christ is “the most general way of characterizing Jesus’s work of salvation. . . . [It is] an exceeding broad topic.”<sup>12</sup> It’s a glorious generality and is meant by God to be gloriously general, but it doesn’t carry inherently the specificity of its various aspects—regeneration, justification, sanctification, adoption, glorification. Indeed, as Frame says, union with Christ and being “in” Christ “are the most general things that can be said about us as [God’s] people.”<sup>13</sup> The way in which we flesh out in more detail what it means to be united to Jesus

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<sup>11</sup> Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, 66.

<sup>12</sup> Frame, *Systematic Theology*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

is to address the blessings of justification, sanctification, regeneration, and glorification. The strengths and weaknesses of union lie in its being the broad category that includes the other benefits. And the strengths and weaknesses of sanctification lie in its specificity as an aspect of that union. We mustn't play the two off each other. So where to from here?

### Room for Reliance

As important and helpful as the doctrine of union with Christ is, this one doctrine is not sanctification's holy grail. We're back to a sanctification of *all*, not *only*. We return to the truth that what is needed for Christian sanctification is not some silver-bullet doctrine or fresh slogan or new overriding emphasis, but the whole of the Bible and the whole of Christian theology and the whole of Jesus. The same Jesus who is our righteousness for justification *is* the same Jesus who is our holiness for sanctification—both definitive and progressive—is the same Jesus we're united to by faith to receive those priceless graces.

By virtue of our Spirit-powered faith union with Jesus, we have the new-creation spiritual life of regeneration, and the righteousness of justification, and the holiness of sanctification, and the familial affection and privilege of adoption, and the honor of glorification. This is big. It gets complicated. There are so many ducks that it's hard to get them all in a row—and that's just the way God would have it. After all, he is the sanctifier, not we. He would rather we always lean on him for holiness than supposing we have it figured out.

### Where's the Spirit in All This?

Before closing this introduction, it's worth asking, *What is the role of the Holy Spirit in all our talk about sanctification?* Sometimes our sense of fairness is irked by how often Jesus and the Father get mentioned while the Holy Spirit seems to remain out of view. This may not be all bad.

It can be helpful to think of the Spirit as the self-effacing member of the Trinity. In John 16:14, Jesus describes the main "job" of the Spirit

this way: “He will glorify me.” There is something intrinsically mystical about the Spirit, as John 3:8 intimates: “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Graham Cole, even in writing a long book about the Spirit, acknowledges this elusiveness:

What God has made known concerning the divine name, will, and ways we know truly but not exhaustively. As for the Spirit, the mystery deepens. For . . . the Spirit points away from himself to another. Thus there is an elusiveness about the Spirit when thematized as the object of inquiry.<sup>14</sup>

As there is a sense of the mystical and elusiveness to our union in Christ, so also with the Spirit who effects and sustains that union. In particular, the Spirit is elusive and self-effacing by relentlessly drawing attention to Jesus’s person and work. So “the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 15:13; see also 15:19; 1 Cor. 2:4; Eph. 1:16) often is known explicitly by other terms, such as “the power of the gospel” (see Rom. 1:16). It’s not as though the gospel as a mere message has an inherent power apart from the power of the personal Spirit. The reason there is power in the gospel is that the Holy Spirit works through that Jesus-glorifying message.

So also “the power of the cross” (see 1 Cor. 1:17, 18, 24). In and of itself, the cross, or any news about a cross, isn’t powerful. But God himself, in the particular person of the Holy Spirit, possesses power and has chosen to do his most direct and potent work in and through and alongside the preaching of a crucified Messiah, who was dead and is now alive. Which brings us at last to the great goal of sanctification.

## The Beginning and End of Sanctification

The beginning and end of Christian sanctification is none other than Christ himself. There is an initial relationship with Jesus that first sets us

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<sup>14</sup> Graham Cole, *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 52.

apart as definitively sanctified and gets the gears going for progressive sanctification, but a deepening relationship with Jesus is the heart of sanctification, and knowing Jesus is the great goal of our sanctification. Jesus is not only the preeminently sanctified one and the one who empowers our sanctification by his Spirit, but also he is the one whom the whole of our sanctification is shaping us to know forever. Knowing Jesus drives us onward in sanctification now (Phil. 3:8), and knowing Jesus is the eternal life that sanctification fits us for (John 17:3).

The greatest blessing of salvation is not mere forgiveness. It's not just justification and being declared righteous. It's not new birth. It's not even sanctification. It's not just the privilege of being united to him, but being united to him serves the greater goal of enjoying him. The greatest blessing of redemption is Jesus himself. All aspects of the Spirit's subjective application to us and all of Jesus's objective accomplishments for us conspire to this one great end: knowing Jesus, enjoying Jesus, admiring Jesus, and treasuring Jesus for all eternity.

This, as our contributors develop in the chapters ahead, is the very essence of holiness. Happiness in Jesus is not just the product of holiness; it is the essence of true Christian holiness.

Slogans will eventually lead us astray. Quick fixes won't last. What we need for Christian sanctification is all of the Christian Scriptures, and all of Christian theology, and ultimately all of Christ. We need all of Jesus—all his words, all the glorious doctrinal truths about him, all his divine life, all his full humanity, all his lived-out righteousness, all his death for us, all his resurrection power, all of his help for us in the Holy Spirit. Without a great Jesus as the center of our now and forever, there is no great salvation.

## What's Ahead

This book had its start in the Desiring God 2012 National Conference on the theme of sanctification. About 2,500 of us gathered in Minneapolis and dedicated the weekend to considering this important theme and its countless implications for everyday life.

The chapters in this book began as plenary addresses at the conference and have been carefully revised and expanded for publication by our authors (most of whom are more writers than speakers).

We gave the conference to the topic of sanctification because we saw a need. One of our hopes in this book is to kindly and carefully correct some of the misstatements about sanctification we've heard and some of the unwise trajectories we see, but our primary aim is to positively construct a vision for what Christian sanctification is and with that to courageously venture some answers to the *how* questions, even though it's sure to raise some ire.

In the first chapter Piper seeks to “put sanctification in its place” by expanding on this introduction in terms of both defining sanctification and developing its relationship to the whole of the process of salvation. Chapter 2 is Kevin DeYoung's important treatment of the multiplicity of motivations in sanctification. DeYoung provides a rich exposition of Colossians 3 that aims to point us toward the full Christian deck of resources available for our growth in holiness while avoiding our tendency to fixate on one.

Ed Welch kindly agreed to put his lifetime of study and experience to our service in chapter 3. We asked how physical limitations and disabilities affect our sanctification, and Welch responded with this especially useful primer on the embodied soul, including several real-life stories to flesh it out. If you're short on time, you may just want to jump straight to Welch's chapter. It is very good.

We knew that discussing this theme and making it practical meant raising many issues and concerns beyond the daily means of grace but also that the spiritual disciplines must be addressed in the course of the discussion. Jarvis Williams tackles the personal means of grace in chapter 4 (focusing on Bible intake, prayer, preaching the gospel to yourself, and suffering), while Russell Moore deals brilliantly with the corporate dynamics in Christian sanctification in chapter 5—a chapter you may find worthy of a re-read and extended reflection.

Finally, in the last chapter, Piper brings it all together. He continues his work from chapter 1 and picks up on the work of the other chapters in pressing the theology into everyday life. Piper gets practical in addressing how God works in and through us to bring about actual holiness in our lives through conscious trust in what he's revealed about himself and his specific promises to us.

Our prayer is that God would be pleased to make use of these chapters in both orienting you and fueling your fire for acting the miracle of Christian sanctification.



# Prelude to Acting the Miracle

*Putting Sanctification in Its Place*

John Piper

This chapter has two parts. In the first part, I try to define sanctification. In the second part, I try to put it in its place in the process of salvation. In this way, I hope to set the stage for the other chapters to come in this book.

## 1) What Is Sanctification?

The English word *sanctify* or *sanctification* is built on the Latin word *sanctus*, which means “holy.” In English, we don’t turn the adjective *holy* into a verb. The word *holify* does not exist. But in the Greek language of the New Testament, the adjective *holy* (*hagios*) can be made into a verb (*hagiazō*), which means “to make holy” or to “treat as holy.” In Greek, that same adjective for *holy* (*hagios*) can be made into three different nouns (*hagiosmos*, *hagiōsunē*, *hagiotēs*), which sometimes mean “the condition of being holy” (“holiness”) or “the process of becoming holy”—which would be “holification” if such a word existed in English, but since it doesn’t, we use “sanctification.”

Here’s the crucial point: *any time you read in the New Testament any form of the word “sanctify,” you know you are reading about*

*holiness*. So a book like this on sanctification is a book on being or becoming holy. And the reason I use the terms “being” or “becoming” holy is that the New Testament refers to our holiness in both of those senses—a condition of being holy and a process of becoming holy.

### *Being Holy*

The clearest place to see both of these in one chapter is Hebrews 10. Hebrews 10:10 says, “By [God’s] will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” So there is a sense in which all those who believe in Jesus “have been sanctified.” They *are* holy. And then four verses later (v. 14) we read, “By a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are *being sanctified*.” So there is a sense in which Christians are both perfected already (are perfectly holy) and are being sanctified (being made holy).

Both the condition of being holy and the process of becoming holy are prominent in the New Testament. Neither is minimized. The most obvious way to see the prominence of the Christian condition or state of holiness is to see that Paul calls Christians “saints” forty times in his thirteen letters. Paul’s favorite name for Christians is *saints*. The New Testament word behind the English “saint” is simply the adjective for “holy” turned into a noun—“holy ones” (*hagioi*). You can see the connection between the condition of being sanctified and the name “saints” in 1 Corinthians 1:2: “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to *those sanctified (hēgiasmenois)* in Christ Jesus, *called to be saints (klētois hagiois)*.” So the picture is that God calls us, and unites us by faith to Jesus, so that “in Christ Jesus,” we are holy, sanctified, and the name that we get, therefore, is “saints” or “holy ones.”

### *Becoming Holy*

But the process of becoming holy (sanctification) is also prominent in the New Testament. We saw Hebrews 10:14, “By a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are *being sanctified*.” We see it in

2 Corinthians 7:1: “Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, *bringing holiness to completion* in the fear of God.” So if we are bringing holiness to completion, there is a process of becoming fully holy. We are not there yet. Or 1 Thessalonians 5:23: “Now may the God of peace himself *sanctify you completely*.” This prayer shows that our becoming holy is not yet complete. So Paul asks God to complete it. Or Hebrews 12:10: “[Our earthly fathers] disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but [God] disciplines us for our good, *that we may share his holiness*.” So a fuller holiness is coming through God’s discipline.

The upshot of all this so far is that whenever the New Testament talks about sanctification, it is talking about holiness. And when it is talking about *our* holiness, it is either talking about the *condition* of our *being* holy (because we are in Christ Jesus—and thus saints), or it is talking about the *process* of our *becoming* holy through God’s work in our lives.

### *Holiness as a Family Trait*

That’s the first part of our answer to the question, *What is sanctification?* But notice what we’ve done. We have pushed the question back to another question, *What is holiness?* Or what does it mean to *be* holy and *become* holy? And it seems to me that the most important thing in defining *our* holiness is to notice its connection to *God’s* holiness. For example, 1 Peter 1:14–16 says, “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but *as he who called you is holy, you also be holy* in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’”

So the basis of God’s command that his people be holy is that he is holy. Peter explains this not as an arbitrary demand but as a family trait. “As obedient *children* . . . be holy in all your conduct.” Peter is thinking the same way the apostle John is in his first letter, when he says, “No one born of God [that is, who has God as his Father] makes

a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God” (1 John 3:9–10). The command to “be holy” is a command to show that we are God’s seed. We have his spiritual DNA, the genetic code of his holiness. That is, we are his children.

This is exactly confirmed by the words of Hebrews 12:10 that we just looked at a moment ago: “[Our earthly fathers] disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but [God our heavenly Father] disciplines us for our good, *that we may share his holiness.*” It’s not a contradiction to say, on the one hand, that we share in God’s holiness because we are born of God (and have his spiritual DNA, as it were, his genetic code of holiness), and to say, on the other hand, that God must discipline us so that we share in his holiness. If a child is to grow into the fullest expression of his Father’s character, he needs both the DNA by virtue of birth and the practice of that character with the help of his father’s discipline. In other words, we need regeneration by God’s seed, and we need sanctification by God’s Spirit—in order to grow up into the full participation in his holiness.

Or here’s the way Paul puts it. We need a “new self”—a new man, a new creation—“created after the likeness of God in true . . . *holiness*”; and we need to “*put on*” that new holy self (Eph. 4:24). In other words, Christians *are* holy and must *become* holy. We have the seed of God’s likeness (God’s holiness) imparted to us when we are born again, and we must grow into that likeness (that holiness) to show who our Father really is. “By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God” (1 John 3:10). “As obedient children, . . . ‘be holy for I am holy’” (1 Pet. 1:14–16) “[Our Father] disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness” (Heb. 12:10). “If you are left without discipline . . . then you are illegitimate children and not sons” (Heb. 12:8).

So, in asking the question, *What is holiness?* and in seeing that the holiness we need is to share in God's holiness, the question now becomes, *What is God's holiness?*

### *The Holiness of God*

The root meaning of the Old Testament word for holy (*chadōsh*), where the biblical idea starts, is the idea of being separate—different and separated from something and devoted to something else. When applied to God, that meant God's holiness is his separateness, his being in a class by himself, and thus being supremely valuable in every way. You can see this meaning of holy in these illustrations:

When Moses struck the rock instead of speaking to it the way God said, God said to him, "Because you did not believe in me, *to uphold me as holy* in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them." (Num. 20:12; see 27:14). In others words, Moses treated God not as separate from man, and thus supremely trustworthy, but as a mere man along with others whose word could be ignored.

Or in Isaiah 8:12–13, God says to Isaiah, "Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But the LORD of hosts, him *you shall honor as holy*. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread." In other words, don't lump God into the same group as all your other fears and dreads. Treat him as an utterly unique fear and dread and set apart from all the ordinary fears and dreads.

### *God's Transcendent Completeness and Self-Sufficiency*

So here is how I conceive of the holiness of God. God is so separate, so above, and distinct from all else—all that is not God—that he is self-existent and self-sustaining and self-sufficient. Thus he is infinitely complete and full and perfect in himself. Since God is separate from, transcendent above, all that is not God, he was not brought into existence by anything outside himself. He is self-existent. He depends on

nothing for his ongoing existence and so is self-sustaining. And therefore he is utterly self-sufficient. Complete, full, perfect.

The Bible makes plain that this self-existing, self-sustaining, self-sufficient God exists as three divine persons in one divine essence. Thus the Father knows and loves the Son perfectly, completely, infinitely; and the Son knows and loves the Father perfectly, completely, infinitely. And the Holy Spirit is the perfect, complete, infinite expression of the Father's and the Son's knowledge and love of each other. This perfect Trinitarian fellowship is essential to the fullness and perfection and completeness of God. There is no lack, no deficiency, no need—only perfect fullness and completeness and self-sufficiency.

### *But Something's Missing*

This is the holiness of God: his transcendent completeness and self-sufficiency.<sup>1</sup> But there is a missing dimension in that description of holiness. Because God is utterly unique and self-existent, there is nothing besides God except what God wills to create. Therefore, God is absolute value. He is absolute worth. His transcendent completeness makes him infinitely valuable. Of infinite worth. It's necessary to introduce this dimension of holiness into the definition because the Bible presents God's holiness in terms of morality as well as terms of transcendence. Holiness is not just otherness. It is good and pure and right.

Introducing God's infinite worth helps us conceive of God's holiness in moral categories. Before creation, there were no standards of goodness and righteousness outside of God that could be used to say, *God is good or right according to these standards*. All there was was God. So, when there is only God, how do you define *good*? How can

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<sup>1</sup>Jonathan Edwards makes the connection between God's self-sufficiency and holiness like this: "God, being infinite in power and knowledge, he must be self-sufficient and all-sufficient; therefore it is impossible that he should be under any temptation to do any thing amiss; for he can have no end in doing it. . . . So God is essentially holy, and nothing is more impossible than that God should do amiss." Jonathan Edwards, "The Sole Consideration, That God Is God, Sufficient to Still All Objections to his Sovereignty," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 107. What I am doing in what follows is asking, *What does "amiss" mean for a Being who has no law above his own nature to which he must conform and which could define "amiss"?*

there be holiness with a moral dimension, and not just a transcendent one?

My answer is this: the moral dimension of God's holiness is that every affection, every thought, and every act of God is consistent with the infinite worth of his transcendent fullness.<sup>2</sup> In other words, I am defining holiness not only as the infinite worth of God's transcendent fullness but also as the harmony that exists between the worth of that transcendent fullness and all God's affections, thoughts, and acts. That harmony is the beauty of holiness.

In sum, then, God is transcendent in his self-existent completeness; and is, therefore, of infinite worth; and there is perfect harmony between the worth of his transcendent completeness and all his affections, thoughts, and acts. This is God's holiness. Or to shorten it even more: his holiness is his transcendent fullness, his worth, and the beautiful harmony of all his acts with that worth.<sup>3</sup>

So when God says in 1 Peter 1:16, "Be holy, for I am holy," or when Hebrews 12:10 says, "He disciplines us . . . that we may *share his holiness*," what aspects of his holiness do they mean? Not that we should be transcendent as God is transcendent. Nor that we should be self-existent as God is self-existent. But, rather, that in all our affections and thoughts and acts, we, like God, should be a beautiful harmony with the infinite worth of God.

### *Human Holiness*

So I would define human holiness as feeling and thinking and doing only what is consistent with God being the supreme and infinite trea-

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<sup>2</sup>Here's Jonathan Edwards's way of saying this: "God's holiness is his having a due, meet and proper regard to everything, and therefore consists mainly and summarily in his infinite regard or love to himself, he being infinitely the greatest and most excellent Being. And therefore a meet and proper regard to himself is infinitely greater than to all other beings; and as he is as it were the sum of all being, and all other positive existence is but a communication from him, hence it will follow that a proper regard to himself is the sum of his regard." Jonathan Edwards, *The "Miscellanies"* (Entry Nos. 833–1152), in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 20 (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002), 460.

<sup>3</sup>Stephen Charnock uses a quaint phrase to say something similar. God's holiness is that he "works with a becomingness to his own excellency." *The Existence and Attributes of God*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 115.

sure of the universe. Our holiness is our conformity to the infinite worth of God. The opposite of holiness is sin, which is any feeling or thought or act that shows that for us God is not the beautiful treasure that he truly is.

This leads me then to define the process of sanctification as *the action by which we bring our feelings and thoughts and acts into conformity to the infinite and all-satisfying worth of God*. And I realize that I just said, “the action by which *we* bring our lives into conformity to the worth of God.” No doubt, I could have said, “the action by which *God* brings our lives into conformity to the worth of God.” Or better, *both*. That too is what this book is about. *Who does it? And how is it done?* We have much work to do.

## 2) What Is the Place of Sanctification in the Process of Salvation?

With that definition of sanctification before us, we now ask, *What is the place of sanctification in relation to the other works of God in our salvation?* To do so, we look at Romans 8:28–30:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

So here we have one great sequence of God’s saving acts. Starting in verse 29, God foreknows, God predestines, God calls, God justifies, and God glorifies. The question is: *Where is sanctification in that sequence, and how does it relate to the other works of God?*

### *Where’s Sanctification?*

The answer is: it is in the beginning as the goal of predestination, and it is at the end as an essential part of glorification. And in between

there are two works of God that make it possible for spiritually dead, wrath-deserving sinners to be sanctified—calling and justification. So let's look very briefly at the beginning and the end and these two works in the middle.

Verse 29: “Those whom [God] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” God predestines a group of people to be conformed to the image of his Son. In other words, he predestines our sanctification, our holiness. Here's the way Paul says it in Ephesians 1:4–5: “He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy. . . . He predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ.”

#### *Our Destiny: Holiness*

The reason God has chosen a people for himself is to give them a particular destiny, and that destiny is their holiness, their sanctification, their conformity to Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The aim of this conformity to Christ (according to Romans 8:29) is “that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” This means two things. It means that our being changed into the likeness of Jesus is because we are brought into the family and given a family likeness with God as our Father and Jesus as our brother. The other thing it means is that Jesus is not just another brother but the unique “firstborn” who is exalted and worshiped by his brothers.

From the very beginning, God predestined that his people would be sanctified, that is, that they would be transformed into the likeness of his Son. Or, we can say, we were predestined to share the Son's holiness, and in that holiness be able to see him and celebrate him as we ought.

#### *Glorification Includes Sanctification*

But not only do we see sanctification at the beginning in this sequence in Romans 8:29 but also at the end in verse 30: “Those whom he justi-

fied he also glorified.” You might ask, “Why didn’t Paul say, ‘Those whom he justified he also sanctified, and those whom he sanctified he also glorified?’” One of the reasons Paul didn’t say that is that “glorification” includes sanctification. Paul thinks of glorification beginning in this life as we are incrementally changed into the likeness of the all-glorious Christ.

Here’s 2 Corinthians 3:18: “We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” We are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory. This is the very transformation into the image of the Son that Romans 8:29 was talking about. Sanctification is the beginning of glorification. We move from one degree of conformity to Christ to the next, that is, one degree of glory to the next.

### *Beholding Is Becoming*

Just as seeing him through a glass darkly in this life means we are sanctified incrementally, the day will come, according to 1 John 3:2, when we will see him as he is. “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.” *Beholding is becoming*. Partially now. Completely later. We usually call it *sanctification* now. And we will call it *glorification* then. But they are all one process.

Now between predestination and glorification, Paul mentions calling and justification. Romans 8:30: “Those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” Without these two works of God, sinners who are spiritually dead and who deserve the wrath of God could never be sanctified. Without God’s call, we would be dead and unresponsive to all his sanctifying influences. And without God’s justification, we would be found guilty as charged, and there would be no sanctifying

influences but only wrath. So without divine calling and divine justification, there would be no sanctification.

### *The Work of God's Call*

The call of God can be either his general invitation to the whole world to come to Christ or his particular, effective call that creates what it commands. When Paul says in verse 30, “Those whom he called he also justified,” we know it does not mean God’s general invitation. It’s not true that all whom he invited he justified. He justifies only those who believe. The calling of God brings about the faith that we need to be justified. This is not a general call but a specific effectual call, like the call Jesus gave to the dead Lazarus: “Come forth.” The call produced what it commanded.

Here’s a description of God’s effectual call from 1 Corinthians 1:22–24: “Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to *those who are called*, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” The general call goes out to all Jews and Gentiles. “Come to Christ the crucified!” But not all come. To many the cross is folly; to others it is a stumbling block. But to those who are called, that is, those in whom God makes his call effective, their eyes are opened, and they see the cross not as foolish but as the wisdom of God and the power of God. This call is virtually the same as the new birth, regeneration. And without it, no one would be justified, because no one would believe. And no one would be sanctified because no one would have life.

### *The Work of Justification*

But when God calls like this, faith in Jesus is awakened and by that faith we are justified—such that Paul can say, “Those whom he called, he justified,” because the call creates the faith that justifies.

So the call of God removes one barrier to our sanctification,

namely, our spiritual deadness. Justification removes the other great barrier to sanctification—and that barrier is our guilt in the courtroom of God and the just wrath of God resting on us (John 3:36). If God’s wrath is resting on us because of our guilt, then we are not going to be sanctified.

God’s remedy for this barrier is the great work of justification. He puts Christ forward by his perfect obedience, climaxing in his death, vindicated by his resurrection, and then offers this Christ to be received by faith. He promises that whoever believes will have pardon for all his sins and the imputation of Christ’s perfect righteousness. Because of that pardon and that imputation we are declared not guilty but righteous. We are justified.

“As by the one man’s [Adam’s] disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s (Christ’s) obedience the many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:19). “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21; see also Phil. 3:9). All this is by faith alone, apart from works of the law. “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20). “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:28).

### *The Place of Sanctification*

Putting it all together, from all eternity God has been holy—transcendently self-sufficient, of infinite worth, acting in beautiful harmony with the greatness of his worth. In that holiness, he foreknew a people for himself and predestined them to share his holiness—to be conformed to the image of his Son for the glory of his Son—and those whom he thus predestined for holiness, he called out of spiritual deadness into life and awakened saving faith, and those whom he thus called he justified so that all his wrath would be removed from us and there would be only mercy. All those whom he thus justified he is bringing

from one degree of glory to another by his Spirit who dwells in us. His success in this work of sanctification is so certain that it is as good as done. Those whom he justified, he glorified.

The place of sanctification is embedded in the sequence of divine acts from eternity to eternity that infallibly come to pass. All whom he foreknew, he infallibly predestined. All he predestined, he infallibly called. All whom he called, he infallibly justified. All he justified, he will infallibly pursue with sanctifying grace till everyone is glorified.



# Incentives for Acting the Miracle

*Fear, Rewards, and the Multiplicity  
of Biblical Motivations*

Kevin DeYoung

My aim in this chapter is to correct a problem, and the problem is this: believing, preaching, praying, counseling, and self-diagnosing as if there was only one proper motivation for holiness. My concern is that as we try to help people on the journey of sanctification, we not unnecessarily limit ourselves. I fear we too quickly remove some of the tools from our sanctification tool belt. We set aside some of the weapons of our warfare. We flatten the promises and commands and warnings of Scripture, so we no longer allow ourselves to say all that the Bible would have us say.

Jesus is our great physician. Like any good doctor, he knows how to write different prescriptions for different illnesses. He has many doses at his disposal. He understands unique personalities and sins and situations. He is gracious to come at us in his Word—with all sorts of truth, for all sorts of people, from all sorts of angles—to keep us striving after holiness. Jesus has many medicines for our motivation.

## Different Injuries, Different Applications

When I'm away from home, my wife usually calls at night to fill me in on the day. One night not long ago, my wife called me to talk about bees. She said there were all sorts of bees outside chasing the children. She tried to get them out, but one bee had disappeared into our three-year-old son's shirt. Suddenly he started screaming, "The bee! The bee! It's in my shirt!" So, like a good mom, she ripped off his little shirt, threw it down, and started stomping it with all her might. "Stupid bee!" my wife cried defiantly. "Stupid bee!" But the damage was done. Our youngest son, the one with lots of allergies, had been stung in the back. "I gave him as much Benadryl as the law allows," she related on the phone. That's what you do when your three-year-old gets a bee sting. You pump him full of allergy medicine.

That's not what you would do on all occasions (though parents will tell you there are worse ideas than loading your kids up with Benadryl). When your child is stung by a bee, you give him some drugs, hold him on your knee as long as he likes, and whisper in his ear, "It'll be okay, love. It'll be okay." But when the same son storms in the house, apoplectic from a tiny scrape on his knee, you tell him to buck up and go back outside. Good parents, like good doctors, understand that different injuries call for different application.

I think back to the days when I ran track and cross country in high school. Whenever I had an injury, the student trainers would tell me the same thing. Whether I had a hip flexor or shin splints or a sprained ankle or a lacerated spleen, they always told me to "ice it and take a couple ibuprofen." That was that. I wanted an X-ray or a CT scan or a replacement foot or something. But they didn't wander far from home. If you could be fixed with ice and ibuprofen, they had the prescription for you. If not, you were out of luck.

Good doctors know how to give different prescriptions to different patients. That's my point. My fear, however, is that when it comes to the care of souls, we get locked into a solitary prescription and stick with

it no matter what. We tend to find one true, good, helpful biblical motivation for holiness and make that the equivalent of ice and ibuprofen.

Let me give you a few examples.

## Duty Is Not Enough

Duty is one of the motivations that's true but often unhelpful all by itself. It's a biblical word, so we should not be afraid to use it. Jesus tells us in Luke 17:10, "So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'" And Ecclesiastes 12:13 concludes: "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man." We have an obligation to keep God's commandments because he is God and we are not. That's duty, *and* it's not a bad word. But it's usually not all God says. Normally, when God comes at us with commands, he says more than, "Listen up. I am the Lord your God. So start obeying." He comes with a multiplicity of motivations.

Think of the Ten Commandments. God doesn't simply give us a list of commands. He motivates with promises, threats, and theology.

- He starts by saying "I'm the Lord your God. *Your* God. I brought you out of Egypt. Do not worship anything or anyone else. I'm the God who saved you."
- He says, "Don't bow down to graven images." Why? "Because I'm a jealous God. I will visit your sins to the third and fourth generation if you disobey, but show steadfast love to thousands of generations if you love me and keep my commandments."
- He says, "Do not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for he will not hold you guiltless." In other words, you'll have trouble on your hands if you ignore this one.
- He says about the fourth commandment in Exodus, "Observe the Sabbath day because God rested on the seventh day." And in Deuteronomy: "Take a break. Give your people a break because you were slaves once too. So don't be treating your servants like they're slaves." Both iterations contain motivations for obedience.

- He says, “Honor your father and mother, that it may go well with you.” Here too we see God promising blessing for those who obey.

Even with the Ten Commandments, God does not resort to duty alone. He offers many reasons and incentives for obeying his commands.

### Gratitude Is Not Enough?

Gratitude is another one of the biblical motivations that should not be made the be-all and end-all of our sanctification. I belong to the Reformed tradition and embrace the Heidelberg Catechism, which is known for its three sections of guilt, grace, and gratitude. I believe that in Romans 12:1 where Paul says, “I appeal to you . . . by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice,” he’s harkening back to all of the promises in Romans 1–11 and inviting us to live a gratitude-informed life of faith. We see in Ephesians 5:4 that there should be “no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.” Gratitude helps to squeeze out what is mean and bitter and nasty. So whatever problems you may have as an angry person, one of your problems is a gratitude problem. It’s entirely appropriate to connect gratitude with the struggle for sanctification.

But gratitude by itself is not enough. It can quickly turn into a debtor’s ethic where we think, “All that I have has been given to me by God, so now I must live the rest of my life trying to pay him back.” If we talk only about gratitude, we end up looking backward at God’s blessings and never forward in faith toward his promises. Duty is fine. Gratitude is good. But they aren’t enough all by themselves.

### Justification Is Not Enough

Let me give you one final example, and this one may hit even closer to home. As important as justification is for the Christian, it’s not meant to be the only prescription in our pursuit of holiness. Without a doubt, it is gloriously true that we are accepted before God because of the work of Christ alone, the benefits of which we receive through faith

alone, by grace alone. That ought to be our sweet song and confession at all times. Justification is enough to make us right with God forever, and it is certainly a major motivation for holiness. If we are accepted by God, we don't have to live for the approval of others. If there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus, then we don't have to fear the disappointment of others.

There's no doubt that justification is fuel for our sanctification. But it is not the only kind of fuel we can put in the tank. If we only remind people of our acceptance before God, we will flatten the contours of Scripture and wind up being poor physicians of souls.

Think of James 4:1: "What causes quarrels and . . . fights among you?" James does not say, "You're fighting because you have not come to grips with your acceptance in the gospel." He says, in effect, "You're at each other's throats because you're covetous and you're selfish. You want things that you don't have. You're demanding. You're in love with the world. You're envious. That's what's going on in your heart right now." Now, we might try to connect all that with a failure to believe the gospel, but that's not what James says. He blames their quarrels on their love of the world.

You have only to be a parent for a short time to see that people sin for all sorts of reasons. Lately we've been using the excellent book *Long Story Short* for our morning devotions with the kids. When we came to the story of Cain and Abel, the book suggested a little lesson where you hand a ten-dollar bill to one child but not to the others. Then you ask the kids, "What would your response be if I gave your sister ten dollars because she did something very pleasing to me, and I gave you nothing?" The aim of the lesson is to relate to Cain's envy toward Abel. So I just asked the question, and my son, in whom there is no guile, replied without hesitation, "Daddy, I'd punch you in the stomach." Now what's going on in his heart at that moment? Is his most pressing need to understand justification, or is there a simpler explanation? I think that my son at that moment, like the people James was addressing, was

ready to fight because of covetousness. He saw ten dollars, thought of the Legos he could buy with it, and was willing to do whatever he had to, to get what he wanted.

The problem with much of our thinking on sanctification is that we assume people are motivated in only one way. It's similar to the mistake some of those associated with Christian psychology fall into. They assume a universal-needs theory. They operate from the principle that everyone has a leaky love tank that needs to be patched up and filled up. If people could only be loved in the right way, they'd turn around and be loving people. Well, I don't doubt there is some commonsense insight there. But does the theory explain everyone? Is this the problem with Al-Qaida or Hamas—they all have leaky love tanks? Or are some other issues at play?

I have no problem acknowledging that sin is always an expression of unbelief. But there are a lot of God's promises I can disbelieve at any moment. Justification by grace alone through faith alone is not the only indicative I can doubt. I can disbelieve God's promise to judge the wicked or his promise to come again or his promise to give me an inheritance or his promise to turn everything to my good. These are all precious promises, each one a possible remedy for indwelling sin. To remind each other of justification is never a wrong answer. It is a precious remedy, but it is not the only one.

## Colossians from the Sky

I've tried to make the negative case that there is no single, solitary biblical motivation for holiness. Now let's see the positive case for the multiplicity of motivations.

In Colossians 3 we see a staggering array of motivations for holiness. The first part of the chapter, verses 1–17, gives a macro-level view of how God motivates us. It deals with general commands, foundational principles. And in the last part of the chapter—the household code in verse 18 and following—we get the micro-level view that zeroes

in on the family and day-to-day life. We'll start with the big picture before moving into the nitty-gritty where God gives specific motivations for specific commands.

## Full of Imperatives

The first thing to notice is that this passage is full of imperatives. Paul wants the Colossians to live a certain way. He doesn't assume that by telling them the good news of the gospel, life transformation will automatically happen. He tells them what a Christian life should look like. Just look at the commands in chapter 3:

- Verse 2: "Set your minds on things that are above."
- Verse 5: "Put to death . . . what is earthly." That means immorality, impurity, evil desire, idolatry, and covetousness.
- Verse 8: "Put them all away," which includes anger and wrath and malice and slander and obscene talk.
- Verse 9: "Do not lie."
- Verse 12: "Put on . . . compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience."
- Verse 15: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts."
- Verse 16: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you."
- Verse 17: "Do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

The whole passage is a long series of statements with imperatival force. God wants us to live a certain way. He wants us to grow progressively into the holiness we already have positionally in Christ. God wants us to move from *here*—less sanctified, less obedient—to *there*—more like Christ, more like God. And notice what he does to spur on that movement. He doesn't just give a long list of commands. He provides motivation. He offers incentives. In other words, God gives theology. If you don't care about theology, you don't care about holiness. Because what God does in chapter 3 is to give the Colossians lots of theology to stir them up to this new kind of life.

## Do You Know Where You Are?

Paul says in verses 1 and 2, “If . . . you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” Do you see the motivation? Set your mind on heavenly things. Why? Because you have been raised from the grave with Christ, and you have been raised in his ascension so that you now are seated in the heavenly places with Christ. Here’s the logic: if, in Christ, you now reside in heaven, why are you making choices as if you lived in hell? Our present placement with Christ is a motivation for our ongoing progress in Christlikeness.

God wants to ask you a question: Do you know where you are right now? Yes, you are in your house or in front of your tablet or on a plane or wherever. But do you know *where* you are? You’re seated with Christ. You’re joined with him. You’ve been raised with him. You are where Christ is. Shouldn’t this make a difference in how you live?

I remember as a child never being able to enter the dining room of our house. One whole wing of the house was quarantined for holidays and special guests. The room had white carpet with vacuum tracks always showing. There were fancy chairs and fine china. It was a sacred room. It’s where we ate with missionaries or pastors, or where we had Thanksgiving dinner. There was something about being in that room. We knew as kids we were in a special place. When I sat in those tall chairs with the stiff high backs and stared at my salad and multiple forks, I knew I needed to be on my best behavior. Just because of where I was.

This is Paul’s point and the engine of our motivation. If we have been raised with Christ and are seated with Christ in a place of infinite holiness, what sort of people ought we to be? Why wouldn’t we live like where we live?

## The You That Was and the You That Is Yet to Come

Then we see in verse 3 that we’ve not only been raised, but we first died. “You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” To turn

from your past of sin and your unrighteousness, you have to do more than just turn the page. People might tell you to turn over a new leaf, but that's not nearly drastic enough.

You have to consider your "old self" dead and buried. You have to picture Christ on the cross and see him hanging there, not only for the penalty for your sin but also for the power of sin. You have to see that on the cross with Christ is the you that was into drugs, and the you that manipulated people, and the you that was angry all the time, and the you that was filled with bitterness, and the you that lived from sensuality to sensuality. That you is dead. That's what Paul is getting at when he says, "You have died."

If we keep going on to verse 4, we see the motivation working in the opposite direction. "When Christ who is your life appears, then you will also appear with him in glory." Instead of considering what we once were in sin, now Paul directs our attention to what we will become when Christ appears and we appear with him in glory. God is reminding us, "Look, there's a better you that you'd better get used to. I'm going to make you like Christ, and that work starts right now."

Sanctification and glorification are cut from the same cloth. The latter is the heavenly completion of the former. The process of making us perfectly glorified, fit for heaven for all eternity, is underway now. God motivates us by having us think of what we will be when Christ, our life, appears. Think of who you will be without sin, without anger, without lust, without bitterness. Think of that you and live it out now.

When we want to meet a specific goal, we often visualize the completion of that goal. If you want to lose weight, for example, you get a picture of the skinny you in your mind. You hold up the picture of the muscular you you've always imagined. Whether it's a real picture or one you've made up, it's there and it's motivating. God, in a manner of speaking, wants us to visualize those spiritual jeans we are going to fit into on the last day and start squeezing into them now. "We are God's children now," the Bible says elsewhere, "and what we will be has not

yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). In other words, consider what you will be and start being that person.

### The Grace of Fear

We see a different kind of motivation in Colossians 3:6. Paul tells the Colossians to put away earthly desires and then says, “On account of these the wrath of God is coming.” Paul is motivating them by the grace of fear.

Some people have a very hard time understanding that threats and warnings are in the Bible for our sanctification. Of course, it’s wonderfully true that God will keep his elect and preserve them to the end. But how do you think he accomplishes this work of preservation? One way is by warning them of what will happen if they do not persevere. In God’s people, warnings like the one in verse 6 stir us up to love and good deeds. The Christian doesn’t despair at these threats of judgment. He pleads, “O Lord, keep me in the love of God as you have promised.” We ought to see the warnings in Hebrews and in passages like this as God’s means of preserving the saints.

Sometimes in an effort to be gospel centered, we shy away from the warnings in Scripture. I understand the impulse. We know that many tender souls need to hear how much God loves them. We need to hear about our new identity in Christ. We need to know God is for us and not against us. But there are also hard hearts in the church—maybe some reading this book—who need to know that the way they are living right now and the stuff they are into right now is why the wrath of God is coming. Some people need to be shaken from their lethargy and realize that the wrath of God will be poured out on the earth for the things they consider light and trivial offenses. Some people need the literal hell scared out of them.

But you say, “Shouldn’t we be emphasizing God’s grace? Isn’t it all of grace? Shouldn’t our preaching and counseling be all about grace?”

And, of course, it should be. But what makes us think that the warning of God's wrath is not his grace to us? We are not giving to our friends, or to ourselves, or to our people, all the grace that God has for us if we do not make known that the wrath of God is coming. God is nothing but grace to his children, but this grace can come to us in brighter and darker hues.

### Speaking the Truth into Us

Paul goes on in verses 9 and 10 to describe who we are as new creations in Christ. Then in verse 11 he explains that Christ is all and in all. That's why, according to verse 12 and following, we ought to bear with one another, love one another, and maintain unity with one another. God wants us to know who we are and then live like it.

I love what these Colossian Christians are called: chosen ones, holy and beloved. Don't pass over this deliberate language. God speaks to us in this way for a reason. When I was in junior high, I played one year of football, which was one too many for me. I had kind of a gruff coach who smoked a lot and encouraged very little. The only thing I was good at was the warm-up laps. I would be way out in front of the big guys. But it didn't help all that much when we had to actually run into people during a game. Coach would sometimes say "helpful" things to me like, "Wow, DeYoung, where'd you get all them bruises?" Not quite inspirational. In high school, my cross country coach was known to say things like, "Hey, DeYoung, don't let the girls beat you." Also very encouraging.

But the best coaches know how to motivate their players, even when they need correction. He might pull you aside and say, "Look. I picked you for this team. You are as good as anyone out there. We need you in the game. Now listen, you gotta get your head in the game." That's what I picture God, through the apostle Paul, doing here in verse 12. He's gently pulling us aside to point us in the right direction.

Good parents do the same thing. The way in which a father talks

to his son, and the language he uses to address him, can make all the difference. You can bark out commands to your son, or you can say, “Listen, you are my son, and I love you with all my heart. You are my special boy. You are smart and bright, and I am so proud of you. You will always be my child, and I will always be your daddy. But we got to talk about some of the things you’re doing.” The language of naming and identification are sincere, but they are also instrumental in motivating the child to obey. In the same way, God reminds the Colossians that he chose them, set his affection upon them, and considers them holy in Christ.

We see the same approach in the next verses. We’ve been forgiven, so we ought to forgive (v. 13). We are beloved, so we ought to love (v. 14). We are one body, so we ought to be at peace with one another (v. 15). You don’t slap your own face. You don’t kick your own shins. You don’t slander the other members of the body of Christ. God speaks the truth into us that we might live according to our true God-given identity.

### An Angular Gospel

Do you see the multiplicity of motivations coming from a dozen different angles? God doesn’t just say, “Here’s a list and do it.” He says, “Let me give you the reasons to obey.”

Now perhaps you hear that and think, *Okay, that’s cool. I see a lot of motivations there. But, man, that’s so much theology. I could never do that. I’m not Paul. I’m not a scholar. I don’t think like that. When I get to talk to my children, or I got to preach a sermon, or I go to talk to my small group, I don’t think of any of this. I can tell them what God commands, but I’ll never come up with all these motivations.*

Well, step back and think for a moment about what Paul is doing here in Colossians 3. There are basically three prescriptions: Paul tells them what was, he tells them what is, and he tells them what will be. You died. You were raised. You’re not your old self any more.

I heard an illustration one time of a pastor talking to a young man struggling with same-gender attraction. The young man called his pastor and said, “I’m feeling these things again. I’m going to go out tonight. I’m going to go to those places. I’m going to do the things I used to do.” The pastor’s response was extremely wise. “No, you’re not going to do those things,” he told him. “That’s not you. That’s not who you are anymore.” He reminded the young man of what was.

Then we remind people of what is. You’re in heaven. You’re a new creation. You’re in Christ. You’re one body.

And finally, we need to remind each other of what will be. The wrath of God is coming. Christ is coming. A glorious appearing is coming. An inheritance is coming. You have to think of what was, what is, what will be. God uses all of it to motivate his people unto holiness.

## Colossians on the Ground

We’ve looked at the macro level; now let’s get in closer to the ground. How does God motivate us to the specific activity of holiness? In 3:18–4:1 Paul addresses six kinds of people: wives, husbands, children, fathers, slaves, and masters. We can boil down the instruction into one foundational command for each group.

- Wives, submit to your husbands.
- Husbands, love your wives.
- Children, obey your parents.
- Fathers, do not provoke your children.
- Slaves, be diligent.
- Masters, be fair.

Again, notice what we *don’t* see. God doesn’t give the list of commands in the way I just gave it to you. He doesn’t tick off the commands like some kind of bookmark or bulletin insert. He gives reasons and provides motivation for these commands. Let’s look at each of the six in turn.

*Wives, Submit to Your Husbands*

There are dozens of reasons wives ought to obey this command, but Paul mentions only one of those reasons here. Wives should submit to their husbands because it “is fitting in the Lord” (v. 18). There’s an order in God’s design, a way rulers and citizens should relate to each other, a way for parents and children to relate, a way for elders and church members, and a way for wives and husbands. It is a beautiful design. Wives shouldn’t grit their teeth, swallow hard, and submit with a bitter heart because, well, “I guess it’s in the Bible.” God wants us to see that his design for men and women is good. It’s fitting. Things work the way they should when wives are graciously, humbly, intelligently submissive to their husbands. Notice, the husband does not force submission; the wife freely gives it. God is not telling the husbands to be dictators. He’s telling the wives to embrace the way God made men and women. He wants wives to do what fits.

We bought a couch from IKEA last summer. IKEA is great because the furniture is so cheap, but one of the reasons it’s cheap is that it comes in big cardboard boxes. C. J. Mahaney was actually preaching at our church that weekend and was in town, so he went to IKEA with me to get the couch. Yes, it was quite a sight—the two of us walking through a maze of Swedish furniture and filling up my Suburban with cardboard boxes. Luckily for C. J., he left before I had to put the stuff together. What a pain. I opened up the four couch boxes and realized the instruction manual contained not a single word. Zero. Not in any language. All they gave me was an Allen wrench and a lot of pictures. I can’t tell you how long it took me to put the couch together, but it was roughly equivalent to that of my seminary degree. I had legs pointing every which way and pieces upside down. Eventually, though, it all fit together. Just like the manual told me. Just as it was designed. Now it’s a great piece of furniture.

God gives us these commands for husbands and wives so we can have a marital couch to sit on. God wants wives to submit to their

husbands because this is what's right. This is his design. This is what's proper and good and fitting.

### *Husbands, Love Your Wives*

Unlike the other five groups, no motivating factor is explicitly mentioned for the husbands. But there is an implicit appeal when Paul says, "Do not be harsh with them" (v. 19). God wants husbands to do what is good for their wives. He wants husbands to love their wives as Jesus commanded, by treating them as they would want to be treated themselves. He wants husbands to consider their wife's feelings, which was a countercultural thing to do in the first century. Some people look at these household codes and write them off as nothing but Greco-Roman patriarchy. But God's standard is actually different in important ways. A wife existed for the pleasure and the service of her husband. Considering the feelings of your wife was not the cultural norm. God says it should be. The husband must love the wife and love her in a caring, sensitive, considerate way. That's God's blueprint.

God understands the particular temptations of men and woman. In her fallenness, the wife is tempted to usurp her husband's authority, just like Eve did. So she is told to submit. The husband, in his fallenness, is tempted to abdicate his God-given headship, like Adam did, by becoming either a doormat or a dictator. So husbands are told to love their wives and not be harsh with them.

### *Children, Obey Your Parents*

In verse 20, Paul provides a very important motivation for children to obey their parents: it pleases the Lord. Sometimes Christians can give the impression that pleasing God is a sub-biblical motivation. "We're totally justified," someone might say. "We're totally accepted. If we tell our kids to please God, we are just giving them more law. We are training them to be little moralists. We're discipling them to think of God

as a kind of Santa Claus keeping a naughty-and-nice list.” Obviously (or maybe not so obviously), that’s not how God wants us to parent, because that’s not what God is like with his children. But don’t let the potential abuse of this “pleasing God” language lead you to suppress what Scripture clearly says. One of the principal motivations for holiness is the pleasure of God.

- Colossians 1:10: Those who bear fruit and every good work and increase in the knowledge of God are pleasing to God.
- Romans 12:1: Presenting your body as a living sacrifice pleases God.
- Romans 14:18: Looking out for your weaker brother pleases God.
- 1 Thessalonians 2:4: Teaching the Word in truth pleases God.
- 1 Timothy 2:3: Praying for your governing authorities pleases God.
- 1 Timothy 5:4: Supporting family members in need pleases God.
- Hebrews 13:16: Sharing with others pleases God.
- 1 John 3:22: Keeping the commandments pleases God.

Over and over, more than a dozen times in the New Testament, we have this motivation. We ought to be generous. We ought to be godly. We ought to love and live a certain way *because it pleases God*.

Some of us have taken justification to mean we no longer have a dynamic relationship with our heavenly Father, as if God is indifferent to our sin and our obedience. But Scripture says we can grieve the Holy Spirit, and in Hebrews 12 we see that a father disciplines those he loves. God is not pleased when we sin. Or, as John Calvin puts it, God can be “wondrously angry with his children.” This doesn’t mean God is ever against us as his justified people. He is always for us. But just as a parent can be upset with a child, so God can consider our actions grievous and discipline us accordingly.

If that kind of dynamism discourages you, consider the flip side. We can also *please* God with our efforts. Through the finished work of Christ, our good deeds are rendered delightful to God. When we hear the language of “pleasing God,” some of us panic because we only relate to God as a judge. But he is also our Father. If you think, “I have

to please God with my obedience because he is my judge,” you will undermine the good news of justification by faith alone. But you ought to reason this way: “I’ve been acquitted. The Lord is my righteousness. I am justified fully and adopted into the family of God for all eternity. I am so eager to please my Father and live for him.”

It’s good to want to protect justification, but don’t do it at the expense of a dynamic relationship with your heavenly Father. There is a difference between saying to your child, “God is watching over you, and when you don’t share your toys, you make baby Jesus cry,” and saying, “God is our Father, and when you listen to what Mommy and Daddy say and you try to do what they want you to do, it makes God really happy. He gets a smile on his face when he sees you trying to do the right thing.” That’s what Paul is saying here to the children at Colossae. It’s how God means to motivate all of us.

### *Fathers, Do Not Provoke Your Children*

In Colossians 3:21 Paul issues a single command for fathers, along with one reason. Do not exasperate or needlessly upset your children lest they become discouraged. Isn’t it interesting that the two commands related to the men in particular have the same sort of motivation: *think of how your actions and attitude affect others*. It’s as if God said, “Would you think about your wives and what it’s like when you’re such a harsh, boorish person? Would you think about your children when you provoke them to anger and see their countenance fall?” Paul is appealing to the welfare of those under their charge. I think he’s also appealing to the natural love they have as husbands and fathers. They should *want* to make their wives and children happy.

I say with shame as a father that I have fallen on the wrong side of this command many times. I have been quick to anger. I have lost my temper and my patience. I’ve tried to break the will of my child and ended up crushing his spirit. God would not have us parent that way. He wants dads to think before they bark.

*Servants, Be Diligent*

Scripture is not promoting with these instructions the institution of chattel or race-based slavery, which we're familiar with today. The apostle Paul was simply regulating a very different kind of slavery prevalent throughout the world at the time. His instructions do not defend or advocate for the kind of institution that the word *slavery* brings to our minds. In fact, the updated version of the ESV translates *doulos* as "bondservant" instead of "slave" because the context suggests that these men and women were not treated as absolute and lifelong possessions of another. Whatever the exact situation, Paul is merely trying to address a cultural institution that showed no signs of going away.

Remarkably, the motivation is the same for both the servant and the master. In both instances, Paul says, in effect, "Remember, you have another master." He wants all those working for some mean, nasty boss to remember that ultimately they are serving God, a God who can punish and reward, a God who sees our quality. Therefore, we ought to work hard "with sincerity of heart" (v. 22). We ought to work "as for the Lord and not for men" (v. 23).

In other words, God expects us to *transpose our work into a heavenly key*. We are working for our heavenly Master, not simply our particular master. And the Master in heaven knows our hearts. He sees our efforts. He knows our trouble. It's not the master or employer down here that we need to impress, no matter what he can do to us. It's the Master up there who matters. We will stand before him on the last day and give account for our labors.

*Masters, Be Fair*

Paul reasons that same way for those in charge of others. He says in 4:1 that the master must treat his bondservants fairly and justly because he has his own Master in heaven. This is a good word for anyone with some degree of influence, some importance, some directional authority over others. God reminds us, "You may think you are a big shot down

here, but remember there is a much bigger shot up there. And you're answerable to him. So treat your assistants and your employees and your junior colleagues and your interns justly and fairly." God is fair to us, so we should be fair to others. He will not show favoritism because we are important in the world's eyes. He oversees us as we oversee others. So let us exercise our authority on earth in such a way that we would be happy to be under the same kind of authority from heaven.

That's how God motivates us in the nitty-gritty of life. Can you see how all of the specific nuanced commands of God come together from above and below and behind and in front to push and to pull and to prod us to holiness? God knows what we need to hear and how we need to hear it. He speaks to us in many ways that we may make progress in the one way of Jesus.

### Three Final Thoughts

What's the take-home from all this? How should this macro and micro look at Colossians 3 influence our daily walk with Christ? How should we think about the multiplicity of biblical motivations for holiness? Here are three final thoughts.

#### *1) Don't try to be smarter than Scripture.*

You may be thinking at this point: "Yes, I see many different motivations. I see what you're saying, and I affirm Scripture speaks in multiple ways. But if we look at the reason behind the reason, and the reasons behind that, we'll see there's really only one motivation: we don't believe the gospel. We don't know how much God loves us and how accepted we are." You may be raising that objection in your mind. And yet, as I said at the beginning, I'm suspicious of reducing all our problems to one mega problem.

I'm suspicious not because the answers don't work, but because many answers can work. I have no problem saying that at the root of every sin is some misfiring of the gospel. I think that's true. But I also

think it's true that at the root of every sin is some failure to recognize the lordship of Christ, or to believe the promises of God, or to accept the goodness of God's commands, or to trust the Word of God, or to recognize our union with Christ, or to celebrate the character of God, or to find satisfaction in Jesus, or to live by the Spirit. God gives us a variety of concrete motivations, and even if in a systematic-theology sort of way we could, by logical progression, show that behind every motivation is another motivation, that still wouldn't erase the particularity of the language in Scripture itself.

Augustine was converted by reading Romans 13:12–14, where Paul says, “The day is at hand, so then let us cast off the works of darkness” (v. 12). This passage affected Augustine because it revealed to him his sin and that he could have relief from his wretched way of life. Yes, there is implicit good news in the text, but it hit Augustine with the *force* of warning and conviction of sin.

God counsels us in a hundred ways, and he exchanges a thousand truths for our lies. Let's not be hesitant to employ the full arsenal of scriptural threats and promises and examples and commands. Let's not be smarter than Scripture and say, “Well, I *see* a warning in the passage, but that doesn't seem to be gospel centered.” Take Scripture; safeguard it with our theology; test it against one another. But let's understand that there is more than one way to skin a cat and more than one way to sanctify one too.

2) *You need to know your people and yourself.*

Wise counselors know when a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down and when something else is needed, like a strong tonic or a bitter pill. It takes maturity and discernment to know whether this brother or sister needs the warm hug of truth or the swift kick of truth, because truth does both. Sometimes we need the swift kick that says, “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters . . . nor

thieves . . . nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9–10). And sometimes we need the warm hug that reassures us, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

The Bible is always giving us reasons, always telling us why we should pursue holiness. We have to realize that by virtue of our upbringing and our church tradition and our personality and all we’re reacting against, we will gravitate toward certain kinds of motivations. When some Christians try to help people, they have only one model in mind—Jesus in the temple. So you talk to people with a curled lip and a pointed-out boney finger and feel justified in blasting them all the time. Somebody may try to say, “Hey, brother, you’ve got to restore people gently” (see Gal. 6:1). But all you know is that Jesus had a whip and flipped tables. And then there are other people who only think of Jesus with the little children. They figure the only way to speak to people is with a gentle, tender whisper and a warm embrace. But the language of Scripture allows us (expects us!) to approach people in different ways.

Just think of the different images for the people of God. Sometimes the Bible refers to us as weak little lambs that need to be gently carried across the river. Sometimes we are a bruised reed or a smoldering wick. And sometimes we are cows of Bashan. If you think everyone you’re talking to is a cow of Bashan, you’re going to hurt a lot of people. If you think everybody is just a bruised reed and a smoldering wick, you’re not going to have some of the edges you need to have when helping people. You need to know yourself, and you need to know your people.

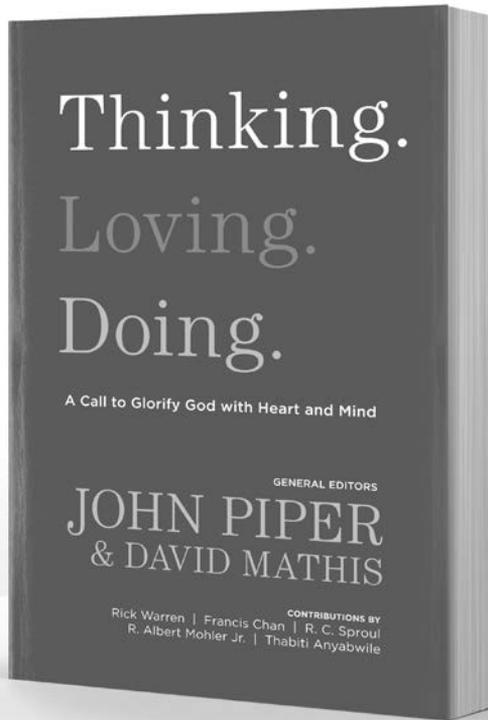
*3) Let us celebrate the all-encompassing grace of God in our sanctification.*

God has planned for your holiness. He’s providing for your holiness. And he helps you grow in holiness by pulling and pushing and prodding and provoking from one little degree of glory to the next. This is all of

grace—grace to call you to a holy calling, grace to empower you for a holy calling, and grace that God would condescend to try to convince you to pursue this holy calling.

Have you considered the grace of God in condescending to *persuade* us to obey? It would have been well within his right to give us a list and make his demands: “Here are the commands. I’m God, and you’re not. I expect obedience. Now obey.” Have you ever considered what a grace it is that the Bible is so long and has so much theology? It’s God’s way of condescending to our weakness to help us toward holiness. Every promise, every reminder, every threat, every warning, every propositional gospel indicative is God’s grace to you. In one way, his grace has saved you, and by a thousand ways, his grace will lead you home.

# A Challenge to Love with Heart *and* Mind *and* Hands



**Here is a call to holistic Christianity.** A challenge to be *thinkers*, engaged and serious about knowing God. And to be *feelers*, pulsing with passion for Jesus and his gospel. And to be *doers*, endeavoring great acts of love for others.

With contributions from **Rick Warren, Francis Chan, R. C. Sproul, John Piper, Albert Mohler, and Thabiti Anyabwile**, *Thinking. Loving. Doing.* extends a thorough and compelling invitation to experience the fullness of the Christian life.

**Sanctification** | noun | *san(k)-tə-fə-'kā-shən*

: a big word for the little-by-little progress of the everyday Christian life

*Fighting sin is not easy.* No one ever coasted into greater godliness. Christian growth takes effort. But we are not left alone. God loves to work the miracle of sanctification within us as we struggle for daily progress in holiness. With contributions from Kevin DeYoung, John Piper, Ed Welch, Russell Moore, David Mathis, and Jarvis Williams, this invigorating book will help you say *no* to the deception of sin and *yes* to true joy in Jesus.

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*Douglas J. Moo*, Wessner Chair of  
Biblical Studies, Wheaton College

*John Piper* is founder and teacher of *desiringGod.org* and chancellor of Bethlehem College and Seminary. He served for 33 years as senior pastor at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis and is the author of more than 50 books.

*David Mathis* is executive editor at *desiringGod.org* and an elder at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis. Together with Piper, he has coedited *Finish the Mission* and *Thinking, Loving, Doing*.