

STUDIES ON SAVING FAITH Part IV 14. ITS ATTAINMENT

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Transcript

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Part IV

14. ITS ATTAINMENT

In writing to a company of the saints an apostle was inspired to declare, "Being confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in you will perform (or "finish") it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). That is what distinguishes the regenerate children of God from empty professors, from those who while having a "name to live" are really spiritually dead (Rev. 3:1). This is what differentiates true Christians from deluded ones. And in what does this "good work" which is "begun" within the saved consist? It is variously described in different Scriptures. It is the heart in being purified by faith (Acts 15:9). It is the love of God being shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). It is the laws of God being written in their hearts (Heb. 8:10). Thus, the nature of Christian assurance is a well-founded knowledge that I am a child of God. The basis of this assurance is that there is an unmistakable agreement between my character, experience, and life, and the description which Holy Writ furnishes of the characters, experiences, and lives of God's children. Therefore, the attainment of assurance is by an impartial scrutiny of myself and an honest comparing of myself with the scriptural marks of God's children. A reliable and satisfactory assurance can only be attained or reached by means of a thorough self-examination. "O therefore, Christians, rest not till you can call this rest your own. Sit not down without assurance. Get alone, and bring thy heart to the bar of trial: force it to answer the interrogatories put to it; set the qualifications of the saints on one side, and the qualifications of thy soul on the other side, and then judge what resemblance there is between them. Thou hast the same Word before thee, by which to judge thyself now, as thou shalt be judged by at the great day. Thou mayest there read the very articles upon which thou shalt be tried; try thyself by these articles now. Thou mayest there know beforehand on what terms men shall then be acquitted or condemned. Try now whether thou art possessed of that which will acquit thee, or whether thou be in the condition of those that will be condemned; and accordingly acquit or condemn thyself. Yet be sure thou judge by a true touchstone, and mistake not the scripture description of a saint, that thou neither acquit nor condemn thyself by mistake" (The Saint's Everlasting Rest, Richard Baxter, 1680). The need for such self-examination is indeed great, for multitudes are deceived; quite sure that they are Christians, yet without the marks of one. "They say they are saved, and they stick to it they are, and think it wicked to doubt it; but yet they have no reason to warrant their

confidence. There is a great difference between presumption and full assurance. Full assurance is reasonable: it is based on solid ground. Presumption takes for granted, and with brazen face pronounces that to be its own to which it has no right whatever. Beware, I pray thee, of presuming that thou art saved. If thy heart be renewed, if thou shalt hate the things that thou didst once love, and love the things that thou didst once hate; if thou hast really repented; if there be a thorough change of mind in thee; if thou be born again, then thou hast reason to rejoice: but if there be no vital change, no inward godliness; if there be no love to God, no prayer, no work of the Holy Spirit, then thy saying 'I am saved' is but thine own assertion, and it may delude, but it will not deliver thee" (C. H. Spurgeon on 1 Chron. 4:10). O what efforts Satan puts forth to keep people from this vitally important and all-necessary work of self-examination. He knows full well that if many of his deceived victims set about the task in earnest, they would soon discover that no miracle of Divine grace has been wrought in them, and that this would cause them to seek the Lord with all their hearts. He knows too that real Christians would gain much advantage against the power of indwelling sin would they but thoroughly search their own hearts. Many are diverted from this wholesome work by the evil example set by so many who now bear the name of Christ. Not a few argue, if he or she (that claims to have been a Christian so much longer and appears to know the Bible so much better), who is so worldly, so governed by the "lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life," is sure he is bound for Heaven, why should I be concerned? But the state of men's hearts is what holds so many back from the discharge of this duty. Some are so ignorant that they know not what self-examination is, nor what a servant of God means when he seeks to persuade them to "prove your own selves" (2 Cor. 13:5). Others are so much in love with sin and have such a dislike for the holy ways of God, they dare not venture on the trial of their state, lest they should be forced from the course they so much relish, to one which they hate. Others are so taken up with their worldly affairs, and are so busy providing for themselves and their families, they say, "I pray thee have me excused" (Luke 14:18). Others are so slothful that they cannot be induced on any consideration to be at those pains which are necessary in order to know their own hearts. Pride holds many back. They think highly of themselves. They are so sure of their salvation, so thoroughly convinced that all is right between their souls and God, they deem any search after proof and testing of themselves by Scripture to see if they have the marks of those who are "new creatures in Christ Jesus," as quite unnecessary and superfluous. They have been brought up in a religious atmosphere where none of those professing the name of Christ expressed any doubts about their state. They have been taught that such doubtings are of the Devil, a calling into question the veracity of God's Word. They have heard so many affirm "I know that my Redeemer liveth," they felt it their duty to echo the same, forgetting that he who first uttered these words (Job 19:25) was one of whom God said, "There is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil" (Job 1:8). Tens of thousands have been taught that it is wrong for the Christian to look within himself, and they have blindly followed the advice of such physicians "of no value." How can it be wrong for me to examine my heart to see whether or not God has written His laws upon it (Heb. 8:10)? How can it be wrong for me to look and see whether or not God has begun a "good work" in me (Phil. 1:6)? How can it be wrong for me to test myself by the Parable of the Sower to see which of its four soils represents my heart? How can it be wrong to measure myself by the Parable of the Virgins, and ascertain whether or not the "oil" of regenerating and sanctifying grace is within the "vessel" of my soul (Matt. 25:4)? Since God Himself declares, "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His" (Rom. 8:9), how can it be wrong for me to make sure that I am indwelt by Him? Rightly did an eminent Puritan say, "The Scripture abounds in commands and cautions for our utmost diligence in our search and inquiry, whether we are made partakers of Christ or not, or whether His Spirit dwell in us or not; which argue both the difficulty of attaining an assured confidence herein, as also the danger of our being mistaken, and yet the certainty of a good issue upon the diligent and regular use

of means to that purpose" (John Owen on Heb. 3:14, 1670). Alas, this is what has been so strenuously opposed by many during the last two or three generations. An easy-going religion, well calculated to be acceptable unto the slothful, has been zealously propagated, representing the salvation of the soul and assurance of the same as a very simple matter. It is very evident to one who has been taught of God that the vast majority of present-day evangelists, tract-writers, and "personal workers" do not believe one-half of what Holy Writ declares concerning the spiritual impotency of the natural man, or the absolute necessity of a miracle of grace being wrought within him before he can savingly turn to Christ. Instead, they erroneously imagine that fallen man is a "free moral agent," possessing equal power to accept Christ as to reject Him. They suppose all that is needed is information and coercion: to preach the Gospel and persuade men to believe it. But have they never heard of the Holy Spirit? O yes, and say they believe that only He can effectually convict of sin and regenerate. But do their actions agree with this? They certainly do not, for not only is there practically no definite waiting upon God and an earnest seeking from Him the power of His Spirit, but they sally forth and speak and write to the unsaved as if the Holy Spirit had no existence. Now just as it is plainly implied by such "novices" that lost sinners can receive Christ any time they make up their minds to do so, just as they are constantly told that nothing more is needed than to believe that Christ died for them and rest on John 3:16 and salvation is theirs; so the idea has been inculcated that the professing Christian may enjoy the full assurance of faith any time he wishes, and that nothing more is required for this than to "rest on John 5:24," etc. One verse of Holy Scripture is sufficient to give the lie to this popular delusion: "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit that we are the children of God" (Rom. 8:16). If the written promises of God were sufficient of themselves to produce assurance, then what is there need for the third person of the Godhead to "bear witness" with the spirit of the Christian that he is a child of God? As this verse is virtually given no place at all in modern ministry, let us ponder its terms: "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God." The clear implication of these words is that the actual existence of the saint's sonship is, at times at least, a matter of painful uncertainty, and that the supernatural agency of the Spirit is required to authenticate the fact, and thus allay all fear. To be fully assured of the amazing fact that God is my spiritual Father, demands something more than the testimony of my own feelings, or the opinions of men; and, let us reverently add, something more than resting upon a Divine promise. Millions have "rested on" the words "this is my body," and no argument could persuade them that the bread upon the Lord's table was not actually changed into Christ's literal flesh. Who so competent to authenticate the work of the Spirit in the heart as the Spirit Himself? What, then, is the mode of His testimony? Not by visions and voices, nor by any direct inspiration or new revelation of truth. Not by bringing some verse of Scripture (of which I was not thinking) vividly before the mind, so that the heart is made to leap for joy. If the Christian had no surer ground than that to stand upon, he might well despair. Satan can bring a verse of Scripture before the mind (Matt. 4:6), and produce in his victims strong emotions of joy, and impart a false peace to the soul. Therefore the witness of the Spirit, to be decisive and conclusive, must be something which the Devil cannot duplicate. And what is that? This: Satan cannot beget Divine grace and impart real holiness to the heart. "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit." To "bear witness with" is a legal term, and signifies to produce valid and convincing evidence. "Our spirit" here has reference to the renewed conscience. Concerning natural men it is said, "which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness" (Rom. 2:15). But the conscience of the natural man is partial, dim-sighted, stupid. Grace makes it tender, pliant, and more able to do its office. The desire of the regenerate man, and unto which he exercises himself, is "to have always a conscience void of offense toward God, and toward men" (Acts 24:16). Where such a conscience is (by grace) maintained, we can say with the apostle, "Our rejoicing is this (what? resting on John 3:16? No, but) the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity

and godly sincerity. . .we have had our conversation in the world" (2 Cor. 1:12). Was the beloved Paul off the right track when he found something in himself which afforded ground for "rejoicing"? According to many present-day teachers(?) he was. It is a great pity that these men do not give less attention to human writings, and more to the Holy Scriptures, for then they would read "The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways: and a good man shall be satisfied from himself" (Prov. 14:14). If that text be despised because it is in the O. T., then we also read in the N.T. "But let every man prove his own work, and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another" (Gal. 6:4). Once more, "let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth: And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him" (1 John 3:18, 19). What is the method which God here sets before His children for assuring their hearts before Him? Not in telling them to appropriate one of His promises, but to walk in the Truth, and then their own spirit will bear witness to their Divine sonship. "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God." In addition to the testimony of a renewed conscience which is enjoyed by the Christian when he (by grace) is walking in the Truth, the Spirit adds His confirmation. How? First, He has laid down clear marks in the Scriptures by which we may settle the question: "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God" (Rom. 8:14)—why tell us this, if "resting on John 5:24" be all that is necessary? Second, by working such graces in the saints as are peculiar to God's children: in Galatians 5:22 these graces are expressly designated "the fruit of the Spirit." Third, by His spiritual consolation: "walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 9:31, and cf. Rom. 15:13). Fourth, by producing in the Christian the affections which dutiful children bear to a wise and loving Parent (Rom. 8:15). To sum up: the blessed Spirit witnesses along with our spirit that we are the children of God by enabling us to discern (in the light of Scripture) the effects and fruits of His supernatural operation within us. The breathings of the renewed heart after holiness, the pantings after a fuller conformity to the image of Christ, the strivings against sin, are all inspired by Him. Thus, by begetting in us the Divine nature, by teaching us to deny "ungodliness and worldly lusts," and to "live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world" (Titus 2:12), the Spirit conducts us to the sure conclusion that we are the children of God. Thereby He shows us there is a real correspondency between our experience and revealed truth. "Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit" (1 John 4:13).

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