

New City Catechism

Question 32: What do justification and sanctification mean?

Answer: Justification means our declared righteousness before God.
Sanctification means our gradual, growing righteousness.

1 Peter 1:1-2

Today's Q&A gives 2 important definitions that we need to know and understand. We will explore them separately and then together.

Justification—commit the definition from our answer to memory. Here is some further explanation: Justification is God regarding sinners as if they had never sinned. It is the instantaneous gift of God which declares us right, just, and perfected before God because of our faith in Jesus Christ and his death taking our guilt. We are made perfect because of our faith bond with Christ. That's an amazing gift that can NOT be taken away from us (Romans 5:8-9).

Sanctification—commit the definition from our answer to memory. Then explain: Sanctification is God making sinners holy in heart and conduct over time through His Spirit and His Word. Sanctification is a gift from God where little by little or in big steps, we are conformed more and more into the image of his Son over time. This is an ongoing process, a gracious gift that God continues to work out all the days of our lives (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).

Now let's read a story together where we will see these 2 things come together in the life of 2 believers. Watch for them...

God's Amazing Grace

"William, my boy, come right in," John Newton beckoned to the young man waiting outside his study at London's St. Mary's Woolnoth Church.

William Wilberforce, a member of Parliament, was happy to come in. He had a question for the pastor.

"Well, sir... I, I've had a rather strange thing happen to me lately and I don't know quite what to do about it," William began.

"And?" John coaxed. "Tell me..."

"I guess the best way to say it, Sir, is that God has sent Christ Jesus to save me."

"Excellent!" John said, "I have prayed for this for a long time. But you are concerned by it?"

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“It’s just that... well, you know that I was elected to Parliament a few years back, and I ... I love the work. I just don’t know that I’m ready to quit and become a preacher.” There, he admitted it.

John resisted the urge to laugh. Clearly the boy was quite serious about his dilemma. “Let me tell you a story. When I was a young man roughly your age, I was a slave trader. I was captain of a ship that I sailed to Africa, where we bought people who had been kidnapped from their homes, and then took them to America and sold them for a huge profit.

This was actually a step up for me, as I had spent the prior ten years doing as much damage to myself and God’s name as he would graciously permit. For you see, God knew he would eventually get my attention. I believe during that time God saved my life many times over, and finally he saved my soul too.

But I was still just a babe in Christ. For years after I first put my faith in him, I ran that slave ship. Perhaps the conditions on my ship were better than most, but we still kept them bound like cattle and sold them like meat in a marketplace.

Over time, God showed me that the slave trade, which the world had come to accept as necessary and thus righteous enough, was in fact abhorrent to my Lord. Slowly, he made it abhorrent to me as well. Nevertheless God himself delivered me from my profession at the age of 29. He provided me with a job on land. In addition, as I studied his word, he instilled in me a passion to preach of Christ. That was over 20 years ago. You can see that my heart has grown much since I first believed. Even in just the past few years, for example, he has given me a great desire to see my former profession to be abolished! You see, William, you must grow in Christ wherever you are. He can use you in Parliament more and more as your heart becomes more holy.”

William Wilberforce left St. Mary’s Woolnoth Church and became one of England’s most respected statesmen, known by all as a devout Christian. Before his death in 1833, he had pushed through Parliament the laws necessary to forever abolish the sale of slaves.

- In what ways do you see justification playing out in this story in the lives of both men? How about sanctification?
- In what ways have justification been played out in your family? How about sanctification? Spend time thanking God for both of these gracious gifts!

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