

The Doctrine of Sanctification 20. Its Rule (COMPLETED)

by A.W. Pink

Transcript

The Doctrine of Sanctification

20. Its Rule

(COMPLETED)

The Unchanging moral Law of God, which requires us to love Him with all our hearts and our neighbors as ourselves, is the believer's rule of life, the standard of holiness to which his character and conduct must be conformed, the line and plummet by which his internal desires and thoughts as well as outward deeds are measured. And, as has been shown, we are conformed to that Law by the sanctifying operations of the Holy Spirit. This He does by making us see and feel the heinousness of all sin, by delivering us from its reigning power, and by communicating to us an inclination and disposition of heart unto the requirements of the Law, so that we are thereby fitted and enabled to the practice of obedience. While enmity against God reigns within—as it does in every unregenerate soul—it is impossible for love to give that obedience which the Law demands. We concluded our last chapter by showing something of the marvelous and radical change which a sinner passes through when he is truly converted to God. One who has really surrendered to the claims of God approves of His Law: "I love Thy commandments above gold; yea, above fine gold. Therefore I esteem all Thy precepts concerning all things to be right; and I hate every false way" (Ps. 119:127, 128). And why do not the unregenerate do likewise? Because they have no love for a holy God. But believers, loving a holy God in Christ, must love the Law also, since in it the image of His holiness is displayed. The converted have a real inclination of heart unto the whole Law: "The Law of Thy mouth is better unto me than thousands of gold and silver . . . all Thy commandments are faithful" (Ps. 119:72, 86). There is in the regenerate a fixed principle which lies the same way as the holy Law, bending away from what the Law forbids and toward what it enjoins. The converted habitually endeavour to conform their outward conduct to the whole Law: "O that my ways were directed to keep Thy statutes! Then shall I not be ashamed, when I have respect unto all Thy commandments" (Ps. 19:5, 6). They desire a fuller knowledge of and obedience to the Law: "Teach me, O Lord, the way of Thy statutes; and I shall keep it unto the end. Give me understanding, and I shall keep Thy Law; yea, I shall observe it with my whole heart. Make me to go in the path of Thy commandments, for therein do I delight" (Ps. 119:33-35). Should any object that these quotations are all made from the Old Testament (waiving now the fact that such an objection is quite pointless, for regeneration and its effects, conversion and its fruits, are the same in all ages), we would point out that the apostle Paul described his own experience in identically the same

terms: "I delight in the Law of God after the inward man . . . with the mind I myself serve the Law of God" (Rom. 7:22, 26). Thus Christ conforms His people to the Law by causing His Spirit to work in them an inclination toward it, a love for it, and an obedience to it. But at this point a very real and serious difficulty is presented to the believer, for a genuine Christian has an honest heart, and detests lies and hypocrisy. That difficulty may be stated thus: If conversion consists in a real conformity to the holiness of God's Law, with submission and obedience to its authority, accompanied by a sincere and constant purpose of heart, with habitual endeavour in actual practice, then I dare not regard myself as one who is genuinely converted, for I cannot honestly say that such is my experience; nay, I have to sorrowfully and shamefacedly lament that very much in my case is the exact reverse. So far from the reigning power of sin being broken in me, I find my corruptions and lusts raging more fiercely than ever, while my heart is a cage of all unclean things. The above language will accurately express the feelings of many a trembling heart. As the preceding chapters upon the Rule of our sanctification have been thoughtfully pondered, not a few, we doubt not, are seriously disturbed in their minds. On the one hand, they cannot gainsay what has been written, for they both see and feel that it is according to the Truth; but on the other hand, it condemns them, it makes them realize how far, far short they come of measuring up to such a standard; yea, it plainly appears to them that they do not in any sense or to any degree measure up to it at all. Conscious of so much in them that is opposed to the Law, conscious of their lack of conformity to it, both inwards and outwards, they bitterly bewail themselves, and cry, "O wretched man that I am" (Rom. 7:24). Our first reply is, Thank God for such an honest confession, for it supplies clear evidence that you are truly converted. No hypocrite—except it be in the hour of death—ever cries "O wretched man that I am." No unregenerate soul ever mourns over his lack of conformity to God's Law! Such godly sorrow, dear Christian reader, will enable you to appropriate at least one verse of Scripture to your own case: "My tears have been my meat day and night" (Ps. 42:3), and those words proceeded not from the bitter remorse of a Judas, but were the utterance of one who had exclaimed "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after Thee, O God" (Ps. 42:1). Alas that so many today are ignorant of what constitutes the actual experience of a Christian: defeat as well as victory, grief as well as joy. Whilst it be a fact that at regeneration a new nature is imparted to us by the Holy Spirit, a nature which is inclined toward and loves the Law, it is also a fact that the old nature is not removed, nor its opposition to and hatred of the Law changed. Whilst it be a fact that a supernatural principle of holiness is communicated to us by the Spirit, it is also a fact that the principle and root of indwelling sin remains, being neither eradicated nor sublimated. The Christian has in him two opposing principles, which produce in him a state of constant warfare: "For 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 that ye would" (Gal. 5:17). That "cannot" looks both ways: because of the restraining presence of the "spirit," the "flesh" is prevented from fully gratifying its evil desires; and because of the hindering presence of the "flesh," the "spirit" is unable to fully realize its aspirations. It is the presence of and the warfare between these two natures, the "flesh" and the "spirit," the principles of sin and holiness, which explain the bewildering state and conflicting experience of the real Christian; and it is only as he traces more fully the teaching of Holy Scripture and carefully compares himself therewith, that light is cast upon what is so puzzling and staggering in his experience. Particularly it is in the seventh of Romans that we have the clearest and most complete description of the dual history of a converted soul. Therein we find the apostle Paul, as moved by the Spirit, portraying most vividly and intimately his own spiritual biography. There are few chapters in the New Testament which the Devil hates more than Romans 7, and strenuously and subtly does he strive to rob the Christian of its comforting and establishing message. As we have shown above, the Christian approves of the Law, and owns it to be "holy and just and good" (Rom. 7:12). He does so, even though the Law condemns many things in him, yea condemns all in him

which is unholy or ungodly. But more: the Christian condemns himself—"For that which I do, I allow not: for what I would, that do I not, but what I hate, that do I" (Rom. 7:15). So far from sin affording him satisfaction, it is the Christian's greatest grief. The more he perceives the excellency of God and what He is entitled to from His creatures, and the more he realizes what a debtor he is to Divine grace and the loving obedience he ought to render out of gratitude, the more acute is the Christian's sorrow for his sad and continual failures to be what he ought to be and to live as he should. Our second answer to one who is deeply distressed over the raging of his lusts and fears that he has never been soundly converted, is this: the fact is, that the more holy a person is, and the more his heart is truly sanctified, the more clearly does he perceive his corruptions and the more painfully does he feel the plague of his heart; while he utters his complaints in strong expressions and with bitterness of soul. In God's light we see light. It is not that sin has greater control of us than formerly, but that we now have eyes to see its fearful workings, and our consciences are more sensitive to feel its guilt. An unregenerate person is like a sow wallowing in the mire: his impurities and iniquities afford him satisfaction, and give him little or no concern, no, not even the unholiness of his outward practice, much less the unholiness of his heart. There is a notable difference between the sensibilities and expressions of the unconverted and the converted. An unregenerate person, who indulges freely in a course of evil practice, will nevertheless give a favourable account of himself: he will boast of his good-heartedness, his kindness, his generosity, his praiseworthy qualities and good deeds. On the other hand, persons truly holy, even when kept pure in their outward behaviour, yet conscious of their indwelling corruptions, will condemn themselves in unsparing language. The unholy fix their attention on anything good they can find in themselves, and this renders them easy in an evil course. But a truly sanctified person is ready to overlook his spiritual attainments and fruits, and fixes his attention, with painful consciousness, on those respects in which he kicks conformity to Christ. A Christian will say, I thought I had tasted that the Lord is gracious and that my heart had undergone a happy change, with a powerful determination toward God and holiness. I concluded I had some sound evidence of true conversion and of a heart that was really regenerated. Yet I knew the effect should be to grow in grace, to advance in holiness, and to be more delivered from sin. But alas, I find it quite otherwise. If there is grace in me, it is becoming weaker, and even though my outward conduct be regulated by the precepts of the Law, yet in my heart sin is becoming stronger and stronger—evil lusts, carnal affections, worldly desires, and disorderly passions, are daily stirring, often with great vehemence, defiling my spirit. Alas, after all, I fear my past experience was only a delusion, and the dread of the final outcome often strikes terror throughout my whole soul. Dear friend, it is true that there is much in every Christian which affords great cause for self-judgment and deep humbling of ourselves before God; yet this is a very different matter from sin obtaining fuller dominion over us. Where sin gains power, there is always a corresponding hardening of heart and spiritual insensibility. Sin is served willingly by the wicked, and is sweet and pleasant to them. But if you sorrow over sin, sincerely and vigorously oppose it, condemn yourself for it, then old things have passed away and all is become new. "Christians may be assured that, a growing sensibility of conscience and heart sorrow for sin, is among the chief evidences of growth in grace and of good advances in holiness, that they are likely to have on this side of Heaven. For the more pure and holy the heart is, it will naturally have the more quick feeling of whatever sin remaineth in it" (Jas. Fraser, 1760). The dual experience of the Christian is plainly intimated in Paul's statement: "So then with the mind I myself serve the Law of God, but with the flesh, the law of sin" (Rom. 7:25). But some one may reply, the opening verse of the next chapter says, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit." Ah, note the minute accuracy of Scripture: had it said, "who act not according to the flesh" we might well despair, and conclude for a certainty we were not Christians at all. But "walking" is a deliberate course, in which a man proceeds freely, without

force or struggle; it is the reverse of his being dragged or driven. But when the believer follows the dictates of the flesh, it is against the holy desires of his heart, and with reluctance to the new nature! But does not Romans 8:4 affirm, that Christ died in order that "the righteousness of the Law might be fulfilled in us?" Again we answer, admire the marvelous accuracy of Scripture; it does not say, "the righteousness of the Law is now fulfilled in us." It is not so, perfectly, in this life, but it will be so at our glorification. Perhaps the reader is inclined to ask, But why does God suffer the sinful nature to remain in the Christian: He could easily remove it. Beware, my friend, of calling into question God's infinite wisdom: He knows what is best, and His thoughts and ways are often the opposite of ours (Isa. 55:8). But let me ask, Which magnifies God's power the more: to preserve in this wicked world one who still has within him a corrupt nature, or one that has been made as sinless as the holy angels? Can there be any doubt as to the answer! But why does not God subdue my lusts: Would it not be more for His glory if He did? Again, we say, Beware of measuring God with your mind. He knows which is most for His glory. But answer this question: If your lusts were greatly subdued and you sinned far less than you do, would you appreciate and adore His grace as you now do? Our third answer to the deeply exercised soul who calls into question the genuineness of his conversion, is this: Honestly apply to yourself the following tests. First, in seasons of retirement from the noise and business of the world, or during the sacred hours of the Sabbath, or in your secret devotions, what are your thoughts, what is the real temper of your mind? Do you know God, commune with and delight in Him? Is His Word precious, is prayer a welcome exercise? Do you delight in God's perfections and esteem Him for His absolute supremacy and sovereignty? Do you feel and lament your remaining blindness and ignorance; do you mourn over your lack of conformity to God's Law and your natural contrariety to it, and hate yourself for it? Do you watch and pray and fight against the corruptions of your heart? Not indeed as you should, but do you really and sincerely do so at all? Second, what are the grounds of your love to God? from what motives are you influenced to love Him? Because you believe He loves you? or because He appears infinitely great and glorious in Himself? Are you glad that He is infinitely holy, that He knows and sees all things, that He possesses all power? Does it suit your heart that God governs the world, and requires that all creatures should bow in the dust before Him, that He alone may be exalted? Does it appear perfectly reasonable that you should love God with all your heart, and do you loathe and resist everything contrary to Him? Do you feel yourself to be wholly to blame for not being altogether such as the Law requires? Third, is there being formed within you a disposition to love your neighbor as yourself, so that you wish and seek only his good? and do you hate and mourn over any contrary spirit within you? Honest answers to these questions should enable you to ascertain your real spiritual state. "The holiness which the Gospel requireth will not be maintained either in the hearts or lives of men without a continual conflict, warring, contending; and that with all diligence, watchfulness, and perseverance therein. It is our warfare, and the Scripture abounds in the discovery of the adversaries we have to conflict withal, their power and subtlety, as also in directions and encouragements unto their resistance. To suppose that Gospel obedience will be kept up in our hearts and lives without a continual management of a vigorous warfare against its enemies, is to deny the Scripture and the experience of all that believe and obey God in sincerity. Satan, sin, and the world, are continually assaulting of it, and seeking to ruin its interest in us. The Devil will not be resisted, which it is our duty to do (1 Pet. 5:8, 9) without a sharp contest; in the management whereof we are commanded to 'take unto ourselves the whole armour of God' (Eph. 6:12). Fleshly lusts do continually war against our souls (1 Pet. 2:11), and if we maintain not a warfare unto the end against them, they will be our ruin. Nor will the power of the world be any otherwise avoided than by a victory over it (1 John 5:4), which will not be carried without contending. "But I suppose it needs no great confirmation unto any who know what it is to serve and obey God in temptations, that the life of faith and race of holiness will not be persevered in without a severe

striving, laboring, contending, with diligence and persistence; so that I shall take it as a principle (notionally at least) agreed upon by the generality of Christians. If we like not to be holy on these terms, we must let it alone, for on any other we shall never be so. If we faint in this course, if we give it over, if we think what we aim at herein, not to be worth the obtaining or persevering by such a severe contention all our days, we must be content to be without it. Nothing doth so promote the interest of Hell and destruction in the world, as a presumption that a lazy slothful performance of some duties and an abstinence from some sins, is that which God will accept of as our obedience. Crucifying of sin, mortifying our inordinate affections, contesting against the whole interest of the flesh, Satan, and the world, and that in inward actings of grace, and all instances of outward duties, and that always while we live in this world, are required of us hereunto" (John Owen, 1660). From all that has been said it should be evident that the Christian needs to exercise the greatest possible care, daily, over the inward purity of his heart, earnestly opposing the first motions of every fleshly lust, inordinate affection, evil imagination, and unholy passion. The heart is the real seat of holiness. Heart-holiness is the chief part of our conformity to the spiritual Law of God, nor is any outward work considered as holy by Him if the heart be not right with Him—desiring and seeking after obedience to Him—for He sees and tries the heart. Holiness of heart is absolutely necessary to peace of mind and joy of soul, for only a cleansed heart can commune with the thrice Holy God: then keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life" (Prov. 4:23). In the last paragraph we have said nothing which in anywise clashes with our remarks in the body of this article; rather have we emphasized once more another aspect of our subject, namely, the pressing duty which lies upon the Christian to bring his heart and life into fuller conformity with the Law. It would be a grievous sin on the part of the writer were he to lower the standard which God has set before us to the level of our present attainments. Vast indeed is the difference between what we ought to be and what we actually are in our character and conduct, and deep should be our sorrow over this. Nevertheless, if the root of the matter be in us, there will be a longing after, a praying for and a pressing forward unto increased personal and practical holiness. N. B. This aspect of our theme has been purposely developed by us somewhat disproportionately. The supreme importance of it required fullness of detail. The prevailing ignorance called for a lengthy treatment of the subject. Unless we know what the Rule of Sanctification is, and seek to conform thereto, all our efforts after holiness will and must be wide of the mark. Nothing is more honoring to God, and nothing makes more for our own true happiness, than for His LAW to be revered, loved, and obeyed by us.

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