

The Christian Life (18): Sanctification (Part 3)

Having considered the distinction and necessity of sanctification, we come this morning to its common mistakes.

Satan knows well the power of true holiness and the immense injury which increased attention to it will do to his kingdom. It is his interest, therefore, to promote strife and controversy about this part of God's truth. Just as in time past he has succeeded in mystifying and confusing men's minds about justification, so he is laboring in the present day to make men 'darken counsel by words without knowledge' about sanctification.¹

I. Sanctification: Its Mistakes

1. *Moralism*. This refers to the attempt to live holy (or be sanctified) apart from God's grace and power. Paul described moralists as "having a form of godliness but denying its power" (2Tim.3:5). They have an external morality without the empowering ministry and presence of the Holy Spirit. This was the mistake of the Pharisees. "Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matt.23:28). Moralism is merely external and never internal. Thus our Savior exhorted His disciples, "unless your righteousness exceeds that righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt.5:20). True righteousness begins on the inside and reveals itself on the outside. It's the outward result of an inward disposition. True morality is the result of a changed nature. It's the outward expression of an inner holiness and purity. "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by its fruit" (Matt.12:33). Moralism is the attempt to have good fruit come from bad trees.

(1) True morality is the consequence of union with Christ. Moralism is the attempt to live morally apart from Christ and the grace of God found in Him. "I am the vine, you are the branches, He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing" (Jn.15:5). "You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (2Tim.2:1). Grace to live holy (power, encouragement, etc.) is only found in Christ. Thus, true holiness is the consequence of union with Christ in whom is grace. "But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God (regeneration), righteousness (justification), sanctification, and redemption (glorification)" (1Cor.1:30). Christ is our sanctification in that He secured it with His blood, exemplified it with His life, and supplies us with His grace.

(2) True morality is the product of the Holy Spirit. "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law" (Gal.5:18). "If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit" (Gal.5:25). To "live in the Spirit" means we live as a result of the Spirit, and thus to "walk in the Spirit" is to walk by the power of the Spirit. This means we are to walk (live) dependent upon the Spirit's ministry within us. We must do nothing that would grieve the Spirit or quench His ongoing work. Thus, as faith is a fruit of the Spirit, to live by the Spirit is to live or walk by faith. The Spirit gives us faith whereby we derive grace (strength) from Christ. "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2Cor.3:18).

First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from Him, all that He has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what He has received

¹ J.C. Ryle, *Holiness*, xviii

from the Father, He had to become ours and to dwell within us. For this reason, He is called 'our Head' (Eph.4:15), and 'the first-born among many brethren' (Rom.8:29). We also, in turn, are said to be 'engrafted into Him' (Rom.11:17), and to 'put on Christ' (Gal.3:27); for, as I have said, all that He possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with Him. It is true that we obtain this by faith. Yet since we see that not all indiscriminately embrace that communion with Christ which is offered through the gospel, reason itself teaches us to climb higher and to examine into the secret energy of the Spirit, by which we come to enjoy Christ and all His benefits.²

The practice of Christian holiness has its rise, *first*, from the Spirit of grace, which Christ has merited for, and bestows on His elect; 'whom the world cannot receive, because it sees Him not, neither knows Him' (Jn.16:17). As He is the Spirit of Christ, He excites in the elect, even the very same motions and inclinations of soul which are in Christ, and molds and forms the whole life of Christ in them; so that they act, not by their own virtue or strength, nor by any innate principle of natural life, but by supernatural grace, and the virtue of Christ (1Cor.15:10); *second*, from faith, 'without which it is impossible to please God' (Heb.11:6). Faith, without which nothing can be done that is acceptable to God, is that virtue or grace, which is the beginning of the spiritual life, or the first work of the Holy Spirit uniting us to Christ. As it apprehends and applies to itself all the efficacy of Christ's merits, it has a power 'of purifying the heart' (Acts 15:9).³

2. *Legalism*. Legalism in the strictest sense is law-keeping in order to find acceptance with God. It's the attempt to obtain salvation through our efforts. But there's another aspect to legalism that's popular among Christians, and that's treating our traditions and opinions as equal to God's law. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel" (Matt.23:23-24). The OT commanded the Jews to give a tenth of their possessions in order to assist and support the Levites. But it never commanded that this tithe include something as minute as herbs. This was a tradition taught by the elders. The Jewish leaders, especially the Pharisees, were fond of expanding the law of God by their traditions. For example, did the OT law command fasting? Yes, so the Pharisees commanded that everyone fast twice a week (Lk.18:12). Did the OT law command various ceremonial washings? Yes, so the Pharisees commanded washing before every meal (Matt.15:1-9). Thus, our Savior was not offended by their tithing of herbs. He expressly says, "These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone." That is, if you want to tithe herbs fine, that's not the issue, the issue is you do so at the expense of what's expressly commanded. The problem was they elevated their traditions to the level of command, imposed them upon everyone else, and actually ignored God's law in the process.

(1) True morality conforms to the law of God. This means, it takes God's law as its only infallible rule to conform to. The moral law of God, as summarized in the Ten Commandments, rightly understood, is the standard of holiness. In fact, Walter Marshall (1628-1680), in his classic *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, described true sanctification as "that which our hearts and lives are conformed to the law of

² John Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1

³ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 2:26-27

God."⁴ He further said, "present holiness is no more than an acceptable performance of these duties of the law, such as our gracious merciful God will certainly delight in, and be pleased with, during our state of imperfection in this world, and such as will end in perfection of holiness, and all happiness in the world to come."⁵ Simply put, true holiness is heart conformity to the spirituality of the law (Rom.7:14).

(2) True morality is done for the glory of God. That is, its final goal or purpose is the glory of God and not merely the praise of men. "Take heed that you do not your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven" (Matt.6:1). This is in contrast to legalism, which merely has a love for morality. "But all their works they do to be seen by men" (Matt.23:5). "The practice of Christian holiness flows from the love of God, and consists in that very ambition, of doing what is acceptable to God. And in this, Christian holiness surpasses all the virtuous actions of the Heathen, who were very justly commended, if what they did proceeded from the love of that virtue they were acquainted with; but as that love did not ascend to God Himself, but centered in a created, nay, and a very defective thing, such as their virtue was, it was not a holy love but a vicious affection, which indirectly and sinfully terminates in man himself" (Witsius).⁶

3. *Passivism*. While this view takes many forms, at its root is the denial that Christians labor and strive in sanctification. It stresses the need to rest, wait, and abide in God, while refraining from all work and effort. A classic example of passivism (or as it's also called quietism) is Andrew Murray's *Abide in Christ*. He said, "We must cease entirely from our own doing and wait for the working of God in us. As we cease from self-effort, faith assures us that God does what He has undertaken, and works in us, And what God does is to renew, to sanctify, and waken all our energies to their highest power. So that just in proportion as we yield ourselves a truly passive instrument in the hand of God, will we be wielded of God as the active instrument of His almighty power." He then concluded, "The soul in which the wonderful combination of perfect passivity with the highest activity is most completely realized, has the deepest experience of what the Christian life is."⁷

Thus, passivism misses the intimate relation between the work of the Spirit and the soul in the pursuit of sanctification. While we remain utterly dependent upon the Spirit's work in us, we are repeatedly exhorted to work out that which the Spirit works in. "Therefore work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Phil.2:12-13). "To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily" (Col.1:29). "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal.2:20). "Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might" (Eph.6:10). "Sanctification may be considered as a privilege, and as a duty. In the one view it is the work of God, and in the other it is the work of man, assisted by supernatural grace" (Dick).⁸ "Our activity is enlisted to the fullest extent in the process of sanctification. But we must not rely upon our own strength of resolution or purpose. It is when we are weak that we are strong" (Murray).⁹ "Sanctification is a privilege, for it is purchased for

⁴ Walter Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, 6

⁵ Walter Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, 2

⁶ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 2:28

⁷ Andrew Murray, *Abide in Christ*, 128

⁸ John Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 3:45

⁹ John Murray, *Collected Writings*, 2:294

us, given to us, and wrought in us by the sanctifying Spirit. It is also a duty as we study it, attain to higher degrees of it, and daily receive it out of the fullness of Christ by faith" (Colquhoun).¹⁰

Passivism misunderstands how faith works differently in our justification and sanctification. In our justification it's passive (it merely receives), but in our sanctification it's active (it receives and works). "We are sanctified by faith, but not merely by faith resting on God's promises, but also by faith working by God's directives" (Waldron).¹¹ That is to say, in our justification faith merely receives from Christ, whereas in our sanctification it receives from Christ and works for Christ. In the first it is passive and in the second active. "Scripture nowhere teaches that faith *sanctifies* us in the same sense and in the same manner that faith *justifies* us. Justifying faith is a grace that 'works not,' but simply trusts, rests and leans on Christ (Rom.4:5). Sanctifying faith is a grace of which the very life is action: it 'works by love' and, like a mainspring, moves the whole inward man (Gal.5:6)" (Ryle).¹² Thus, while we are justified and sanctified by faith, faith does not justify and sanctify in the same exact way. With reference to our sanctification, it enables us to work, labor, strive, run, pursue, wrestle, and fight. "Fight the good fight of faith" (1Tim.6:12).

It is true, religion in the souls of men is the immediate work of God, and all our natural endeavors can neither produce it alone, nor merit those supernatural aids by which it must be wrought: the Holy Ghost must come upon us, and the power of the Highest must overshadow us, before that holy thing can be begotten, and Christ be formed in us: but yet we must not expect that this whole work should be done without any concurring endeavors of our own: we must not lie loitering in the ditch, and wait till Omnipotence pull us from thence; no, no! We must bestir ourselves and actuate those powers which we have already received: we must put forth ourselves to our utmost capacities, and then we may hope that 'our labor shall not be in vain in the Lord' (1Cor.15:58).¹³

4. *Asceticism*. This is the mindset that thinks self-denial of basic comforts somehow renders the soul more holy. This view became popular in the fourth century with the rise of monasticism. Such monastics denied themselves the basics of this life in an attempt to be holy. It has its origin in the NT pagan philosophy of Gnosticism (which viewed the body with its natural desires as evil). "These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humiliation and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh" (Col.2:23). "Asceticism developed as Christians responded to persecution of the church by the world and later to the worldliness of the church whose members chose to be culturally acceptable" (Beeke).¹⁴ This distortion of holiness found its fullest expression Roman Catholicism. "Asceticism is essential to the Roman Catholic pursuit of holiness. According to the Roman Catholic Church, monks, nuns, and members of other special orders who take vows of 'chastity, poverty and obedience,' which require the practice of 'mortification' of the flesh, are 'following Christ with greater freedom and imitating Him more closely'" (Beeke).¹⁵ In contrast to this, Scripture exhorts us to use the lawful enjoyments of this life in a moderate and thankful way (1Tim.4:1-5). Furthermore, Scripture portrays Christians as shining in the midst of a dark world and not hiding from it. "Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God

¹⁰ John Colquhoun, *Sermons*, 187

¹¹ Sam Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 215

¹² J.C. Ryle, *Holiness*, xix

¹³ Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, 94-95

¹⁴ Joel Beeke, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 3:649

¹⁵ Joel Beeke, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 3:649

without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world" (Phil.2:14-15). "I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world" (Jn.17:15-16).

5. *Perfectionism*. While this view has several variations, its most common version is that of Wesleyanism. In fact, John Wesley (1703-1791) is in many ways the father of perfectionism. Wesley did not believe in complete sinlessness, but believed Christians could achieve a level of sanctification that was void of any known offense. This he referred to as "entire sanctification." "It is thus that we wait for entire sanctification, for a full salvation from all our sins, from pride, self-will, anger, unbelief. Or, as the Apostle expressed it, 'go on to perfection.' But what is perfection? The word has various senses. Here it means perfect love. It is love excluding sin; love filling the heart, taking up the whole capacity of the soul" (Wesley).¹⁶ For Wesley and historic Wesleyan Methodism, perfectionism and entire sanctification are synonymous. It refers to "a state of perfect love, righteousness and true holiness which every regenerate believer may obtain." "John Wesley taught that Christians could attain 'perfection,' though he did not refer to freedom from ignorance, intellectual mistakes, or weakness of mind. He spoke of a perfection consisting in a freedom from voluntary violations of God's laws, 'loving God with all the heart, so that every evil temper is destroyed and every thought and word and work springs from and is conducted to that end by the pure love of God and our neighbor'" (Beeke).¹⁷ "John Wesley said that Christian perfection means that Christian men and women are not willfully committing any known sin at any given moment. John Wesley granted that they may be committing sins that they are not aware of, but he very carefully defines it as not being guilty *willfully* of any known sin. It is a moment-by-moment state, says Wesley; you may sin the next moment but you are perfect at this moment. And it only applies to known sins" (MLJ).¹⁸

The nineteenth-century saw an advancement in Wesley's doctrine. "Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection morphed into a number of forms in the nineteenth century. While there is diversity among them, they shared the common idea that Christians must seek a further blessing after conversion that elevates them to a higher level of spirituality" (Beeke).¹⁹ This became known as the Holiness Movement and gained a wide following through the ministries of D.L. Moody (1839-1899), A.B. Simpson (1843-1919), and R.A. Torrey (1856-1928). Perhaps more than anyone, Charles Finney (1792-1875) advanced and systematized Wesley's view of entire sanctification. "He wrote in 1839 that believers must yield themselves to the Holy Spirit and thus receive Him by faith after their conversion. The promise in the new covenant of the sanctifying Holy Spirit was fulfilled at Pentecost, but Christians must individually appropriate it by faith" (Beeke).²⁰ Finney said, "Sanctification may be entire in two senses: (1) In the sense of present, full obedience, or entire consecration to God; and (2) In the sense of continued, abiding consecration or obedience to God. Entire sanctification, when the terms are used in this sense, consists in being established, confirmed, preserved, continued in a state of sanctification or of entire consecration to God."²¹ The way to achieve entire sanctification is to receive the Spirit by faith, who enables us to avoid temptations that may overcome us. It's not until the Spirit is received by faith, can a believer be fully and entirely sanctified. "This can only be done through and by the Holy Spirit, who takes of the

¹⁶ John Wesley, *The Scripture-Way of Salvation*, 10

¹⁷ Joel Beeke, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 3:654

¹⁸ M.L. Jones, *Great Doctrines of the Bible*, 3:196

¹⁹ Joel Beeke, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 3:655

²⁰ Joel Beeke, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 3:655-656

²¹ Charles Finney, *Systematic Theology*, 341

things of Christ and shows them to us. He so reveals Christ, the soul receives Him to the throne of the heart, to reign throughout the whole being."²²

According to Finney, every Christian should seek entire sanctification for two reasons: "1. It is self-evident, that entire obedience to God's law is possible on the ground of natural ability. The law is clean: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind, and with all thy strength.' Now, as entire sanctification consists in perfect obedience to the law of God, and as the law requires nothing more than the right use of whatever strength we have, it is, of course, forever settled, that a state of entire sanctification is attainable in this life, on the ground of natural ability."²³ "2. The provisions of grace are such as to render its actual attainment in this life, the object of reasonable pursuit. It is admitted that the entire sanctification of the church is to be accomplished. It is also admitted that this work must be accomplished, 'through the sanctification of the Spirit and the belief of the truth.' It is also universally agreed that this work must be begun here; and also that it must be completed before the soul can enter heaven."²⁴ Thus, for Finney, the fact that God's law is perfect argues the ability to live perfectly. This is further underscored as the Spirit gives us sufficient grace to live perfectly.

In response, it's agreed that every Christian should strive for perfection. "All admit that we are bound to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect" (Hodge).²⁵ But striving for perfection and obtaining it (in this life), are two very different things. "Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me" (Phil.3:12). And when Scripture describes a saint as perfect, "this means in some cases merely that they are full-grown (1Cor.2:6), and in others that they are fully equipped for their task (2Tim.3:17)" (Berkhof).²⁶ Finally, when John declares that they who are born of God do not sin (1Jn.3:6, 8, 9; 5:18), "he is contrasting the two states, represented by the old and the new man, as to their essential nature and principle" (Berkhof).²⁷ "Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous. He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning" (1Jn.3:7-8). "Therefore, we reject perfectionism, and we warn our fellow believers against the spiritual elitism that such teaching promotes. Biblical realism demands that we face the ugliness of our remaining sin. However, we must also reject a lazy compromise with sin. We must set our sights on the ideal of perfect obedience. Let us pursue holiness with all our might. Our prayer must be, 'Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me and lead me in the way everlasting' (Ps.139:23-24)" (Beeke).²⁸

²² Charles Finney, *Systematic Theology*, 377

²³ Charles Finney, *Systematic Theology*, 343-344

²⁴ Charles Finney, *Systematic Theology*, 344

²⁵ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:245

²⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 2:539

²⁷ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 2:539

²⁸ Joel Beeke, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 3:655