

JOHN MACARTHUR

GOD'S

PASSION

for

HIS PEOPLE



SANCTIFICATION

“This is a classic example of the kind of book readers worldwide have come to expect from the pen of John MacArthur. Saturated with Scripture, straightforward, and easy to understand, MacArthur’s words show what the Bible teaches about sanctification and how it applies both to the individual Christian and to the local church. Christians concerned about the kind of teaching that has resulted in the ‘hole in our holiness’ will find here much to clarify the issue for them and practical encouragement on walking closely with Christ.”

Donald S. Whitney, Professor of Biblical Spirituality, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* and *Praying the Bible*

“Sanctification—John MacArthur brings to bear the full force of his pastoral passion on this vital theme! Why? First, because Jesus made it the burden of his prayers for us; Paul insisted it is the will of God for every believer; the author of Hebrews wrote that without it none of us will see the Lord—it is heaven’s sine qua non. Second, because we are always in danger of demeaning or ignoring holiness. How many books have you read since you last read one on sanctification? *Sanctification* is a powerful tract for our times—a purposefully short book. You can read it in an hour or two, but its goal is the transformation of the rest of your life.”

Sinclair B. Ferguson, Chancellor’s Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary; Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries

“Justification and sanctification are like the two arms of Jesus Christ by which he embraces us to himself. John MacArthur does a masterful job of showing us how Christ, the Great Shepherd whose Spirit lives in every true spiritual shepherd, earnestly desires for his image to be formed in his beloved people.”

Joel Beeke, President and Professor of Systematic Theology and Homiletics, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary; Pastor, Heritage Reformed Congregation, Grand Rapids, Michigan; author, *Reformed Preaching*

“A seasoned, well-regarded preacher of the gospel offers us a scripturally saturated treatise on sanctification. Simple but not simplistic, short but not shallow, John MacArthur not only explains the Bible’s teaching on sanctification but also makes the appropriate, sometimes pointed, applications this current generation needs.”

Mark Jones, Pastor, Faith Reformed Presbyterian Church,
Vancouver, British Columbia

“MacArthur charges Christians to shine as lights in the midst of this darkened, confused generation. The freedom we have in Jesus Christ is a freedom to serve him as our Master and Lord. Just as he has done throughout his ministry, MacArthur faithfully lifts up God’s word. This book pleads for holy, joyful living unto the glory of God.”

Chris Larson, President and CEO, Ligonier Ministries

“Clear, inspiring, and with just enough cautions about where the world may have snuck into our theology and, therefore, our lives.”

Ed Welch, Faculty and Counselor, Christian Counseling &
Educational Foundation

“MacArthur has written a concise and straightforward book to stir up Christians to remembrance of what God teaches concerning how we are to grow as believers. He distinguishes biblical sanctification from other pseudo views on the subject and balances the Christian’s position *in Christ* with the Christian’s walk *with Christ*. I highly recommend this book to help keep us believing rightly so we can live more Christlike lives.”

Stuart W. Scott, Associate Professor of Biblical Counseling, The
Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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His People

John MacArthur

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To Peter Coeler
A true friend marked by uncommon
humility, generosity, and grace

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The Prize of the Upward Call

Scripture says of Christ, “He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25).

We have a clear window into Christ’s continual intercession for his people in John 17. That passage is known as Jesus’s high priestly prayer. Its centerpiece is a plea for the sanctification of his disciples: “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth” (John 17:17–19). Then Jesus pointedly applies that request not only to the twelve, but also to every Christian in all subsequent generations: “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word” (17:20).

The Shepherd Theme in Scripture

That petition reveals the true heart of the good shepherd for his people as clearly as anything in Scripture. “He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake” (Ps. 23:3). As our shepherd, he is the “Overseer of [our] souls” (1 Pet. 2:25). The Greek word translated “Overseer” in that verse is *episkopos*, a word elsewhere translated “bishop.” According to *Thayer’s Lexicon*,¹ it refers to “a man charged with the duty of seeing that things to be done by others are done rightly.” Christ as the chief shepherd is the overseer, or guardian, of our souls—caring for us, protecting us, leading us, correcting us, and giving us nourishment, all with the ultimate goal of our sanctification.

The English word *pastor* also means “shepherd,” of course, and every faithful pastor will have a passion for the holiness of Christ’s sheep that mirrors the desire of the Savior.

By the way, the divinely chosen imagery of flocks and shepherds is fitting. God knows his people—all believers—are like sheep in many ways. Sheep are not particularly smart, nor are they adroit at navigating around the pitfalls of their environment. So it’s not a particularly flattering comparison. But it is one that Scripture makes repeatedly. “We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture” (Ps. 100:3). Peter urges his fellow elders to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you . . . not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:2–3). He

1. Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: American Book Co., 1886), 243.

reminds church leaders of their accountability to the chief shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4).

The Shepherd's Task Is Not Easy

In contrast to the tranquil, untroubled imagery we often see when artists portray flocks in the field, real-life shepherding is hard, messy work. The shepherd's tasks are many and varied. He has to lead and feed the flock, care for injured sheep, seek and rescue lost lambs, ward off predators, stand guard overnight, and tend to the flock's every need. It is a highly demanding task—requiring constant vigilance and care.

Caring for the people of God is likewise an exhausting, never-ending series of wide-ranging duties that would tax any man's skill set. Virtually all pastors will at times be called upon to fill practically every role of service in the church from setup to clean-up. In addition to preaching the word (his central and most important assignment), the pastor is burdened with constant concern for the sheep. As Paul wrote, "Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall [into sin], and I am not indignant?" (2 Cor. 11:29). Beyond the spiritual struggles are the tasks. The pastor is asked to officiate at marriages, conduct funerals, offer counseling sessions, make hospital visits, and perform a host of similar functions. A pastor might be faced with wildly disparate duties all in one day—visiting prisoners in the morning and preparing sermons in the afternoon, with a stop in between to comfort a grieving family. He has to be able to move gracefully from one task to another and be skilled at all of them.

Despite the diversity of so many responsibilities, all those pastoral duties ultimately point to one clear and singular goal: the sanctification of God's people. All the man's energies and all the faculties of his heart and mind must remain focused on that one long-range goal, and he must never lose sight of it. This is, after all, God's ultimate purpose for his elect: "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8:29). That is how Scripture summarizes the goal of sanctification—not merely to make us *appear* holy, but to make us truly and thoroughly Christlike.

I was struck once more with this great truth while preaching through Galatians 4 recently. I came to verse 19, where Paul addresses the believers of that region as "my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!" That text gripped my mind and my heart to such a degree that it took me a long time to get beyond it. It is a fine summation of every pastor's ministry purpose: to see that Christ is formed in his people.

This of course has significant ramifications not only for pastors and church leaders, but for every Christian as well. Your duty as a believer, no matter who you are, is "to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:22–24).

The True Shepherd's Greatest Burden

What struck me afresh about Galatians 4:19 was the passion expressed in the analogy Paul chose. He yearned for the sanctification of his people. He ached to be used of God to spur them on to Christlikeness. And his desire to see the completion of that goal was so deep and so profound that the only apt comparison he could envision was the bitter-sweet agony of a woman in the pain of giving birth.

That burning passion kept the apostle focused and faithful through a relentless onslaught of vexing trials and persecutions. Here's how Paul recapped his life in ministry. He said he had endured:

far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. (2 Cor. 11:23–27)

Then he added this: “And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches” (11:28).

That the issue of sanctification—holiness—weighed so heavily on the heart of the apostle is a fitting reminder to pastors

and church members alike that we must not forget what God is doing with us. “He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Eph. 1:4). It is our duty as believers “to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (4:24). God is conforming us to the likeness of his dear Son. Even our bodies will ultimately be resurrected and glorified to be like the risen Christ (Phil. 3:21). “Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven” (1 Cor. 15:49).

That goal cannot be thwarted nor the progress ever permanently stopped. True believers will one day be completely perfected. “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” (1 John 3:2).

The finish line may appear to be so far in the distance that it’s tempting to give up. The apostle Paul acknowledged that he too felt that frustration: “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24). But he did not quit: “I press on to make it [i.e., the goal of complete sanctification] my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:12–14).

That’s how we must live. And in the pages that follow, we’ll consider why this is such a dominant priority.



Among all the things that a pastor will do on any given day, he must not lose sight of his one ultimate goal: the sanctification of God's people. This is the heart of God's purpose for Christians.

John MacArthur calls pastors to remember what all the countless hours preparing sermons, visiting hospitals, counseling, conducting weddings, and more are all about, even when the finish line seems so far in the distance that they're tempted to give up. He encourages pastors with the power God gives them to place the sanctification of God's people at the center of their ministry.

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