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### **The Unconverted “Believer” (1): The Problem Stated**

Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior of mankind, gave a commission to His Church to tell the people of the world the good news of salvation from sin through faith in Him. We are to declare to all people everywhere that they may escape God’s sentence of eternal damnation and may be assured of His promise of everlasting life. Mark 16:15 and 16 record the Lord’s words, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” However, we are to do more than proclaim a message, we are to make disciples, or followers of Jesus the Lord. Matthew recorded our Lord’s great commission in these words, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:18-20). We are to have the same passion for the lost that characterized our Lord. We are to desire the salvation of all people everywhere, rejoicing when they respond to our message, when they come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and join with His people in following Him as His disciples.

But not only is the church to proclaim to the lost world that people might receive salvation through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. The church is to make every effort to assure that those in the churches, those who profess to be believers, live as true disciples, following Him in faith and obedience through life. We are to labor so that professing Christians will be saved from their sin when they face the Lord Jesus in judgment on the last day. We are to teach, warn, and exhort one another, lest any of us fails to live in a manner that characterizes true Christians. For the failure to live as a Christian will result in one’s damnation along with all non-Christians. We are to come along side one another, helping one another in the faith, so that we all might complete our journey of faith in the day that our Lord calls us unto Himself.

But this responsibility is a great duty and challenge when we consider the scope of a great problem. The Word of God reveals that there may be many churches that are comprised of many people who believe themselves to have salvation, but are yet in their sins. The church in the city of Sardis, which existed toward the end of the first century, was comprised largely of unconverted souls. Jesus dictated a letter to that church which read,

“I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. <sup>2</sup>Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. <sup>3</sup>Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. <sup>4</sup>You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. <sup>5</sup>He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. (Rev. 3:1-5)

This church congregation thought itself spiritually alive, but in fact they were spiritually dead. There were only “a few names” of those in the church who would receive salvation. Similar conclusions could be drawn of the churches in Thyatira and Laodicea from their letters that are recorded in Revelation 2 and 3.

Bringing professing Christians in churches to experience true salvation is a great undertaking if we consider the great numbers of people who claim to be Christian, who assume or at least hope that they will escape God’s condemnation and be allowed entrance into everlasting life. We might weigh in on those under the broad heading, Christendom, which is a term that refers to all people throughout the world who profess to be Christian. Of the present population of 7.8 billion souls living on our planet today, almost one third of the

earth's inhabitants claim to be Christian. That is a total of 2.4 billion souls world-wide. Does the world give evidence that one third of the population are living as devout disciples of Jesus Christ?

The estimated number of Christians in the United States varies. The Gallup poll and Pew Forum state that between 75% and 80% of Americans claim to be Christian, which projects to be from 250 to 260 million professing American Christians. Most of us would agree that there may be a great difference between the large number of Americans who claim to be Christian and the actual number of those among them who are truly committed, living for Jesus Christ in their daily lives. The evangelical pollster, George Barna, asserted that 66% of Americans may be defined as casual Christians, but only 16% are "captive" (committed) Christians. The Pew Research Center in 2014 stated that 25.4% of Americans identify with American evangelicalism, those who claim to believe the Holy Bible is the authoritative Word of God. Does America give evidence that 25% of its adult population is living as devout disciples of Jesus Christ?

Evangelicals are those who claim that they believe and follow the Bible as the Word of God. But we might ask, what percentage of evangelicals (so-called Bible believers) are true Christians? I fear the number is strikingly small even among those who believe themselves to be "committed" evangelical Christians. There is an annual survey conducted by Ligonier Ministries and LifeWay Research entitled, "The State of Theology; What do Americans believe about God, salvation, ethics, and the Bible?" Their findings in 2020 are not pretty, to say the least. Almost 1/3 of American evangelicals believe that Jesus was just a great teacher, but that He is not God incarnate. Among American evangelicals 42% believe that "God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam." Here is one conclusion of these researchers:

These results reveal an urgent need for clear biblical teaching on the person of Christ, the gospel of grace, and the way that the truth of God informs our ethical decisions in everyday life. There is much work to be done in this age of confusion, but we hope the findings of this survey will serve the church in its calling to reach more people with the faithful proclamation of God's Word.<sup>1</sup>

But when we consider what the Holy Bible, the Word of God, teaches regarding salvation, I must conclude that the percentage of evangelicals who are truly converted by the Holy Spirit are relatively few in number. Perhaps after you have read and reflected on the biblical passages that we will address, you may also conclude that there must be a scarcity of authentic biblical Christians in even so-called Bible-believing churches.

As a pastor, I am concerned for the eternal destiny of souls. This is a universal concern in some ways, in that I desire to see all people everywhere be delivered from sin and its punishment of eternal hell fire through salvation in Jesus Christ. But more specifically and perhaps with a greater sense of urgency and distress, I am burdened for the souls of those who are members and attendees of local churches, those who profess to be believers in Jesus Christ, those who believe themselves to have salvation--but do not. There have always been among the professing people of God unconverted "believers", just as there was the "mixed multitude" among the people of Israel in the days of Moses. But this seems to be a systemic problem in churches today, and sadly, even in so-called evangelical churches. A spiritual pandemic has infected the churches of Jesus Christ with ignorance and error with respect to the biblical gospel of Jesus Christ and the nature and way of salvation by Him.

And so today we begin a new sermon series to address this great problem, "The Unconverted 'Believer.'"<sup>2</sup> This is a matter which is always on my heart, in that I think about it frequently and pray about it just as often. I fear for the soul who believes himself to be a true Christian, but in truth he is still in his sins. He is a nominal Christian, that is, he is a Christian in name only. He and many like him have assurance of salvation. Just ask him. He will tell you that it is so. But when his faith and practice are examined by the Word of God, it reveals the likelihood that he possesses false assurance that he is a true Christian; he has not as yet been saved from his sin through Jesus Christ. He may have spiritual confidence that he is safe, but it is

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<sup>1</sup> <https://thestateoftheology.com/>

<sup>2</sup> This was the subject of a sermon given on March 29, 2020, which is labeled FBC1037 and entitled "Unconverted Believer." But what we declared in one message then, we will expand significantly in this current series of sermons.

not saving faith, but damning presumption. He is on the ledge of an eternal precipice into which he will most certainly fall forever, unless he is set right in his thinking, believing, and living. But he does not know his danger. Ignorance and error have shut his spiritual eyes so that he cannot perceive his true condition. And even if he did open his physical eyes in an attempt to read and learn, he is incapable of perceiving the truth regarding his condition for the devil has spiritually blinded him. Yet he believes himself “saved”! There may be those about him, perhaps family, friends, fellow church members, and possibly even a pastor, who believe that this poor soul has been saved. These well-intentioned ones bolster his sad condition, helping to seal him unto damnation. This deluded soul believes that he has been washed clean of his sin, but actually he is filthy still. He remains polluted by his sin before God for he has never have been spiritually washed in the blood of the Lamb of God. He will remain in his sorry condition unless and until God does a supernatural work of saving grace in him.

It is not our desire or effort through this study to trouble souls who are truly safe in Christ. I am always concerned about unsettling the tenderhearted and easily troubled soul. We want to be as our Lord who would neither break a bruised reed nor quench a smoking flax (Matt. 12:20). But this is difficult to avoid doing when we shout our message loudly and clearly to awaken and stir the careless and hardened soul. I have often said that the most difficult task of the preacher is to awaken the soul who is ignorant and insensitive to his lost condition, while at the same time comfort and encourage the truly gracious (saved) soul who may be weak or easily shaken in his faith. This is especially a problem because the devil is skillfully at work to keep the unawakened soul fast in his spiritual slumber, at ease in his lethargic spiritual condition, even as he attempts to disrupt, confuse, and torment the true Christian who may be rather weak in faith. Ultimately only the Holy Spirit can apply his truth rightly and appropriately to the people in whom he is working. But this is always a concern that weighs heavily upon me. I hope that if you become troubled, that you not prolong your difficulty by failing to speak with us. You come to us, for we are always desirous and available to speak with you.

Actually it is my hope that most of you will not hear anything “new” in this series on nominal Christianity. I suspect that I will be rehearsing and repeating everything we have declared to you before today. But it is hoped that what we say and consider together will confirm and reinforce these important matters upon which rest the eternal destiny of our souls. But it is also hoped that this study will benefit us all so that we become better equipped to help others. Each of us probably knows at least one and possibly a number of professing Christians for whom we have grave concerns. We have an extended family member, a friend or fellow worker, of whom we have suspicion about the legitimacy of his or her Christian profession. Maybe you have not voiced your concern directly to him or her, because you have doubted whether your perception is accurate. Or maybe you have voiced your doubts directly to that one, but your concern and warning went unheeded. Maybe you have spoken to that soul very directly and quite frequently, to the point of having alienated yourself from that one. He or she has grown weary and agitated because of your repeated expressions of concern and attempts to warn and instruct turn about to seek the Lord. It is hoped that through this study that the truths of Scripture may be made clear to better equip you in your ongoing task of witness. Or perhaps through the placing these notes into the hands of another, the Lord may use them to lead others to experience true life in Jesus Christ. May the Lord illuminate us to the truth that is in Jesus Christ so that He may use us to rescue many doomed souls about us. For unless the Lord delivers them from their sin, washes them from their filthiness, they will remain unclean before Him and will be damned from His presence forever.

However, at the same time it is biblical for us to be concerned about the salvation of one another as professing Christians in this church. Let us make certain that we, ourselves, have biblical assurance that we have been delivered from the danger of damnation and that we will inherit everlasting life. The apostle Paul expressed his great interest and deep distress for the salvation of those in the churches in the region of Galatia. He wrote, “My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you, I would like to be present with you now and to change my tone; for I have doubts about you” (Gal. 4:19f). These people in these churches had come to faith in Christ when Paul had first proclaimed the gospel to them. Or he had thought that they had done so, but because they had departed from the nature and content of that gospel he had once proclaimed to them, he feared for the salvation of their souls. When he was first among them, he was as a woman in painful labor who struggled to give birth to her child. That period of spiritual

labor ended when they had first embraced the gospel of Jesus Christ. But in his epistle of Galatians we read that his concern for their salvation had been renewed in his soul. He was once “again” suffering as a woman in labor pains. Paul would continue to have this great burden for these professing Christians until he became convinced that they had truly come to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, that Christ was “formed” in them. And so, in a similar way I, as do other pastors, have doubts and fears of many who claim and believe quite confidently that they have salvation. Because of what they have been taught about the nature of salvation, what they believe about the way of salvation, and about the grounds of assurance of salvation, we have cause for great concern for them. I would not want any of us to be found in this condition when our Lord summons us before Him, so we will address this matter of nominal Christianity, attempting to understand, expose it, and correct it clearly. We will make every effort to do so biblically and thoroughly, as the Lord enables us.

One other matter I might say as we begin this series, I plan to direct our words primarily for the individual who may be the unconverted “believer.” In other words, even though I will be speaking before us all as a gathered congregation, I will more directly address the one among us who may be in this spiritual state of spiritual deception. I will do this for I desire our speech and notes to be in a form that may be passed on by us to those for whom we are concerned.

And so, it is my desire through these messages to awaken and inform you biblically to this most important matter of life, if that is your need, so that you would obtain the salvation of your soul. The Lord Jesus spoke of the value that we should place upon this matter. We read our Lord’s words in Mark 8:36, “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?” The eternal condition and destiny of your soul is the most important and pressing issue in your life. This should be the matter of your primary interest, concern, and effort to understand what it is you are to believe and what it is you are to do in order to inherit everlasting life and to escape the everlasting damnation of all those who fail or refuse to experience biblical salvation.

May the Lord enable each of us to take to heart the importance of careful and serious self-examination respecting our true spiritual state before the Lord. May He motivate every one of us to conduct a thorough and extensive examination of all the matters that impinge on this great need of salvation. It is a very difficult task to assess rightly the spiritual condition of one’s own soul. As one once wrote, “All investigations of the exercises of the human mind are intended with difficulty, and never more so, than when we attempt to ascertain the religious or spiritual state of our hearts.”<sup>3</sup>

We must not presume that any understanding we presently hold concerning critically important matters should not undergo serious examination. In other words, we must become truly teachable. We are to strive to be as those in the city of Berea who were more noble than those of Thessalonica. Paul wrote of them, “Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11). Paul had recently come among them and had taught them new and somewhat strange things about salvation through Jesus Christ. These Bereans were not as those in Thessalonica who had apparently gone to the Scriptures to prove that Paul was a false teacher, that the things he was promoting were error. The Bereans heard Paul and then went to the Scriptures to determine if what he was telling them was true. They doubted themselves more than they doubted Paul, or rather, they believed that only the Scriptures could lead them to discover and affirm the truth of these matters. May we be characterized with such a spirit, in that we are skeptical of ourselves and our own understanding and that we look to the Scriptures as our guide to assess and to know the truth. I have learned through experience over the years that it is much more difficult to unlearn than it is to learn. Once people have it settled in their minds that they know and understand themselves rightly, it is very difficult to unsettle them, to shake their confidence, to lead them to examine themselves honestly and thoroughly on what they believe and how they live. May our Lord grant us grace to know Him and His Word more clearly and fully. May the Holy Spirit undeceive us, instruct us, and then comfort us with a true and sound assurance that we are His own.

Where shall we begin? Let us consider an Old Testament verse--**Proverbs 30:12**. It reads,

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<sup>3</sup> Archibald Alexander, **Thoughts on Religious Experience** (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967, orig. 1844), p. xvii.

“There is a generation that is pure in its own eyes,  
Yet is not washed from its filthiness.”

Here is a verse of Scripture that states the widespread ignorance and erroneous perception of people in the self-appraisal of their souls before God. They believe themselves to be pure, when actually they are terribly defiled. They believe themselves to be right with God, but they are still in their sins.

The writer of this portion of Proverbs was a man named Agur. He is identified in verse 1 of this chapter, which reads, “The words of Agur the son of Jakeh, his utterance.” In verse 12 Agur wrote of what characterized a “generation” of people, presumably who were living in his day. Through these words God has revealed and affirmed that it is possible, even commonplace, for many people, even a “generation” of people, to be sadly mistaken about their spiritual condition before God. They believe themselves to be “pure”, but they are actually polluted. They believe that they had been “washed”, but they were filthy still. In other words, they possess a false assurance that they have salvation from sin, even while they are still condemned before God due to their sin. Let us consider in some detail this verse, giving attention to the main words it contains.

## I. The meaning of Proverbs 30:12.

A. “There is a **generation** that is pure in its own eyes, yet is not washed from its filthiness.”

Agur was not writing of one or a few that had this errant view of themselves. He wrote regarding a “generation.” The Hebrew word for “generation” is *dore* ( דֹּר ). This is a word commonly used in the Old Testament. Sometimes the word is preceded by an adjective, for example, “an evil generation”, a “crooked generation, or a “rebellious generation.” He was stating a condition that was common among the people, a view that most all had of themselves. But then he set forth the truth of the matter.

Actually verse 12 is but one of four verses in this context in which the author referenced a “generation.” Here is Proverbs 30:11-14:

<sup>11</sup>There is a **generation** that curses its father,  
And does not bless its mother.

<sup>12</sup>There is a **generation** that is pure in its own eyes,  
Yet is not washed from its filthiness.

<sup>13</sup>There is a **generation**—oh, how lofty are their eyes!  
And their eyelids are lifted up.

<sup>14</sup>There is a **generation** whose teeth are like swords,  
And whose fangs are like knives,  
To devour the poor from off the earth,  
And the needy from among men.

Agur described four classes of people, He declared that each group was guilty of egregious sin. These generations were not unique to that time in history. It would seem that in every age there have been those guilty of these sins. There is no new thing under the sun. “For these four generations belong to every age. They always have been, and always will be, to the end of time.”<sup>4</sup>

The **first generation** of **verse 11** depict a people that reject parental authority. “**There is a generation that curses its father, and does not bless its mother.**” There was an ancient Greek philosopher and lawmaker named **Solon**, who lived from about 630 BC to about 560 BC. He was regarded as one of the Seven Wise Men of Greece in his day. He was once asked why he had never made a formal law in Athens against parricides--those who murder parents. He replied that he could never envision of anyone being so impious and cruel as to ever commit such a crime. But our God was, of course, much wiser than this wise man, for He set forth in His law that the son who but cursed his father or mother would be subject to capital

<sup>4</sup> Charles Bridges, **An Exposition of Proverbs** (The National Foundation for Christian Education, 1846), p. 600.

punishment by the community (Lev. 20:9). This was the same way the community was to deal with a murderer. God views the crime of cursing one's parent to be similar evil and warranted the same punishment.

The *second generation* of **verse 12** describes a class of people who are self-righteous. "***There is a generation that is pure in its own eyes, yet is not washed from its filthiness.***" These people have assurance that they are "clean", for they had been "washed." The implication is that they thought that they were in a right relationship with God, that God looked upon them favorably, that they had been forgiven of their former sins. But they were deluded. They were filthy still. They remained defiled by their sin.

The *third generation* is described as ones who are very proud, sinfully proud. We read in **verse 13**, "***There is a generation—oh, how lofty are their eyes! And their eyelids are lifted up.***" This large segment of population was characterized by sinful pride, even arrogance. Perhaps they were proud of their race, or the class into which they were born. Maybe they were proud due to their achievements in life. But it is implied that they were also proud before God. They were self-righteous. Usually people who look upon themselves quite highly will tend to look down on others as quite lowly. They are as the Pharisee that Jesus described as coming into the temple court at the same time as did a broken, apparently repentant corrupt tax collector. Jesus gave forth the parable in this way:

Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: <sup>10</sup>"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' <sup>13</sup>And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' <sup>14</sup>I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The *fourth generation* that Agur identified is in **verse 14**. It reads, "***There is a generation whose teeth are like swords, and whose fangs are like knives, to devour the poor from off the earth, and the needy from among men.***" These people are depicted as cruel and barbaric, who oppress those who are weaker and unable to resist them.

Now it is suggested that each of these four sins may be related to the other three. In other words, it may be that Agur was referring to one wicked generation that was guilty of all four of these sins. It could be shown that the self-righteous Pharisees were guilty of all of these offenses. It is common for the rebellious man (v. 11), to be a self-righteous man (v. 12), who will be a proud man (v. 14), who will also be a cruel man (v. 15). Adam Clarke (1762-1832) commented about this generation with all four of these characteristics

There are such persons in the world. In this... the wise man points out four grand evils that prevailed in his time. The *first*, those who not only did not honor, but who evil-treated, their parents. The *second*, those who were self-righteous, supposing themselves to be *pure*, and were not so. The *third*, those who were full of vanity, pride, and insolence. The *fourth*, the greedy, cruel, and oppressive, and especially oppressive to the poor.<sup>5</sup>

But this generation with these four characteristics are not just evils that "prevailed in his time", but they depict persons that prevail in their evil in all times. This is the common spiritual malady of the fallen human race. Of these four kinds of people, the commentator, **Charles Bridges** (1794-1869) wrote:

Indeed the four generations teach us this lesson, most valuable, yet most humbling, thoroughly to know. Yet so depraved is man, that he does not understand his own depravity. Nothing is so much hidden from him as himself (2 Kings 8:13). He keeps a good opinion of himself, by keeping the light out of the heart and conscience. His imagination fancies good, where there is nothing but hateful deformity.

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<sup>5</sup> Adam Clarke, **Commentary on the Whole Bible**; one-volume edition (Baker Book House, 1967), pp. 550f.

Under this self-delusion, we deal so gently and tenderly with sin, that no conflict is maintained with it, no sorrow or burden felt concerning it. How deeply do we need the searching light and convincing power of the Spirit of God, to show us our abominations; to make us tremble at the sight of them; and to let us see, that our remedy must come from God every moment; that no partial change, no external polish, nothing less than the creating power of God, can reach the case for a cure!<sup>6</sup>

Because of the specific nature of our subject, our attention and focus will be upon the second of these four characteristics of this generation. Again, Proverbs 30:12, reads

There is a generation that is pure in its own eyes,  
Yet is not washed from its filthiness.

This problem was no small matter that characterized just a few people here and there. An entire generation of people was characterized by this condition. This is a general problem, a common malady, that is apparently true of people in general. It was true in the days of Agur, and it is true today. Most people, and certainly most people in churches, believe themselves to be pure, that they are in favor with God, but they are wrong. They have not been cleansed of their sins.

B. “There is a generation that is *pure in its own eyes*, yet is not washed from its filthiness.”

A generation of people may believe themselves to be “pure.” The Hebrew word translated in Proverbs 30:12 as “pure” is *tahor* ( טָהוֹר ). The English word “pure” is an adjective which describes the quality of something or someone. It is used to describe a high quality of gold—“pure gold.” The words of God are said to be “pure.” Psalm 12:6 reads, “The words of the LORD are *pure* words, like silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times.” Another common English translation of this Hebrew word is “clean.” Again, it is an adjective, so it describes the condition of something or a person. The Bible speaks of “clean” animals, “clean” hands, or “clean” persons. Here in Proverbs 30:12 the word “pure”, or perhaps “clean”, describes the quality that these people thought they possessed before God. This generation of people thought themselves to be “pure” or “clean” before God with respect to sin. Sin renders one as “unclean.” To be “clean” is to be without sin, without the pollution that is the result or manifestation of sin. They thought that God regarded them as “pure” or “clean” rather than sinful and guilty. This generation was “pure”, but the problem was that this was true only “in its own eyes”. This was their understanding. They wrongly thought that either sin was not present in them or that God had no regard for their sin, that He overlooked their sin. Perhaps they thought that God had forgiven them for their sin even as they continued to live in their sin. These people thought that God regarded and treated them as “pure” in spite of what they actually were or for what they did. But they were wrong. They were ignorant and perhaps they had been deceived as to their true standing before God.

And so it is today. This is the false understanding of many nominal Christians. There are, I fear, many who claim to be Christian, perhaps multitudes who see themselves as “clean” or “pure” before God with respect to sin. In their own eyes they are convinced that this is so. You cannot convince them otherwise. They have been taught and led to believe that they are “saved.”

C. “There is a generation that is pure in its own eyes, *yet is not washed* from its filthiness.”

The Hebrew word for “washed” is *reckats* ( רָחַץ ). In this verse it might be understood as this generation having not been “washed off.” The people were defiled. They were unclean. They were in need of through washing. But they did not see that they had this need. They thought themselves quite “clean”, that they were prepared and qualified to be in the presence of God and to receive blessing from Him. They were sadly, tragically in ignorance and error regarding themselves.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pp. 603f.

This form of the Hebrew word is used in one other place in the Old Testament. God described the nation of Israel as having been a new born infant but not washed after its birth. Here is Ezekiel 16:4, “And as for your birth, on the day you were born your cord was not cut, ***nor were you washed with water to cleanse you***, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in swaddling cloths.” The idea is that Israel in the beginning was unclean. Israel as an “infant” that had not yet been washed of its birth. It would remain unclean unless and until God had cleansed it.

D. “There is a generation that is pure in its own eyes, yet is not washed ***from its filthiness***.”

The Hebrew word translated “filthiness” is ***zoah*** ( זָוָה ). But it is in a compound form in that it is preceded by a conjunction and single letter preposition, ***wamitsoato*** ( מִתְּוֹתָי ). This one word in Hebrew conveys the phrase, “from its filthiness.” Actually the English word used, “filthiness”, is somewhat sanitized. The same word is used by Isaiah to refer a drunkard’s vomit. Here is Isaiah 28:5-8 that speaks of God bringing salvation to ones who were clean, over against those who lie in their filthy vomit.

In that day the LORD of hosts will be  
For a crown of glory and a diadem of beauty  
To the remnant of His people,  
<sup>6</sup>For a spirit of justice to him who sits in judgment,  
And for strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate.

<sup>7</sup>But they also have erred through wine,  
And through intoxicating drink are out of the way;  
The priest and the prophet have erred through intoxicating drink,  
They are swallowed up by wine,  
They are out of the way through intoxicating drink;  
They err in vision, they stumble in judgment.

<sup>8</sup>***For all tables are full of vomit and filth;  
No place is clean.***

Elsewhere, however, this Hebrew word translated “filthiness” depicts human excrement, or what we might say colloquially--crap. They were as unwashed ones who were covered and soiled with crap. The Assyrian general used this word when he spoke to the Jewish defenders on the walls of Jerusalem in the days of King Hezekiah. He described the great hardship that the Jews would experience in a siege of the city if they did not surrender to Assyria:

But the Rabshakeh said to them, “Has my master sent me to speak these words to your master and to you, and not to the men sitting on the wall, who are doomed with you to eat their own ***dung*** and to drink their own urine?” (2 Kings 18:27)

Again, as we conclude our consideration of this verse of Proverbs 30:12, it reads, “There is a generation that is pure in its own eyes, yet is not washed from its filthiness.” The contrast between how this generation thought of itself and how God thought of them could not be farther removed from one another. They thought themselves to be “pure”, God regarded them as unwashed, covered with drunken vomit and human feces. To God they were as a drunken man having vomited all over himself and had fallen into a cesspool, who was now standing before Him saying, “I am clean.”

Sin has resulted in a person not capable of perceiving his true spiritual condition and how the holy triune God of the Bible views him. He thinks himself to be pure in his own eyes, and he presumes that is how God also regards him. Only the Holy Spirit can reveal to you or me our true spiritual condition and how God actually regards us. Is your perception of your spiritual condition more like this sinful generation of Proverbs 30:12, or is your perception biblically informed and confirmed to you by the comfort and assurance

only the Holy Spirit can rightly impart? May the Lord enable us to rightly assess our condition before the Lord before whom we will one day stand in judgment.

## II. Our understanding and the application of these words to our world today.

### A. The universal uncleanness of all humans everywhere.

What is set forth in Proverbs 30:12 respecting “a generation” should not be viewed as something that is only true of certain people at various times in history. It describes the spiritual malady of all people everywhere in all times. Other statements in Proverbs gives the scope of this problem as being universal to the human condition. “All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the spirit” (Prov. 16:2). “Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the heart” (Prov. 21:2). This is the spiritual condition of all people unless and until they have been washed by the grace of God found only through Jesus Christ. King David spoke of this universal sinful condition in Psalm 14.

The Lord looks down from heaven upon the children of men,  
To see if there are any who understand, who seek God.  
They have all turned aside,  
They have together become corrupt;  
There is none who does good,  
No, not one. (Prov. 14:2f)

### B. What is conveyed by the metaphor of having been “washed”?

Most people in churches would probably answer the question quickly without much thought: “Of course this speaks to the great need and of God’s gracious provision for us to be forgiven of our sins.” But that would be a wrong answer. It would be a common answer to the question, but it would be a mistake. Although receiving the forgiveness of our sins by God is the great need and the great blessing of all who are in Christ, the metaphor of having been “washed” or made “clean” is not a metaphor of the forgiveness of sins. What then does it signify? *Spiritual washing speaks to the need and the experience of ceasing to live for sin and in sin.*

This is a critically important truth to understand. I believe it is the heart of much nominal Christianity. People generally think that they are forgiven of their sins, that they have been “washed”, or forgiven by God for all their sins. But washing speaks of a very real change in the way one thinks and lives. It does not speak directly of God’s forgiveness of sins, but of God’s deliverance from sinning. In short, being washed speaks more to our sanctification by God from sin than it does to our justification by God with respect to our sin. Consider this New Testament passage:

“Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, <sup>10</sup>nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>11</sup>And such were some of you. But *you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified* in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.” (1 Cor. 6:9-11)

These Christians were no longer living as they had formerly, before they had come to Christ. They had repented from their sin, that is, they had turned from practicing their sin to believing and following Jesus Christ.

That “washing” conveys the idea of becoming more holy before God is also suggested by Paul’s instructions to husbands:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, <sup>26</sup>that **He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing** of water by the word, <sup>27</sup>that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. (Eph. 5:25-27)

Paul was not speaking of the husband's sense of value for his wife, but that the husband should be attempting to help his wife to become more holy in her faith and practice. Cleansing speaks of ceasing to sin and living in a holy manner.

John in the Revelation set forth those who had been "washed their robes and made them white by the death of Jesus Christ." John asked his heavenly messenger who these ones were that he saw before him. Revelation 7:14 records the angel's answer to John: "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." And then later in the Revelation the meaning of these washed robes is set forth: "Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready. And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, **for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints**" (Rev. 19:7). Take note that here the white garments are not set forth as the imputed righteousness of Christ in justification, that they are white because their sins have been forgiven, although this is taught in other places in the Scriptures. But here the washed, white linens are the "righteous acts of the saints." Here the metaphor of "washing" speaks of the grace of sanctification, cleansing from sinful living, not the grace of justification, deliverance from sin's penalty.

Peter wrote of false teachers, unconverted men, who had cleaned up their lives in a measure through their knowledge of Jesus Christ, only to return later to their sins. He described them as having formerly washed themselves in a measure, but it had only been temporary.

For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. <sup>21</sup>For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. <sup>22</sup>But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: "A dog returns to his own vomit," and, "a sow, **having washed**, to her wallowing in the mire." (2 Peter 2:20-22)

Of course these men were never regenerate. They never had the new nature that is characteristic of all true Christians. Rather, they had cleaned themselves up in a measure regarding their sins, having washed themselves through the Word of God, but they returned to that which was natural to them, to that which was congruent with their sinful nature. They were never saved men.

I believe that this also explains a rather cryptic statement in 2 Peter 1:9, which reads, "For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins." Here is 2 Peter 2:5-9:

"But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, <sup>6</sup>to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, <sup>7</sup>to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. <sup>8</sup>For if these things are yours and abound, *you* will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup>For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has **forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins**.

Was Peter referring to backslidden Christians, who were truly "saved" but through their neglect and failure had fallen from their sense of assurance of salvation? I think not. I do not believe that the ones he was addressing were true Christians. They were as the false teachers described in the next chapter. They had experienced a measure of cleansing from their sin through the influence of the gospel and hearing the Word of God proclaimed and taught to them. But because they had failed to order their lives in faithful obedience, seeking growth in grace and knowledge of the Lord, they "forgot" or had come to disregard the time in which they had responded to the Word of God so as to wash themselves, that is, clean up their lives in

departing from sin. But their “cleansing” was temporary, not that of true salvation, but only a temporary influence had affected them. They returned to their sin, though they had been for a time like “washed” pigs.

If you are still living in sin and for sin, you have not been *washed* from your sin. If you are living in sin and for sin, you have not yet been *forgiven* by God of your sin. If your “repentance” was only temporary and you have returned to your old ways of thinking and living in sin, your repentance was not true repentance that characterizes regenerate people. Yes, it is possible that you are a true Christian, that you have fallen into sin and have backslidden. But how do you know that is the case with you? Unless you repent afresh, you will die in your sin and be damned due to your sin.

This, of course, is not saying that a true Christian can lose his salvation. That is not possible for the Lord Himself keeps him by the power of His grace through faith (1 Pet. 1:5). But there are many, even multitudes of people who have either grown up in the church or who had at one time aligned with the church in their profession of Christ, but later walked away from the faith or disregarded the faith as the governor of their lives. They were never truly converted. They were unconverted “Christians”, Christians in name only, although they may have cleaned themselves up from egregious sin for a time.

### **C. The work of God’s grace in the sinner that results in repentance from sin and turning to God is what the Bible sets forth as “cleansing.”**

We are cleansed through the grace of regeneration which brings to the sinner the desire to depart from sin and to live according to the will of God, that is, the Word of God. Paul wrote of himself what is true of all Christians.

“For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. <sup>4</sup>But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, <sup>5</sup>not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, *through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit*, <sup>6</sup>whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, <sup>7</sup>that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” (Titus 3:3-7)

Regeneration is another term for having been born again. Regeneration does not speak directly of the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness of sins is due to God’s grace in the sinner’s justification. When a sinner truly believes the gospel, God counts his faith as righteousness. Upon true saving faith God pardons the guilty, ungodly sinner of all sin. God also at that time declares that the gift of the righteousness of Christ is credited to the account of the believing sinner. But please understand, forgiveness of sins and the gift of righteousness in justification says nothing with regard to an actual change in your life, a transformation from the life of a sinner to the life of a saint. Justification takes place in heaven for it is a declaration of God of the believer’s new standing before Him. But regeneration does speak of an actual change that takes place in the heart and life of a sinner by which God sovereignly imparts a new heart and a new mind to the sinner. The result of God’s act of regeneration is shown forth in that one turning from sin and believing on Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, in other words, washing. And then because that believing sinner was born again (regenerated), he begins to grow in his faith and love for God and His Word. Gradually over time he increasingly conforms to the Scriptures in his faith and practice, growing into one more like Jesus Christ. This spiritual growth in holiness is what the Scriptures depict as progressive sanctification. It is this work of God’s grace in regenerating and sanctifying the sinner, that the Bible refers to as being “cleansed” from sin.

### **D. The great need of the church is to reveal to people their true condition before God and their need to be cleansed from their sin.**

Just as the greatest need of this generation in Proverbs 30:12 was for someone to declare to them their true standing and condition before God, so the great need and the great responsibility for the church and its preachers is to proclaim the gospel of faith and repentance. We must use every means God has given us

to enable people to see the truth of their standing before God, that people may be smitten with a sense of their great need and possess the desire to seek a remedy for their miserable spiritual condition.

Repentance from sin is an essential element of gospel preaching. But perhaps one of the greatest errors present among evangelicals today is the absence of the call to repentance in gospel preaching. Sadly, in these days if one comes along and says the Scriptures teach you must repent of sin and believe on Christ for salvation, that voice is dismissed as one who teaches salvation by works. It was **William Booth**, the founder of the Salvation Army who once said in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *“The greatest danger to Christianity in the future will be the promise of forgiveness of sins apart from repentance.”* But we will need to address this matter of repentance at a later time. We will do so probably sooner than later.

What is taught by the Word of God that we have examined today is that it is an easy thing, a natural thing, even a common thing, for many people to be tragically mistaken about their standing before God. They think that they are pure in God’s eyes, but God regards them as defiled and damned. And what we have suggested today is that the way of salvation that is proclaimed by much of Christendom is not what is set forth in the Holy Scriptures. The Word of God declares to us, “If you live in sin, you will die and be damned in your sin. It does not matter what you believe, if you fail or refuse to repent while believing the gospel.” Sadly the message most frequently heard is this, “Believe on the Lord Jesus and you need not do anything. He will freely forgive you regardless of how you live.” That is not biblical salvation. This leads us to draw one final conclusion. Not only is a deficient understanding of salvation popularly proclaimed, but a deficient gospel is all too often taught and believed, one which has not resulted in the true conversion of many, who sadly but wrongly believe that they are right with God. May our Lord help us to be right and true respecting this most important matter!

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“Now may the LORD show steadfast love and faithfulness to you.” (2 Sam. 2:6)

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