

The Doctrine of Sanctification 5. ITS PROBLEMS

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Transcript

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It should hardly be necessary for us to explain that when speaking of the problem of sanctification we refer not to such as unto God, but rather as it appears unto our feeble perceptions. But in these days it is not wise to take anything for granted, for not only are there some ready to make a man an offender for a word, if he fails to express himself to their satisfaction, but there are others who need to have the simplest terms defined unto them. No, it would be blasphemy to affirm that sanctification, or anything else, ever presented any problem to the great Jehovah: Omniscience can never be confronted with any difficulty, still less an emergency. But to the Christian's finite understanding, deranged as it has been by sin, the problem of Holiness is a very real and actual one; far more perplexing, we may add, than that presented by the subject of justification. There are various subsidiary difficulties in sanctification, as we intimated in the fourth and fifth paragraphs of the Introductory article, such as whether sanctification itself be a quality or a position, whether it be legal or experimental, whether it be absolute or progressive; all of which need to be cleared up in any satisfactory treatment of this theme. But far more intricate is the problem itself of how one who is a moral leper can be fit to worship in the Sanctuary of God. Strange to say this problem is the acutest unto those who are the most spiritual. Self-righteous Pharisees and self-satisfied Laodiceans are in no wise troubled over the matter. Antinomians cut the knot (instead of untying it) and deny all difficulty, by asserting that the holiness of Christ is imputed to us. But those who realize God requires personal holiness, yet are conscious of their own filthiness, are deeply concerned thereupon. Things are now, generally, at such a low ebb, that some of our readers may be surprised to find us making any reference at all to the problem of sanctification. In most places, today, either the doctrine taught is so inadequate and powerless, or the practice maintained is so defective, that few are likely to be exercised in conscience over the nature of that holiness without which none shall see the Lord. The claims of God are now so whittled down, the exalted standard which Scripture sets forth is so disregarded, heart purity (in which vital godliness so largely consists) is so little emphasized, that it is rare to find any concerned about their personal state. If there be some preachers zealously warning against the worthlessness of good works to save where there be no faith in Christ, there are far more who earnestly cry up an empty faith, which is unaccompanied by personal holiness and obedience. Such a low standard of spiritual living now prevails, that comparatively few of the Lord's own people have any clear or disturbing conceptions of how far, far

short they come of measuring up to the holy model which God has set before us in His Word. Such feeble and faulty ideals of Christian living now prevail that those who are preserved from the grosser evils which even the world condemns, are "at ease in Zion." So little is the fear of God upon souls, so faintly are the majority of professing Christians conscious of the plague of their own hearts, that in most quarters to speak about the problem of sanctification, would be talking in an unknown tongue. A fearful miasma has settled down upon nine-tenths of Christendom, deadening the senses, blunting spiritual perceptions, paralyzing endeavour after deeper personal piety, till almost anything is regarded as being acceptable unto God. On the other hand, there is no doubt that some of us have intensified the problem, by creating for ourselves additional and needless difficulties, through erroneous ideas of what sanctification is or what it involves in this life. The writer has been personally acquainted with more than one who was in abject despair through failing—after the most earnest and resolute efforts—to attain unto a state which false teachers had told them was attainable in this life, and who terminated their mortal wretchedness by committing suicide; and it has long been a wonder to him that thousands more who heed such teachers do not act likewise. There is no need to multiply difficulties: scriptural sanctification is neither the eradication of sin, the purification of the carnal nature, nor even the partial putting to sleep of the "flesh"; still less does it secure an exemption from the attacks and harassments of Satan. Yet, on the other side, we must not minimize the problem, and reduce it to such simple proportions that we suppose a complete solution thereto is provided by merely affirming that Christ is our sanctification, and in himself the believing sinner remains unchanged to the end of his earthly course. If we die unholy in ourselves, then we are most assuredly lost for eternity, for only the "pure in heart" shall ever see God (Matt. 5:8). What that purity of heart is, and how it is to be obtained, is the very real problem which sanctification raises. It is at the heart God looks (1 Sam. 16:7), and it is with the heart we need to be most concerned, for "out of it are the issues of life" (Prov. 4:23). The severest woes were pronounced by Christ upon men not because their external conduct was foul, but because within they were "full of dead bones, and all uncleanness" (Matt. 23:27). That personal holiness is absolutely essential for an entrance into Heaven was shown at length in our last chapter, and that what men regard as the lesser pollutions of sin just as effectually exclude from the kingdom of God as do the most heinous crimes, is clear from 1 Cor. 6:9, 10. The question which forces itself upon us is, How shall men be sanctified so as to suit an infinitely pure God? That we must be justified before we can stand before a righteous God is no more obvious than that it is necessary that we must be sanctified so as to live in the presence of a holy God. But man is utterly without holiness; yea, he is impure, foul, filthy. The testimony of Scripture on this point is plain and full. "They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good. The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God. They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy" (Ps. 14:1-3). The testimony of Scripture is that all men are vile and polluted; that they are, root and branch, source and stream, heart and life, not only disobedient, but unholy, and therefore unfit for God's presence. The Lord Jesus who knew what was in man, makes this clear enough when, revealing with His own light that loathsome den, the human heart, He says, "Out of the heart of men proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: all these evil things come from within" (Mark 7:21-23). Nor must we forget that the confession of saints concerning themselves has always corresponded to God's testimony. David says, "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps. 51). Job declared, "Behold I am vile; I abhor myself." Isaiah cried out, "Woe is me, for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips.., for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." But the most remarkable confession of this absolute vileness is contained in an acknowledgment by the Old Testament church—a sentence which has been taken up by all believers as exactly expressing what

they all have to say of their condition by nature: "But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousneses are as filthy rags" (Isa. 64:6). Strong language indeed is that, yet not one whit too strong to depict the mud and mire into which the Fall has brought us. If, then, when considering the doctrine of justification we found it appropriate—in view of man's self-will, lawlessness, and disobedience—to ask, "How shall a man be just with God?" it is no less so now we are contemplating the doctrine of sanctification to inquire—in view of man's uncleanness and filthiness—"Who shall bring a clean thing out of an unclean?" (Job 14:4). We have no more power to make ourselves holy than we have to unmake or unbeing ourselves; we are no more able to cleanse our hearts, than we are to command or direct the winds. Sin in dominion is the "plague" of the heart (1 Kings 8:38), and as no disease is so deadly as the plague, so there is no plague so deadly as that of the heart. "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good that are accustomed to do evil" (Jer. 13:23). The proud cannot make himself humble; the carnal cannot force himself to become spiritual; the earthly man can no more transform himself into a heavenly man than he can make the sun go backward or the earth fly upward. Sanctification is a work altogether above the powers of human nature: alas that this is so little realized today. Even among those preachers who desire to be regarded as orthodox, who do not deny the Fall as a historical fact, few among them perceive the dire effects and extent thereof. "Bruised by the fall," as one popular hymn puts it, states the truth far too mildly; yea, entirely misstates it. Through the breach of the first covenant all men have lost the image of God, and now bear the image of the Devil (John 8:44). The whole of their faculties are so depraved that they can neither think (2 Cor. 3:5), speak, nor do anything truly good and acceptable unto God. They are by birth, altogether unholy, unclean, loathsome and abominable in nature, heart, and life; and it is altogether beyond their power to change themselves. Not only so, but the curse of the law lying upon them has severed all spiritual relation between God and them, cutting off all communion and communication with Heaven. The driving from the Garden of Eden of our first parents and the establishment of the cherubim with the flaming sword at its entrance, denoted that in point of justice they were barred from all sanctifying influences reaching them—that being the greatest benefit man is capable of, as assimilating him to God Himself or rendering him like Him. The curse has fixed a gulf between God and fallen creatures, so that sanctifying influences cannot pass from Him unto them, any more than their unholy desires and prayers can pass unto Him. It is written, "The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination unto the Lord" (Prov. 15:8). And again, "The thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the Lord" (v.26). It has, then, been rightly said that our sanctification "is no less a mystery than our justification" (T. Boston). As the depravity of human nature has always been so manifest that it could not escape notice even in the world, so in all ages men have, been seeking to discover a remedy for the same, and have supposed a cure could be achieved by a right use of their rational, faculties. But the outcome has always been, at best, but an outward show and semblance of sanctification, going under the name of "moral virtue." But so far is that from meeting the requirements of Him who is Light, that men themselves, once their eyes are (in any measure) anointed with heavenly eye salve, perceive their moral virtue to be as "filthy rags," a menstrous cloth. Until men are regenerate and act from a principle of grace in the heart, all their actions are but imitations of real obedience and piety, as an ape would mimic a man. It is a common error of those that are unregenerate to seek to reform their conduct without any realization that their state must be changed before their lives can possibly be changed from sin to righteousness. The tree itself must be made good, before its fruit can possibly be good. As well attempt to make a watch go, whose mainspring is broken, by washing its face and polishing its back, as for one under the curse of God to produce any works acceptable to Him. That was the great mistake Nicodemus laboured under: he supposed that teaching was all he needed, so that he might adjust his walk to the acceptance of Heaven. But to him the Lord Jesus declared, "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again" (John 3:7):

that was only another way of saying, Nicodemus, you cannot perform spiritual works before you possess a spiritual nature and a spiritual nature cannot be had until you are born again. Multitudes have laboured with great earnestness to subdue their evil propensities, and have struggled long and hard to bring their inward thoughts and affections into conformity with the law of God. They have sought to abstain from all sins, and to perform every known duty. They have been so devout and intent that they have undermined their health, and were so fervent in their zeal that they were ready to kill their bodies with fastings and mascerations, if only they might kill their sinful lusts. They were strongly convinced that holiness was absolutely necessary unto salvation, and were so deeply affected with the terrors of damnation, as to forsake the world and shut themselves up in convents and monasteries; yet all the while ignorant of the mystery of sanctification—that a new state must precede a new life. It is positively asserted by Divine inspiration that, "They that are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:8). Alas, how few understand the meaning of those words "in the flesh;" how many suppose they only signify, to be inordinately addicted to the baser passions. Whereas, to be "in the flesh" is to be in a state of nature—fallen, depraved, alienated from the life of God. To be "in the flesh" is not simply being a personal transgressor of God's holy law, but is the cause of all sinfulness and sinning. The "flesh" is the very nature of man as corrupted by the fall of Adam, and propagated from him to us in that corrupt state by natural generation. To be "in the flesh" is also being in complete subjection to the power of the Devil, who is the certain conqueror of all who attempt to fight him in their own strength or with his own weapons. The flesh can no more be brought to holiness by man's most vehement endeavours, than he can bring a dead carcass to life by chafing and rubbing it. The varied elements which entered into the problem of Justification were: God's law requires from us perfect obedience to its statutes; this we have utterly failed to render; we are therefore under the condemnation and curse of the law; the Judge Himself is inflexibly just, and will by no means clear the guilty: how, then, can men be shown mercy without justice being flouted? The elements which enter into the problem of Sanctification are: the law requires inward as well as outward conformity to it: but we are born into this world with a nature that is totally depraved, and can by no means be brought into subjection to the law (Rom. 8:7). God Himself is ineffably pure, how then can a moral leper be admitted into His presence? We are utterly without holiness, and can no more make ourselves holy than the Ethiopian can change his skin. Even though a holy nature be imparted by regeneration, how can one with the flesh, unchanged, within him, draw near as a worshipper unto the Heavenly Sanctuary? How can I as a person possibly profess myself as holy, while conscious that I am full of sin? How can I honestly profess to have a "pure heart," while realizing a sea of corruption still rages within me? If my state must be changed before anything in my life is acceptable to God, what I possibly do?—I cannot unmake myself. If I know that polluted and vile, and utterly unsuited unto the thrice holy how much less can He regard me as fit for His presence?

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