

“What it Means to be Reformed”; Session # 49 – “Perseverance in Evangelical Obedience”, Prepared for the Adult Sunday School Class on August 23rd, 2015, by Pastor Paul Rendall.

The Doctrine of the Saints persevering in faith and obedience is meant to be understood in terms of evangelical obedience.

1. What is evangelical obedience?

Evangelical obedience is our striving toward that perfection which God expects of every Christian in conjunction with the grace of Christ which is given to them. A Christian strives toward perfection even though God knows, and we should know, that our obedience will have imperfections attendant to it. It is based upon the grace which is imparted to us by Christ, through the Holy Spirit, after we believe in Him for salvation. This obedience of the believer is their sincerely going about to keep all of the moral commandments and ethical principles of the Word of God, not in order to merit favor with God, for that has been accomplished by Christ Himself, but to glorify God from a heart which is thankful for all that Christ has done for them.

Matthew 5: 43-48 – “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ “But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” “For if you love those who love you, what reward have you?” “Do not even the tax collectors do the same? “And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others?” “Do not even the tax collectors do so?” “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.”

To be perfect in this case is to love like the heavenly Father loves (show kindness) to evil people who do not acknowledge Him. His love truly is perfect. Inasmuch as we imitate the Father in our love for people who hate us and curse us and persecute us, by praying for them and doing good to them, we are becoming more and more like the Father.

b. Two usages of the word “perfect” - Philippians 3: 12 – “Not that I have already obtain it (the resurrection from the dead) or have become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.”

Philippians 3: 15 – “Let us therefore, as many as are perfect (“mature” in the New King James), have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; however, let us keep living by the same standard to which have attained.”

Johann Bengel in his commentary says: “Τέλειος means often not absolutely perfect, but one having attained the full limit of stature, strength, etc., which constitute the man’s τέλος, opposed to νεοί or παῖδες, youths or children. See 1Co_2:6. So Paul here, ver. 15, claims to be τέλειος, fully established in the things of God, no longer a babe in Christ. Yet in ver. 12 he denies that he is as yet τετελειωμένος (a race-course expression), i.e. crowned with the garland of victory, his course completed, and perfection absolutely reached.”

2. Evangelical Obedience is based upon the reality of the doctrine of justification; believed in, held to, and acted upon, in the Christian's living their life unto God.

Romans 5: 1-5 – “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” “And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character hope.” “Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy spirit who was given to us.”

You can see here that when a sinful person believes in Jesus they are justified by faith, and they have peace with God through Christ. They have access by faith into this grace in which they stand. It is this phrase, “this grace in which we stand”, that we need to think about in relation to perseverance. As Christians we stand in the grace of imputed righteousness; that is, we stand in Christ's righteousness which is imputed to our persons and to our legal standing in the sight of God, continually, all through our life until our death. We are no longer under God's condemnation and wrath; there is no condemnation for those who are “in Christ Jesus”. And we can also, it says here, “rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” What does that last phrase mean? It means that we can rejoice that God will perfect that which He has begun in our lives, and He will bring us to glory. It is not something that we need to doubt and fear will not happen, but something which we should look forward to, and expect. We have this sure hope that will not disappoint us, because we have been justified.

We also know the reality of the imparted grace of Christ. We have the love of God poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us. Therefore, we can also even glory in all of our tribulations knowing that they will produce perseverance and proven character. All of the defects in our striving to keep God's law; all the omissions in duty and actual failures to do His will at many points will all be covered by the precious blood and righteousness of Christ. In all of these considerations we remember our need to confess our sins and to forsake them in repentance. We do not continue in sin that grace may abound, but the blood and righteousness of Christ does indeed cover all of our transgressions. They are forgiven and they are not remembered by the Lord because of Christ. Our goal is to learn and to grow up into greater Christ-likeness over the time of our earthly pilgrimage.

John Calvin says this:

“And by the word stand, he means, that faith is not a changeable persuasion, only for one day; but that it is immutable, and that it sinks deep into the heart, so that it endures through life. It is then not he, who by a sudden impulse is led to believe, that has faith, and is to be reckoned among the faithful; but he who constantly, and, so to speak, with a firm and fixed foot, abides in that station appointed to him by God, so as to cleave always to Christ.

And glory in the hope, etc. The reason that the hope of a future life exists and dares to exult, is this, — because we rest on God's favor as on a sure foundation: for Paul's meaning is, that though the faithful are now pilgrims on the earth, they yet by hope scale the heavens, so that they quietly enjoy in their own bosoms their future inheritance. And hereby are subverted two of the most pestilent dogmas of the sophists. (Those who think that they are wise, but not) What they do in the first place is, they bid Christians to be satisfied with moral conjecture as to the perception of God's favor towards them; and secondly, they teach that all are uncertain as to their final perseverance; but except there be at present sure knowledge, and a firm and undoubting persuasion as to the future, who would dare to glory? The hope of the glory of God has shone upon us through the gospel, which testifies that we shall be participators of the Divine nature; for when we shall see God face to face, we shall be like him.”

John Owen says: “The saints weigh their own righteousness in the balance, and find it wanting.... In particular: they daily weigh all their particular actions in the balance, and find them wanting, as to any such completeness as, upon their own account, to be accepted with God. “Oh!” says a saint, “if I had nothing to commend me unto God but this prayer, this duty, this conquest of a temptation, wherein I myself see so many failings, so much imperfection, could I appear with any boldness before him? Shall I, then, piece up a garment of righteousness out of my best duties? Ah! it is all as a defiled cloth,” Isaiah 64:6. These thoughts accompany them in all their duties, in their best and most choice performances: — “Lord, what am I in my best estate? How little suitableness unto thy holiness is in my best duties! O spare me, in reference to the best thing that ever I did in my life!” Nehemiah 13:22. When a man who lives upon convictions has got some enlargements in duties, some conquest over a sin or temptation, he hugs himself, like Micah when he had got a Levite to be his priest: now surely it shall be well with him, now God will bless him: his heart is now at ease; he has peace in what he has done. But he who has communion with Christ, when he is highest in duties of sanctification and holiness, is clearest in the apprehension of his own unprofitableness, and rejects every thought that might arise in his heart of setting his peace in them, or upon them. He says to his soul, “Do these things seem something to thee? Alas! thou hast to do with an infinitely righteous God, who looks through and through all that vanity, which thou art but little acquainted withal; and should he deal with thee according to thy best works, thou must perish.” - Vol. 2 of his *Works*, P. 188, *Of Communion with the Son Jesus Christ*.