

## "Sanctification" is Sinless Perfection Possible in This Life?

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TEXT.—Matt. 5:48: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." (A. V.) Or: "Ye therefore shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (R. V.)

In this text we are commanded to be perfect. The command is from the lips of our Lord himself and must be obeyed by all his disciples. The standard of perfection is likeness to God, and is expressed in the last clause of the text, "even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." It is this state of perfection, or likeness to God, which we call "sanctification."

In order that we may get a clear idea as to what the goal really is which we are commanded to win, we will consider:

I.—The Nature and Requirements of Sanctification.—Sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit, by which the new disposition imparted to the individual at regeneration is maintained and strengthened. As regeneration and conversion are but two sides of the same change, so also sanctification is the name which we apply to the work of the Holy Spirit in strengthening the Christian character, and when viewed from the human aspect we give it the name perseverance. Sanctification and Perseverance are then names of the same operation as it appears from different points of view. In the twofold and inseparable act of regeneration and justification there is implanted within the soul the germ of new life. Sanctification is the nurturing of that germ into flowering and fruitage,—what the apostle Peter calls "growing in grace." In the New Testament, sanctification as a term is used to express consecration to God in the sense of objective dedication to him. We also find it used in the sense of inward perfection or personal holiness, and sometimes we find that it expresses a combination of these senses. We use here the second meaning and present this problem for solution:—Is perfection or personal holiness attainable in this life?

The standard of requirement which is given to us is nothing less than complete conformity to God's Law, which is the expression of the Divine character. Sanctification implies likeness to God. It is this standard to which Christ referred when the young ruler came to him with the question, "Good Master what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The reply was, "Why callest thou me good? there is none good but God only." The manifest purpose of Christ here is to direct the attention of the young man from the merely human to the one and only absolute standard of perfection.

A narrow and superficial view of the requirements of sanctification is the cause of numerous doctrinal errors and their attendant evils. We are not free from obligation to keep the Law as some would teach. While Christ did render perfect obedience, yet this does not make the believer free to disregard the claims of the Law. The Moral law is an expression of the Divine character and as such must be obeyed; for "whosoever shall break one of these least commandments and shall teach men so, shall be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, he shall be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven." The injunction is, "to do and to teach." That freedom from the law of which the Scripture speaks, is a freedom from the constraint and the bondage of the law to all who are united to Christ: yes, it is also freedom from the penalty of a broken law, for we have become one with Christ who has himself paid the penalty for us. Christ's spirit of obedience is imparted to the believer so that whereas he once felt the galling yoke of the law, now he says "Oh how I love thy law, it is my meditation all the day," for thy law is written on my heart. The Christian is thus to render a free and willing obedience; he is commanded to be perfect, "ye therefore shall be perfect," he is commanded to be holy, "be ye holy for I am holy;" and yet he knows that when he has made his greatest effort to obey these injunctions that he is still only a poor imperfect Christian, and must cast himself continually on the mercy of God. "Christ is the end of the law unto righteousness to every one that believeth," and since we have been crucified with Christ he has redeemed us from the curse of the Law.

We should be careful not to make the standard of God's requirements too low. Divine law is not a sliding scale of moral requirement graduated according to the different conditions of men, but rather the unchangeable reflection of God's holiness. Our obligation to God remains the same whether we realize it or not. If sin consisted only in wilful transgression of known law, then we might have this variable standard, or sliding scale of requirements according to the knowledge possessed by each individual. But when we consider that sin includes more than mere outward acts, and has to do with the disposition, the inward state of the heart, then there is revealed to us a world of wicked desires and unholy aspirations; we see that we are utterly unable to choose God supremely at every moment. Every human will is to a greater or less degree enslaved by sin, so that on account of the depravity with which we came into the world, and on account of the character which has be-

come fixed in us, it is impossible for a man perfectly at any moment to obey the whole law of God.

But the question may be asked, Does God command us to do that which we are unable to perform? Does he make requirements of us which we are unable to fulfil? The answer is, Yes, he does. We cannot possibly keep Divine requirements; only an unfallen being can do that. Divine ideals have never yet been realized by mortal man; wherever you find a law of individual conduct that requires a perfection within your reach, you may be certain that such a law does not represent divine thought. If a moral law be given by God it must naturally be a perfect law, whether it be kept by many or none; and though it be kept by none it cannot be pronounced useless, because it reveals what the Christian ought to be, and to do, and shows to those who are saved the degree of sin still in their hearts and lives, as well as the wondrous grace of God toward his wayward children. In making a requirement of us, Divinity could set before us nothing less than absolute perfection, and humanity will never really be satisfied with anything less than the final fulfilment of this requirement which God will ultimately perform for those that love him. From a consideration of its nature and requirements we are led to think that sanctification is not attainable in this life, but it is well to ask what are the statements of Scripture upon the question.

II. The explicit Scripture statements are numerous. We find assertions that all men are sinners, and distinct denials that any man on earth lives without sin. In 1 Kings 8:46 we read, "there is no man that sinneth not." Eccl. 7:20, "Surely there is not a righteous man upon the earth that doeth good and sinneth not." James 3:2, "For in many things we all stumble." 1 John 1:8, "If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." From these and other passages which might be quoted it does not appear that sinless perfection is possible in this life. And yet are there not other statements of Scripture which express the opposite view? Does not Paul say in Romans 6 that "our old man was crucified with him that the body of sin might be destroyed?" and does he not speak of Christians as being "free from sin," "dead to sin," and "alive to God?" Yes, but he also admonishes these same Christians to "Let not sin reign in your mortal body." Why should he ask such saints the question, "shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" These Christians at Rome were living without condemnation, but their is no evidence that they were living without sin.

Paul addresses one of his epistles to "The Church of God at Corinth," and in it he speaks of the Corinthian Christians as "sanctified in Jesus Christ, called to be holy," and in the 6th chapter of the same epistle after speaking of fornicators, drunkards, thieves and idolaters, he adds these words: "And such were some of you, but ye were washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God." These people were new creatures, made holy by regeneration, a holy principle had been implanted within their souls though much of the evil still remained. The expression "ye are sanctified" and the designation "saints" as used by Paul, are expressive of a holiness existing in germ or of what they would finally be through Christ to whom they were united by faith.

In the first epistle of John we read these words: "Every one that abideth in him, sinneth not, whosoever sinneth hath not seen him neither knows him. He that committeth sin is of the devil, and whosoever hath been begotten of God, doth not commit sin," etc. . . . These words seem to teach that all Christians live without sin, and that the "anointing of the Holy one" secures to all a knowledge of Christian truth. But such an interpretation makes John contradict himself again and again in this same epistle. His language must here be supposed to set forth the character and workings of the new disposition originated by the Holy Spirit, or else to describe the ideal life of the renewed soul. The language of John here reminds us of Paul's distinction in the 7th chapter of Romans between the "inner man" or "true self," and "the old man" or "the body of sin." Divine truth as revealed in the Scripture seems often to be between two extremes, it is emphatically so in this case. What a paradox seems to be here presented: the one class of texts enjoins perfection and holiness and apparently speaks of living Christians as such, while on the other hand we read that "if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."

We find that Scripture sanctification is represented as a continuous process. Though we are "sinful in self" yet we shall be "sinless in Christ," for the day will come when he shall perfect in us the work that is now begun. In Col. 3:9, 10, we read "Lie not one to another seeing that ye have put off the old man with his doings, and have put on the new man, which is being renewed unto knowledge after the image of him who created him." In Acts 2:47, and 1 Cor. 1:18, we read of those who are "being saved," thus speaking of the work of God in a progressive sense. Holiness as well as sin is a germ whose nature is to grow if the conditions of growth are not lacking; hence we have the injunction of the apostle Peter, "But grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." We are exhorted to "give all diligence, add to your faith virtue, and to virtue knowledge, and to knowledge temperance, and to temperance patience, and to patience godliness, and to godliness brotherly-kindness, and to brotherly-kindness charity." Such an exhortation as this must have been addressed to those who were expected to make progress in their Christian life. A very large portion of the precepts of the New Testament addressed to Christians are in harmony with this idea. As the prayer for the regeneration of a sinner assumes that the regeneration has not taken place, so Paul's prayers for the sanctification of his brethren show the moral imperfections of the Christians for whom they are offered. In the prayer which our Lord gave to his disciples we are to ask for forgiveness. It was manifestly intended for daily use as shown by the expression, "Give us this day our daily bread;" and then follow the words, "forgive us our trespasses as we have forgiven those who have trespassed against us."

We all have need daily to pray for pardoning mercy, for as we learn more about the character of God we shall, by contrast have new revelations of our own sinfulness so that we may well cry out "unclean," "unclean." And the more we know of his holiness and purity of being, so much the more shall we "put our hands to our mouths and our mouths in the dust and cry unclean." There is no more room for the Pharisaic spirit, but like the poor publican of old, in God's presence we can only say "God be merciful to me a sinner."

But some one asks, when does sanctification take place? Do we not read that "This is the will of God, even your sanctification, and are we not commanded to "be perfect," and to "be holy?" Yes, "even as God is holy," but this can never come to pass in its completeness while we remain in this earthly tabernacle.

The Scriptures represent sanctification of the soul as complete only at death, and of the body at the resurrection; for it is then that Christ "shall fashion anew this body of our humiliation, that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, according to the working whereby he is able to subject all things unto himself." (Phil. 3:21). In Jude 24 we read: "He shall guard you from stumbling, and set you before the presence of his glory, without blemish in exceeding joy." In Col. 3:4, "When Christ who is our life shall be manifested, then ye shall also with him be manifested in glory." And in Rev. 14:5 we read: "And in their mouth was found no lie, they were without blemish." Oh yes, brethren, we may be certain concerning our sanctification in the future state. We have definite assurances on that point. It is then that we are to look for the accomplishment of our perfect conformity to the likeness of God—our sanctification will be complete when we awake in eternity and behold our Lord and Saviour in unveiled glory. This is the celestial paradise upon which Christians should fix their earnest gaze, this is the heavenly prize which we may win through the grace of Christ Jesus our Lord.

III. But let us notice in the third place: The Testimony of Christian Experience.—We shall touch this point briefly, as after all it is only confirmatory to the Scripture teaching.

1. Do we find complete sanctification set forth in the experience of the most saintly of Biblical characters? Let us see: Noah was not perfect, Abraham practised dissimulation concerning his wife, Isaac indulged in sinful partiality toward Esau, Jacob evidently had blemishes on his character, Lot was shamefully overcome by temptation, Moses' sin kept him from the Promised Land, Aaron helped forward the plans for idolatry, David sinned so that his holy soul was afterwards humbled to the dust, Solomon's old age was disgraced by his sins, Job and Jeremiah impatiently cursed the day of their birth. We need not speak of the faults of Eli, Samuel, Asa, Hezekiah and Josiah; and yet we may well ask, where in the Old Testament will we find complete sanctification if not among these grand characters who enjoyed so much the favor of God.

We find the same to be true of New Testament Christians. Not one of them is presented to us as faultless. Even in the little band of Christ's disciples we observe the spirit of worldly ambition, for they become warm in a dispute as to who shall be the greatest and they bring their dispute to Christ for settlement. Peter apparently so strong and true denied his Lord, and in later years Paul says of him, "When Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face because he was to be blamed." We therefore see that the apostle whose very name denotes firmness and constancy was in himself both weak and sinful. James and John were actuated by a spirit of revenge when they commanded fire to come down from heaven and consume the Samaritans who refused to receive their Master. Paul asserts the reality of his faith and piety, but not that he is perfect. His words are, "Not as though I had already attained, or am already made perfect: brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended, but I press on toward the goal," etc.

In the 7th chapter of Romans we have a picture of Paul's experience. He is evidently referring to his life after regeneration, for he uses such terms as cannot be applied to an unregenerate man. And what does he say: He speaks of sin dwelling within him, of willing to do what he cannot perform. He finds a law that when he would do good evil is present. He delights in the law of God after the inward man, and yet realizes that there is a warring principle against the good within him, so that he exclaims, "Oh wretched man that I am," etc. In Gal. 5:17 Paul also speaks of the inward spiritual conflict as common among Christians. "The flesh lusteth against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary the one to the other so that ye cannot do the things ye would." Many of us have had experiences like these, when we have felt the power of the unseen evil one within us so that we have almost despaired of release, and with Paul we can only thank God that our final deliverance is certain through Jesus Christ our Lord. Thus we see that the experience of Biblical characters confirms and establishes Biblical doctrine.

2. We find that the experience of the church of God in our day is in harmony with the testimony of patriarchs, prophets, apostles and saints of New Testament days. Who are the men who have been most honored of God in the work of upbuilding his kingdom. In the confessions of the great Augustine the power of indwelling sin is acknowledged with an intensity of penitential sorrow. Luther, Baxter, Owen, Flavel, Charnock, Bates, Howe, Bunyan and a host of men of that age are united in acknowledging the exceeding amount of sin remaining in God's people. Who has not heard of Edwards, Brainerd or Payson as they confessed and mourned over sins that were mixed with their holiest services for God. John Newton, Winter, Scott, Martyn and many more who are thought of by us as eminently spiritual, have always been full of confessions of sinfulness. If these men are not real saints, then we ask where shall we look for them? "By their fruits ye shall know them." The experience of the church is that "true holiness is always accompanied by a keen sense of sin and a state of greater humility.

Some useful lessons are suggested by the consideration of this theme which we will mention by way of conclusion. The first is—

A Word to the Indifferent.—As perfection is our aim we should never be satisfied with present attainments. It is our duty "to strive" earnestly to reach the goal set

before us. "Why should I be so holy? And because life they be the words of the perfect, even perfect." In motive of it has set the reach it. (be a heresy yet it is a main inducement. Our hour to be taught us earnest walking in spirit can do with Only by faith in our Master ever ready. In such a your all in under-world fore arise the God, that y and having your content let it excite crown of life eternal pro the war; the Go on from promised to of our Lord. We have ful of your holy law, y people now faction who either that God—has p different to true that the condition; much more to see with Humility preach to t mention th of their acc "enter not sight shall n of Israel: o our righteous "though on request for God has p destitute. poor in spiri man. He v sent attain that on whi foundation. "In exact does it shrin ready attain remaining a We find a not be disc failure shoul In our effor appointed. round that hoped and s that sanctifi God. We e the Holy Sp we appropri vation," bu God that we The proce certain cou come like G use every ep tate much n character is become lik anew your Only he cat are consciou ness, and y has promise We say: De the future s attain unt Death in abodes of m ance from t there is not the struggle of my last "earthly ho that I may purity and a boundless delight,—if The valley beyond are Let no o our "comple is." Thoug from spiriti from streng every one o citizenship i city. There certain of fi