

The Doctrine of Sanctification 1.

INTRODUCTION

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Transcript

The Doctrine of Sanctification

1. INTRODUCTION

In the articles upon "The Doctrine of Justification" we contemplated the transcendent grace of God which provided for His people a Surety, who kept for them perfectly His holy law, and who also endured the curse which was due to their manifold transgressions against it. In consequence thereof, though in ourselves we are criminals who deserve to be brought to the bar of God's justice and there be sentenced to death, we are, nevertheless, by virtue of the accepted service of our Substitute, not only not condemned, but "justified," that is, pronounced righteous in the high courts of Heaven. Mercy has rejoiced against judgment: yet not without the governmental righteousness of God, as expressed in His Holy law, having been fully glorified. The Son of God incarnate, as the federal head and representative of His people, obeyed it, and also suffered and died under its condemning sentence. The claims of God have been fully met, justice has been magnified, the law has been made more honourable than if every descendant of Adam had personally fulfilled its requirements. "As respects justifying righteousness, therefore, believers have nothing to do with the law. They are justified 'apart from it' (Rom. 3:21), that is, apart from any personal fulfillment thereof. We could neither fulfill its righteousness, nor bear its course. The claims of the law were met and ended, once and forever, by the satisfaction of our great Substitute, and as a result we have attained to righteousness without works, i.e., without personal obedience of our own. 'By the obedience of one shall many be constituted righteous' (Rom. 5:19). There may indeed, and there are, other relations in which we stand to the law. It is the principle of our new nature to rejoice in its holiness: 'we delight in the law of God after the inner man.' We know the comprehensiveness and the blessedness of those first two commandments on which all the Law and the Prophets hang: we know that 'love is the fulfilling of the law.' We do not despise the guiding light of the holy and immutable commandments of God, livingly embodied, as they have been, in the ways and character of Jesus; but we do not seek to obey them with any thought of obtaining justification thereby. That which has been attained, cannot remain to be attained. Nor do we place so great an indignity on 'the righteousness of our God and Saviour,' as to put the partial and imperfect obedience which we render after we are justified, on a level with that heavenly and perfect righteousness by which we have been justified. After we have been justified, grace may and does for Christ's sake, accept as well-pleasing our imperfect obedience; but this being a consequence of our perfected justification cannot be made a ground thereof. Nor can anything

that is in the least degree imperfect, be presented to God with the view of attaining justification. In respect of this, the courts of God admit of nothing that falls short of His own absolute perfectness" (B. W. Newton). Having, then, dwelt at some length on the basic and blessed truth of Justification, it is fitting that we should now consider the closely connected and complementary doctrine of Sanctification. But what is "sanctification": is it a quality or position? Is sanctification a legal thing or an experimental? that is to say, Is it something the believer has in Christ or in himself? Is it absolute or relative? by which we mean, Does it admit of degree or no? is it unchanging or progressive? Are we sanctified at the time we are justified, or is sanctification a later blessing? How is this blessing obtained? by something which is done for us, or by us, or both? How may one be assured he has been sanctified: what are the characteristics, the evidences, the fruits? How are we to distinguish between sanctification by the Father, sanctification by the Son, sanctification by the Spirit, sanctification by faith, sanctification by the Word? Is there any difference between sanctification and holiness? if so, what? Are sanctification and purification the same thing? Does sanctification relate to the soul, or the body, or both? What position does sanctification occupy in the order of Divine blessings? What is the connection between regeneration and sanctification? What is the relation between justification and sanctification? Wherein does sanctification differ from glorification? Exactly what is the place of sanctification in regard to salvation: does it precede or follow, or is it an integral part of it? Why is there so much diversity of opinion upon these points, scarcely any two writers treating of this subject in the same manner. Our purpose here is not simply to multiply questions but to indicate the many sidedness of our present theme, and to intimate the various avenues of approach to the study of it. Diverse indeed have been the answers returned to the above questions. Many who were ill-qualified for such a task have undertaken to write upon this weighty and difficult theme, rushing in where wiser men feared to tread. Others have superficially examined this subject through the coloured glasses of creedal attachment. Others, without any painstaking efforts of their own, have merely echoed predecessors who they supposed gave out, the truth thereon. Though the present writer has been studying this subject off and on for upwards of twenty-five years, he has felt himself to be too immature and too unspiritual to write at length thereon; and even now, it is (he trusts) with fear and trembling he essays to do so: may it please the Holy Spirit to so guide this thoughts that he may be preserved from everything which would pervert the Truth, dishonour God, or mislead His people. We have in our library discourses on this subject and treatises on this theme by over fifty different men, ancient and modern, ranging from hyper-Calvinists to ultra-Arminians, and a number who would not care to be listed under either. Some speak with pontifical dogmatism, others with reverent caution, a few with humble diffidence. All of them have been carefully digested by us and diligently compared on the leading points. The present writer detests sectarianism (most of all in those who are the worst affected by it, while pretending to be opposed to it), and earnestly desires to be delivered from partisanship. He seeks to be profited from the labours of all, and freely acknowledges his indebtedness to men of various creeds and schools of thought. On some aspects of this subject he has found the Plymouth Brethren much more helpful than the Reformers and the Puritans. The great importance of our present theme is evidenced by the prominence which is given to it in Scripture: the words "holy, sanctified" etc., occurring therein hundreds of times. Its importance also appears from the high value ascribed to it: it is the supreme glory of God, of the unfallen angels, of the Church. In Ex. 15:11 we read that the Lord God is "glorious in holiness"—that is His crowning excellency. In Matt. 25:31 mention is made of the "holy angels," for no higher honour can be ascribed them. In Eph. 5:26, 27 we learn that the Church's glory lieth not in pomp and outward adornment, but in holiness. Its importance further appears in that this is the aim in all God's dispensations. He elected His people that they should be "holy" (Eph. 1:4); Christ died that He might "sanctify" His people (Heb. 13:12); chastisements are sent that we might be "partakers of God's holiness" (Heb. 12:10). Whatever sanctification be, it is the great promise

of the covenant made to Christ for His people. As Thos. Boston well said, "Among the rest of that kind, it shines like the moon among the lesser stars—as the very chief subordinate end of the Covenant of Grace, standing therein next to the glory of God, which is the chief and ultimate end thereof. The promise of preservation, of the Spirit, of quickening the dead soul, of faith, of justification, of reconciliation, of adoption, and of the enjoyment of God as our God, do tend unto it as their common centre, and stand related to it as means to their end. They are all accomplished to sinners on design to make them holy." This is abundantly clear from, "The oath which He swore to our father Abraham: that He would grant unto us, that we, being delivered out of the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life" (Luke 1 :73-75). In that "oath" or covenant, sworn to Abraham as a type of Christ (our spiritual Father: Heb. 2 :13), His seed's serving the Lord in holiness is held forth as the chief thing sworn unto the Mediator—deliverance from their spiritual enemies being a means to that end. The supreme excellency of sanctification is affirmed in Prov. 8:11, "For wisdom is better than rubies; and all things that may be desired are not to be compared to it." "Everyone who has read the book of Proverbs with any attention must have observed that Solomon means by 'wisdom' holiness, and by 'folly' sin; by a wise man a saint, and by a fool a sinner. 'The wise shall inherit glory: but shame shall be the promotion of fools' (Prov. 13:35): who can doubt whether by 'the wise' he means saints, and by 'fools' sinners! 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' (Prov. 9:10), by which he means to assert that true 'wisdom' is true piety or real holiness. Holiness, then, is 'better than rubies,' and all things that are to be desired are not to be compared with it. It is hard to conceive how the inestimable worth and excellency of holiness could be painted in brighter colours than by comparing it to rubies—the richest and most beautiful objects in nature" (N. Emmons). Not only is true sanctification an important, essential, and unspeakably precious thing, it is wholly supernatural. "It is our duty to enquire into the nature of evangelical holiness, as it is a fruit or effect in us of the Spirit of sanctification, because it is abstruse and mysterious, and undiscernible unto the eye of carnal reason. We say of it in some sense as Job of wisdom, 'whence cometh wisdom, and where is the place of understanding, seeing it is hid from the eyes of all living, and kept close from the fowls of heaven; destruction and death say, We have heard the fame thereof with our ears: God understandeth the way thereof, and He knoweth the place thereof. And unto man He said, Behold, the fear of the Lord that is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding' (28:20-23, 28). This is that wisdom whose ways, residence, and paths, are so hidden from the natural reason and understandings of men. "No man, I say, by mere sight and conduct can know and understand aright the true nature of evangelical holiness; and it is, therefore, no wonder if the doctrine of it be despised by many as an enthusiastical fancy. It is of the things of the Spirit of God, yea, it is the principal effect of all His operation in us and towards us. And 'these things of God knoweth no man but the Spirit of God' (I Cor. 2:11). It is by Him alone that we are enabled to 'know the things that are freely given unto us of God' (v. 12) as this is, if ever we receive anything of Him in this world, or shall do so to eternity. 'Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things that God hath prepared for them that love Him': the comprehension of these things is not the work of any of our natural faculties, but 'God reveals them unto us by His Spirit' (vv. 9, 10). "Believers themselves are oft-times much unacquainted with it, either as to their apprehension of its true nature, causes, and effects, or, at least, as to their own interests and concernment therein. As we know not of ourselves, the things that are wrought in us of the Spirit of God, so we seldom attend as we ought unto His instruction of us in them. It may seem strange indeed, that, whereas all believers are sanctified and made holy, they should not understand nor apprehend what is wrought in them and for them, and what abideth with them: but, alas, how little do we know of ourselves, of what we are, and whence are our powers and faculties even in things natural. Do we know how the members of the body are fashioned in the womb?" (John Owen) Clear proof that true

sanctification is wholly supernatural and altogether beyond the ken of the unregenerate, is found in the fact that so many are thoroughly deceived and fatally deluded by fleshly imitations and Satanic substitutes of real holiness. It would be outside our present scope to describe in detail the various pretensions which pose as Gospel holiness, but the poor Papists, taught to look up to the "saints" canonized by their "church," are by no means the only ones who are misled in this vital matter. Were it not that God's Word reveals so clearly the power of that darkness which rests on the understanding of all who are not taught by the Spirit, it would be surprising beyond words to see so many intelligent people supposing that holiness consists in abstinence from human comforts, garbing themselves in mean attire, and practicing various austerities which God has never commanded. Spiritual sanctification can only be rightly apprehended from what God has been pleased to reveal thereon in His holy Word, and can only be experimentally known by the gracious operations of the Holy Spirit. We can arrive at no accurate conceptions of this blessed subject except as our thoughts are formed by the teaching of Scripture, and we can only experience the power of the same as the Inspirer of those Scriptures is pleased to write them upon our hearts. Nor can we obtain so much as a correct idea of the meaning of the term "sanctification" by limiting our attention to a few verses in which the word is found, or even to a whole class of passages of a similar nature: there must be a painstaking examination of every occurrence of the term and also of its cognates; only thus shall we be preserved from the entertaining of a one-sided, inadequate, and misleading view of its fullness and many-sidedness. Even a superficial examination of the Scriptures will reveal that holiness is the opposite of sin, yet the realization of this at once conducts us into the realm of mystery, for how can persons be sinful and holy at one and the same time? It is this difficulty which so deeply exercises the true saints: they perceive in themselves so much carnality, filth, and vileness, that they find it almost impossible to believe that they are holy. Nor is the difficulty solved here, as it was in justification, by saying, Though we are completely unholy in ourselves, we are holy in Christ. We must not here anticipate the ground which we hope to cover, except to say, the Word of God clearly teaches that those who have been sanctified by God are holy in themselves. The Lord graciously prepare our hearts for what is to follow.

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