

Justification and Sanctification Must Be Kept Separate

By Bob Nyberg

As a phonetics teacher, I often used “same or different” drills to see if my students were catching the difference between sounds. Here is a theological version of that exercise:

Same or different — justification and sanctification?

I recently read a statement of faith on the website of a missions agency which says:

“We believe that God’s justifying grace must not be separated from His sanctifying power and purpose.”

Sadly, this statement is a hallmark of Lordship Salvation. It teaches that justification (salvation) and sanctification (discipleship/obedience) are inseparable. In practice, this means works are viewed as a necessary proof or component of saving faith. This is directly opposed to the doctrine of grace, which affirms that salvation is by faith alone, apart from works, and that sanctification flows from salvation but is never a condition for it (cf. Eph. 2:8–10; Rom. 4:5). This doctrine of grace has been the historical position of Ethnos360 and is embedded in the doctrinal statement to which we have all subscribed.

Why It’s Important to Keep Justification and Sanctification Separate

1. Preserves the Gospel of God’s Free Grace

- Justification is by grace through faith **alone** (Eph. 2:8–9; Rom. 4:5).
- Sanctification is the believer’s growth in holiness, which involves works and obedience (Eph. 2:10).
- Keeping them separate ensures salvation remains a **free gift**, not tied to performance.

2. Protects Assurance of Salvation

- If justification depends in any way on our sanctification, assurance will fluctuate based on our level of obedience or spiritual performance.
- When kept separate, assurance rests on **Christ’s finished work**, not our ongoing work (John 5:24; 1 John 5:13).

3. Safeguards the Gospel in Missions and Evangelism

- New believers (especially in unreached areas) need a clear, simple gospel message: *“Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved”* (Acts 16:31).
- Mixing discipleship demands into the invitation to believe confuses the entry point into salvation.

4. Avoids Turning Faith into Works

- Lordship Salvation redefines faith as including submission, obedience, or commitment.
- Keeping justification separate prevents redefining faith into something that looks like a **work**.

5. Maintains Biblical Order

- Biblically, justification comes **first** (Rom. 5:1), sanctification **follows** (Rom. 6:19, 22).
- Blending the two confuses God's order and damages the biblical sequence.

6. Allows for Honest Discipleship Conversations

- If justification and sanctification are blurred, exhortations to holy living can sound like conditions for salvation.
- Keeping them distinct allows pastors and missionaries to urge believers to grow in holiness without threatening their eternal security.

Problems That Result from Blending Justification and Sanctification

1. A Works-Laden Gospel

- People may think they must reform their behavior to “really” be saved, leading to front-loading the gospel with works.

2. Loss of Assurance

- Believers will constantly wonder: *“Am I obeying enough? Have I repented enough? Have I surrendered enough?”*
- This leads to insecurity rather than resting in Christ's promise.

3. Spiritual Burnout and Legalism

- If acceptance with God depends on obedience, people will try to earn God's favor through performance—often leading to exhaustion or self-righteousness.

4. False Conversions or Discouragement

- Those unable to meet high behavioral demands may conclude they were never truly saved, even if they trusted in Christ.

5. Misrepresentation of God's Character

- Blending the two can portray God as reluctant to save unless the sinner first proves commitment or obedience—undermining His grace and generosity.

6. Distortion of Repentance

- Biblical repentance (a change of mind) gets replaced with a demand to change behavior before one can believe—a direct contradiction of the gospel of grace.

Do Not Put Diesel Fuel in a Gas Engine!

Dr. Charlie Bing explains the importance of keeping justification and sanctification separate.

“Don't put diesel fuel in a gasoline engine. Both are fuel, but they are distinctly different. Ignore the difference and disaster results. There are important distinctions in the Bible that can only be ignored with dire consequences.”

—Grace Salvation and Discipleship p. 15

“The Bible distinguishes justification from sanctification with good reason. To confuse them is to inject the many principles of Christian growth into the one requirement for salvation—faith in Christ as Savior. It makes it impossible to know for certain that anyone is saved since sanctification is a lifetime process. It contradicts the unconditional gospel of grace with conditional requirements related to spiritual growth.”
—Grace Salvation and Discipleship p. 21

This simple chart helps us understand the distinctions.

Justification	Sanctification
One-time event	Lifetime process
Spiritual birth	Spiritual growth
Faith in Christ as Savior	Obedience to Christ as Lord
Placed into Christ	Transformed into Christlikeness
One condition	Many conditions
What God did for me	What God is doing through me
Christ died on the cross for me	I take up the cross for Christ
Saved from the penalty of sin	Saved from the power of sin

Concluding Thoughts

Justification and sanctification, while both essential works of God, are distinct in nature and purpose. Justification is an act of God—an instantaneous legal declaration in which He pronounces the sinner righteous on the basis of Christ’s finished work. Sanctification, on the other hand, is the ongoing work of God within the believer, conforming them over time to the image of Christ. One deals with our standing before God; the other with our state in daily living.

When these two are confused, the gospel itself becomes clouded. To mingle justification and sanctification is to risk introducing human works into the basis of our acceptance with God. Such confusion inevitably shifts the focus from Christ’s completed work to our imperfect efforts. It turns the good news of eternal life into an invitation to a lifetime of probation under God’s scrutiny. The result is often legalism, performance-based spirituality, and the loss of assurance for believers.

Justification is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Sanctification flows from justification as its intended result, not as a condition for it. Making the fruit of salvation a requirement for salvation itself undermines grace and front-loads the gospel with works. This error strikes at the heart of the Reformation’s recovery of justification by faith apart from works, effectively undoing that painstakingly recovered clarity and replacing it with a performance-based gospel.

The believer’s justification is perfect and complete from the moment of faith; sanctification is a progressive, lifelong process. Maintaining the distinction preserves the purity of the gospel and protects against the corruption that comes when our standing in Christ is confused with our state in this life. To merge the two is to alter the message of grace into something God never intended—a salvation made conditional upon works rather than resting fully in the promise of God.