

Professor Finney's Letters.--No. 31

by Charles Finney

Charles Finney addresses misconceptions about salvation and emphasizes the importance of recognizing and thanking God for sanctification through grace.

Scripture: Ephesians 2:8

Topics: "Grace", "Sanctification"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the misconceptions surrounding salvation by faith and the doctrine of entire sanctification, expressing concern that many Christians and ministers misunderstand the grace of God. He argues that both justification and sanctification are achieved through grace, and that it is not self-righteousness to thank God for sanctification. Finney emphasizes that acknowledging God's work in our lives should not be seen as boasting, but rather as honoring God's grace. He challenges the notion that confessing our sanctification implies spiritual pride, asserting that true holiness comes from Christ alone. Ultimately, he calls for a deeper understanding of grace that allows believers to confidently proclaim their sanctification without fear of being self-righteous.

Transcript

Prof. Finney returned from Cleveland in time to write the following letter, for the last side of the paper. His Lecture will resume its place in our next.

Dear Brother:

I have seen several remarks in the papers of late, and have heard several suggestions from various quarters, which have but increased the fear which I have for some time entertained, that multitudes of Christians and indeed many ministers have radically defective views of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. To the doctrine of entire sanctification in this life, as believed and taught by some of us, it has been frequently of late objected, that prayers offered in accordance with this belief, and by a sanctified soul, would savor strongly of spiritual pride and self-righteousness. I have seen this objection stated in its full force of late, in a religious periodical, in the form of a supposed prayer of a sanctified soul--the object of which was manifestly to expose the shocking absurdity, self-righteousness, and spiritual pride, of a prayer, or rather thanksgiving, made in accordance with a belief that one is entirely sanctified. Now I must confess, that that prayer, together with objections and remarks which suggest the same idea, have created in my mind no small degree of alarm. I not a little fear, that many of our divines, in contending for the doctrines of grace, have entirely lost sight of the meaning of the language they use, and have in reality

but very little practical understanding of what is intended by salvation by grace, in opposition to salvation by works. If this is not the case, I know not how to account for their feeling and stating such an objection as this to the doctrine of entire sanctification.

Now If I understand the doctrine of salvation by grace, both sanctification and justification are wrought by the grace of God, and not by any works or merits of our own, irrespective of the grace of Christ through faith. Now if this is the real doctrine of the Bible, what earthly objection can there be to our confessing, professing, and thanking God for our sanctification, any more than for our justification. It is true, indeed, that in our justification our own agency is not concerned, while in our sanctification it is. Yet I understand the doctrine of the Bible to be, that both are brought about by grace through faith, and that we should no sooner be sanctified without the grace of Christ than we should be justified without it. Now who pretends to deny this? And yet, if it is true, of what weight is that class of objections to which I have alluded? These objections manifestly turn upon the idea, no doubt latent and deep seated in the mind, that the real holiness of Christians, in whatever degree it exists, is in some way to be ascribed to some goodness originating in themselves, and not in the grace of Christ. But do let me ask, how is it possible that men who entertain, really and practically, right views upon this subject, can by any possibility feel as if it must be proof conclusive of self-righteousness and Pharisaism, to profess and thank God for sanctification? Is it not understood on all hands, that sanctification is by grace; and that the gospel has made abundant provision for the sanctification of all men? This certainly is admitted by those who have stated this objection. Now if this is so, which is the most honorable to God, to confess and complain of our sins, triumphing and having dominion over us, or to be able truly and honestly to thank Him for having given us the victory over our sins. God has said, "Sin shall not have dominion over you, for ye are not under the law but under grace."

Now, in view of this and multitudes of kindred promises, suppose we come to God and say, "O Lord, thou hast made these great and precious promises, but as a matter of fact they do not accord with our own experience. For sin does continually have dominion over us. Thy grace is not sufficient for us. The blood of Christ does not cleanse us from all sin. We are continually overcome by temptation, notwithstanding thy promise, that in every temptation thou wilt make a way for us to escape. Thou hast said the truth shall make us free, but we are not free. We are still the slaves of our appetites and lusts."

Now which, I inquire, is the most honorable to God, to go on with a string of confessions and self-accusations, that are in flat contradiction to the promises of God, and almost, to say the least, a burlesque upon the grace of the gospel, or to be able, through grace, to confess that we have found it true in our own experience, "that if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"--that his grace is sufficient for us--that as our day is so our strength is, as a matter of fact, and that sin does not have dominion over us, because we are not under the law but under grace?

To this I know it will be answered that in thus confessing our sins we do not impeach the grace or faithfulness of God inasmuch as all these promises are conditioned upon faith, and consequently that the reason of our remaining in sin is to be ascribed to our unbelief, and is therefore no disparagement to the grace of Christ. But I beg that it may be duly considered that faith itself is of the operation of God--is itself produced by grace; and therefore the fact of our being obliged to confess our unbelief is a dishonor to the grace of Christ. Is it honorable or dishonorable to God that we should be able to confess that even our unbelief is overcome, and that we are able to testify from our own experience that the grace of the gospel, as a matter of fact, is sufficient for our present salvation and sanctification? There is no doubt a vast

amount of self-righteousness in the Church, which while it talks of grace really means nothing by it. For a man to go any farther than to hope that he is converted, seems to many minds to savor of self-righteousness. Now why is this, unless they themselves entertain self-righteous notions in regard to conversion? Many persons would feel shocked to hear a man in prayer unqualifiedly thank God that he had been converted and justified. And they might just as well feel shocked at this, and upon precisely the same principle, as to feel shocked if he should unqualifiedly thank God that he had been sanctified by his grace.

But again I say, that the very fact that a man feels shocked to hear a converted or a sanctified soul unqualifiedly thank God for the grace received, shows that down deep in his heart lies concealed a self-righteous view of the way of salvation, and that in his mind all holiness in Christians is a ground of boasting; and that if persons have become truly and fully sanctified that they really have a ground of boasting before God. I know not how else to account for this wonderful prejudice. For my own part I do not conceive it to be the least evidence of self-righteousness when I hear a man sincerely and heartily thank God for converting and justifying him by his grace. Now should I feel either shocked, horrified, or disgusted, to hear a man thank God that He had sanctified him wholly by his grace, if in either or both cases I had the corroborative evidence of an apparently holy life, I should bless God, take courage, and feel like calling on all around to glorify God for such an instance of his glorious and excellent grace.

The feeling seems to be very general that such a prayer or thanksgiving is similar in fact and in the principle upon which it rests with that of the Pharisee noticed by our Savior. But what reason is there for this assumption? We are expressly informed that that was a prayer of a Pharisee. But the Pharisees were self-righteous and expressly and openly rejected the grace of Christ.

The Pharisee there boasted of his own righteousness originating in and consummated by his own goodness and not in the grace of Christ. Hence he did not thank God that the grace of Christ has made him unlike other men. Now this prayer was designed to teach us the abomination of any man's putting in a claim to righteousness and true holiness irrespective of the grace of God by Jesus Christ. But certainly this is an infinitely different thing from the thanksgiving of a soul who fully recognizes the grace of Christ, and attributes his sanctification entirely to that grace. And I cannot see how a man can suppose these two prayers to be analogous in their principle and spirit who has entirely divested himself of Pharisaical notions in respect to the doctrine of sanctification.

Your brother in the bonds of the gospel,

C.G. FINNEY

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