

Session 10

Chapter 8 Our Standing and State Before Christ: Positional and Progressive Sanctification (Part A)

One concept that can help the believers to grow spiritually, while avoiding the pitfalls of spiritual laziness on the one hand and legalism on the other, is to know the difference between our standing before God and our actual state.

I. Standing



Standing refers to our legal position with Christ in the heavenlies—that is, our present spiritual union with Christ. This is how God sees us, regardless of our walk with Him, through Christ.

A. The difference between positional justification and sanctification

1. Justification.

As stated previously, this term refers to exculpating the guilty on account of the substitutionary death of Christ.

- a. Consequently, the status of the person is transformed by the action of “justification,” not the character.
- b. While no longer condemned legally, he may not be all that righteous in ontological sense (that is, in his being), at least not at the outset of being forensically justified.
- c. It is akin to adopting a child into one’s family; after proper documents are signed, that child is now a son. He may misbehave or act waywardly but that does not annul his legal standing in the family.



2. Positional sanctification.

This terminology refers to accrediting Christ’s righteousness onto the justified ontologically (in faith); this is how Paul was able to say that the carnal Corinthians were not only “justified” but also “washed and sanctified . . . in Christ” (1 Cor. 6:11).

It is as if the sanctified individual had never sinned, just like the sinless Christ.

- a. It is not something achieved or attained by effort; rather, it is received as a gift from God as a result of faith in Christ. Paul, while explaining his conversion to King Agrippa, says, “Those who are sanctified by faith in [Christ] . . .” (Acts 26:18).
- b. When Jude says that God is able to “present us before his glorious presence without

fault” (1:26), he wasn’t thinking about an actual state obtained by believers through their perfect moral and spiritual life, but how God will choose to see them in Christ.

3. Therefore, *salvation past* refers to the fact that the believers have been declared righteous once and for all in a positional and ontological sense, “since [God] has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son . . .” (Col. 1:13-14^b).

B. Moving from one kingdom to another



A young believer with a delicate conscience, after sinning, may feel like God has rejected him or perhaps he was never saved. Even seasoned believers, perhaps unaware of their secure position in Christ, act like “infants, tossed back and forth” (Eph. 4:14^a) whenever they sin. Because of their uneasy conscience, they may respond to every altar call for salvation. This is all the more reason the believer’s secure position in Christ must be clearly understood.

1. A lot happened when we believed. Paul states, “For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves” (Col. 1:13).

The apostle is describing the new believer’s transition from the kingdom of darkness, ruled by the devil, to the kingdom of the light governed by Christ.

2. There are three main changes.

- a. Before: In the dominion of darkness, the devil had “the power of death over this subjects, holding them “in slavery by their fear of death” (Heb. 2:15).

After: Jesus freed them by “destroy[ing] the devil’s work” (1 Jn. 3:8^b) through his death (Heb. 2:14). We are now free from the penalty of sin.

- b. Before: the devil, being “the accuser of . . . brothers, accuse[d] them before . . . God day and night (Rev. 12:10^b).

After: Jesus “canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross” (Col. 2:14).

(1) “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

(2) Even if our walk with God is unfaithful at any given moment, we can be assured that we’re still a child of God. (The doctrine of adoption is in view here.)

- c. Before: Unbelievers, being slaves to the devil (2 Pet. 2:19^b), “used to offer the parts of [their] body in slavery to impurity and to every-increasing wickedness” (Rom. 6:19).

After: Now in the kingdom of the Son and empowered by the Holy Spirit, the believers can “offer [themselves] to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of [their] body to him as instruments of righteousness” (Rom. 6:13).

In reality, this has more to do with “state” than “standing” (discussed later).

3. In summation, the security of believers stems from, first, being justified from the penalty of sin, two, being freed from the threats and accusations of the devil, and third, possessing the power to live for righteousness instead of wickedness.

C. Paul’s affirmation of the security of the believers

1. Paul’s epistles to churches are built around this theme, that God sees those who are justified in Christ as being wholly sanctified in Him at the same time.
2. In most cases, the first half of the letters is devoted to the believer's standing in Christ. Thus, Paul, in greeting the Corinthians, could address them as “to those sanctified in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor. 1:2^b) despite of the many problems that plagued this church.
3. In Paul’s letter to the Philippians, he reminded them of what they already have in the heavenlies.



Eph. 1:18-20: “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength ²⁰ he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, . . .”

According to this, the believers already have the following things in the heavenly realms regardless of whether they are presently struggling with sins or not.

- a. The hope of eternal life (since the penalty of sin has been paid)
- b. The riches of God’s glorious inheritance in his holy people (the enemy, therefore, cannot condemn them since they have been made holy before God).
- c. The same power that was used to exert Christ from the death (thus, they can truly live for God, *now*).

II. State

The state refers to one's actual spiritual condition here and now—that is, the degree to which a believer has appropriated the fullness of Christ in his everyday life. While the position before Christ is always secure, our actual spiritual state can fluctuate.



A. Salvation present

Salvation present refers to an on-going process in which the redeemed battle out against the power of sin in their everyday life to reach an optimal spiritual state; this is subjective, personal and experiential.

1. The process of untangling ourselves from the power of sin in different areas of our lives (e.g., finance, relationship, habits, sex, etc.) is called progressive or experiential sanctification.
2. Gaining victory in these areas means that we are no longer hindered by the power of sin in worshiping and serving the Lord; in other words, it doesn't control us.
3. However, we can regress to an earlier spiritual state if we discontinue "fix[ing] our eyes on Jesus (Heb. 12:2) and "walk according to the flesh" (Rom. 8:4^b NKJV).



B. Fluctuation of the spiritual state

This is an issue that Jesus, Paul and Peter all address.

1. Unlike one's standing in God's family or kingdom, his actual state can "fall," which is what Jesus said to the Ephesian church:
"You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen!" (Rev. 2:4^a-5).
2. Apostle Paul, regarding Demas who was serving with him as late as A.D. 60 (Col. 4:14), says in his second epistle to Timothy, written in 64, "Because he loved this world, has deserted me . . ."
3. Apostle Peter reminded the believers in Asia Minor, "Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position*" (2 Pet. 3:17).



*NASB translates the Greek word *stērigmos* as "steadfastness" and RSV as "stability."

C. The key component to sin that affects our state

There are two components to sin that affect the believers: the penalty and power of sin.

1. The penalty of sin.

As mentioned earlier, those who are justified forensically are now released from the penalty of sin; the wages of sin, which is death, have been paid by the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ once and for all.

2. What, then, is the power of sin?

- a. Paul, in his first epistle to the Corinthians says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Cor. 5:17).

(1) This new spiritual reality does not mean, however, that the sinful nature has been eradicated by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in the believers.

(2) As mentioned previously, Paul, dealing with his own inner struggle with sin as a Christian, declares,

“I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. . . . Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it” (Rom. 7:20).

- b. Whereas the sinful nature monopolizes the will of the unregenerate man, thereby inducing him to be a slave to sin, after the rebirth however, its power over the regenerate man is restrained by the Holy Spirit.

- c. The power of sin now has a serious competition in its battle for the will of the regenerate man. Paul describes this inner battle in this way:

“For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want” (Gal. 5:17-8).

3. A key to diminishing the power of sin is to avoid fueling it by conforming to the pattern of this world (Rom. 12:2), being deceived by the devil’s schemes (Eph. 6:11), and succumbing to the effects of past painful experiences (explained later).

D. A general approach to progressive sanctification

1. Paul’s declaration, “Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12), underscores the importance of actively participating in the actual liberation from the power of sin, which results in separation from the ways of the world.



2. This is the process by which a believer, whose status had changed from guilty to not guilty at the moment of justification, can consistently experience a life that is “set free from sin and ha[s] become slaves to righteousness” (Rom. 6:18).
3. And this spiritual state will not be reached unless a believer is adequately separated from the three main sources that fuel the power of sin.

Discussion¹: I am very certain that you too have had experienced a fluctuating spiritual state: sometimes you feel like you are pleasing to the Lord while other times it’s just the opposite. Share your experience. What made you feel so low? How did you eventually come out of it?

III. The Battle over Three Main Sources that Fuel the Power of Sin

The three areas where sanctification (i.e., separation) is urgently needed are: the pattern of this world (Rom. 12:2), devil’s schemes (Eph. 6:11) and the effects of hurtful events of the past.

A. The first source: the pattern of the world

To the Corinthians who were quite worldly (1 Cor. 3:1, 3), Paul says in 2 Corinthians 7:1: “Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.”

Obviously, the first area is quite broad:

Everything in the world that pollutes both body and spirit, or as Paul put it elsewhere, the pattern of this world that entices people to conform (Rom. 12:2).

1. Looking at the many vices of the Corinthians—division, jealousy, quarreling, immorality, drunkenness, fracturing of the body of Christ, idolatry, and abusing of the spiritual gifts— one can immediately understand why Paul says this.
2. Thus, Paul commanded the Corinthian believers to thoroughly purify themselves from the pattern of this world out of respect for God.
 - a. From the Greek word *katharizō*, translated here as “purify,” derives the English word “cauterize”: to burn or sear to prevent infection.
 - b. Paul, therefore, was not suggesting some behavioral modification; rather, he was gunning for a thorough expunging of *sin* that can really do some serious harm.

In his letter to Timothy, Paul put this in another way:

“Flee the evil desires of youth” (2 Tim. 2:22).

3. In addition, “everything that contaminates” includes “arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God” (2 Cor. 10:5^a), which, Paul told the Corinthians to “demolish[] and take[] captive to make them obedient to Christ” (10:5^b).



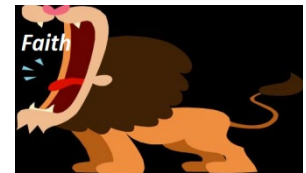
B. The second source: the devil's schemes

To be wholly sanctified, the believers need to separate themselves from the devil's schemes.

Paul tells the Ephesians:

“Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes . . . , so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then. . . .” (Eph. 6:11, 13, 14).

1. Evidently, while the believers have been rescued from the kingdom of darkness, the devil continues to scheme against them, trying to induce them to succumb to the power of sin; thus, Paul exhorts the Ephesians to get ready for battles.
2. In fact, Peter writes, “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8). He adds, “Resist him, standing firm in the faith” (1 Pet. 5:9).
- 3, James also says the same: “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7^b), that is, the devil will separate from you.



C. The third source: a hurtful past

Another area from which some believers need to separate themselves is past hurtful experiences: deep and lasting scars that distort how they view others, God, and the things of the world, such as money and sex.

For the most part, it is the inevitable consequences of living in a world full of fragile, selfish and indifferent people.

1. These are often deceptive thoughts that oppose what God says about us in the Scripture.

For instance, it is difficult for some to truly accept that God would love them unconditionally, or that He wouldn't reject them even if they don't perform to His liking.



2. Upon being justified, while they are set free and sanctified in Christ positionally, it is hard for them to actually experience that freedom because of the hurts and insecurity of the past that have long been embedded into their identity.
3. Paul's exhortation to the Philippians—"Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead" (Phil. 3:13)—certainly includes painful memories of the past that continue to affect the present, despite being in Christ positionally.

The sanctification process must also address this delicate matter as well (discussed in the next chapter).

Discussion²: Obviously, everyone is wounded and damaged, in varying degrees, by others as well as self-inflicted. We've allowed the world, devil, and our hurtful past to keep us chained to the power of sin.

Considering that, what is one area of your life in which you are most susceptible to fall into a particular pattern of sinful/unhealthy thought and behavior. How have you dealt with it?

Homework 10

Read over the material covered in the last class and the additional Bible reading (if any). If you have any questions, please note them here and ask me later.

1. Distinguish between justification and sanctification.
2. Distinguish between our state and our standing.
3. Distinguish between the peace of God from peace with God: how is each attained.
4. In what ways can the pattern of this world, the devil's schemes, and painful past experiences, affect the sanctification process in a negative way?