

Sanctification--No. 4

by Charles Finney

Charles Finney argues that entire sanctification is attainable in this life, supported by scriptural evidence and biblical promises.

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:23

Topics: "Holiness", "Sanctification"

Description

In his sermon 'Sanctification--No. 4', Charles Finney emphasizes the attainability of entire sanctification in this life, arguing that Christ's prayers and the teachings of the Apostles support this doctrine. He asserts that believers are called to be perfect and complete in all the will of God, and that the means for achieving this sanctification are provided through the Holy Spirit and the church's ministry. Finney warns against the apathy that arises from denying this doctrine, suggesting that such beliefs lead to complacency in sin among Christians. He encourages ministers to uphold a standard of complete obedience to God, as anything less undermines the covenant made with God and the church. Ultimately, Finney calls for a total abstinence from sin, asserting that this principle is essential for true holiness.

Transcript

TEXT.--I Thess. 5:23, 24. And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit, and soul, and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is he that calleth you who also will do it.

Having examined a few of the promises in proof of the position, that a state of entire sanctification is attainable in this life, I will now proceed to mention other considerations in support of this doctrine.

5. Christ prayed for the entire sanctification of saints in this life. "I pray not," He says, "that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil of the world." He did not pray that they should be kept from persecution or from natural death, but He manifestly prayed, that they should be kept from sin. Suppose Christ had commanded them to keep themselves from the evil of the world; what should we understand him to mean by such a command?

6. Christ has taught us to pray for entire sanctification in this life; "Thy will be done on earth as it is done in heaven." Now, if there is entire sanctification in heaven, Christ requires us to pray for it on earth. And is it probable that He has taught us to pray for that which He knows never can be or will be granted?

7. The Apostles evidently expected Christians to attain this state in this life.--See Col. 4:12: "Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God." Upon this passage I remark:

(1.) It was the object of the efforts of Epaphras, and a thing which he expected to effect, to be instrumental in causing those Christians to be "perfect and complete in all the will of God."

(2.) If this language does not describe a state of entire sanctification, I know of none that would. If "to be perfect and complete in all the will of God," be not Christian perfection, what is?

(3.) Paul knew that Epaphras was laboring to this end, and with this expectation; and he informed the church of it in a manner that evidently showed his approbation of the views and conduct of Epaphras.

8. That the Apostles expected Christians to attain this state is further manifest, from 2 Cor. 7:1: "Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness, in the fear of God."

Now does not the Apostle speak in this passage as if he really expected those to whom he wrote "to perfect holiness in the fear of God?" Observe how strong and full the language is, "Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit." If "to cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and all filthiness of the spirit, and to perfect holiness," be not entire sanctification, what is? That he expected this to take place in this life, is evident from the fact, that he requires them to be cleansed from all filthiness of the flesh as well as of the spirit.

9. All the intermediate steps can be taken. Therefore, the end can be reached. There is certainly no point in our progress towards entire sanctification, where it can be said, we can go no further. To this it has been objected, that though all the intermediate steps can be taken, yet the goal can never be reached in this life, just as five may be divided by three, ad infinitum, without exhausting the fraction. Now this illustration deceives the mind that uses it, as it may the minds of those who listen to it. It is true that you can never exhaust the fraction in dividing five by three, for the plain reason that the division may be carried on, ad infinitum. There is no end. You cannot in this case take all the intermediate steps, because they are infinite. But in the case of entire sanctification, all the intermediate steps can be taken; for there is an end, or state of entire sanctification; and that too, at a point infinitely short of infinite.

10. That this state may be attained in this life, I argue from the fact that provision is made against all the occasions of sin. Men sin only when they are tempted. And it is expressly asserted that in every temptation provision is made for our escape. Certainly if it is possible for us to escape without sin, under every temptation, then a state of entire and permanent sanctification is attainable.

11. Full provision is made for overcoming the three great enemies of our souls; the world, the flesh, and the devil.

(1.) The world--"This is the victory that overcometh the world, even your faith." "Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Christ."

(2.) The flesh--"If ye walk in the Spirit, ye shall not fulfill the lusts of the flesh."

(3.) Satan--"The shield of faith shall quench all the fiery darts of the wicked." "And God shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly."

Now all sober rules of Biblical criticism require us to understand the passages I have quoted, in the sense I have quoted them.

12. It is evident from the fact, expressly stated, that abundant means are provided for the accomplishment of this end. Eph. 4:10-16: "He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things. And He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: that we henceforth be no more children tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the slight of men, and cunning craftiness, where by they lie in wait to deceive; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into Him in all things, which is the head even Christ: from whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body, unto the edifying of itself in love." Upon this passage, I remark:

(1.) That what is here spoken of is plainly applicable only to this life. It is in this life that the apostles, evangelists, prophets and teachers exercise their ministry. The means, therefore, are applicable, and so far as we know, only applicable to this life.

(2.) The Apostle here manifestly teaches that these means are designed, and adequate to perfecting the whole Church as the body of Christ, "till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." Now observe--

(a.) These means are for the perfecting of the saints, till the whole Church, as a perfect man, "has come to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." If this is not entire sanctification, what is? That this is to take place in this world, is evident from what follows. For the Apostle adds, "That we henceforth," (i.e. after arriving at this perfection,) "be no more tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men and cunning craftiness whereby they lie in wait to deceive."

(3.) It should be observed that this is a very strong passage in support of the doctrine, inasmuch as it asserts that abundant means are provided for the sanctification of the Church in this life. And as the whole includes all its parts, there must be sufficient provision for the sanctification of each individual.

(4.) If the work is ever to be effected, it is by these means. But these means are used only in this life. Entire sanctification then must take place in this life.

(5.) If this passage does not teach a state of entire sanctification, such a state is no where mentioned in the Bible. And if believers are not here said to be wholly sanctified by these means, and of course in this life, I know not that it is any where taught that they shall be sanctified at all.

(6.) But suppose this passage to be put in the language of a command, how should we understand it? Suppose the saints commanded to be perfect, and to "grow up to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ," could any thing less than entire sanctification be understood by such requisitions? Then by what rule of sober criticism, I would inquire, can this language, used in this connection, mean any thing less than I have supposed it to mean?

13. God is able to perform this work in and for us. Eph. 3:14-19: "For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that he would

grant you according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God." Upon this passage I remark:

(1.) Paul evidently prays here for the entire sanctification of believers in this life. It is implied in our being "rooted and grounded in love," and being "filled with all the fulness of God," to be as perfect in our measure and according to our capacity, as He is. If to be filled with the fulness of God, does not imply a state of entire sanctification, what does?

(2.) That Paul did not see any difficulty in the way of God's accomplishing this work, is manifest from what he says in the 20th verse--"Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, &c."

14. The Bible no where represents death as the termination of sin in the saints, which it could not fail to do, were it true that they cease not to sin until death. It has been the custom of the Church, for a long time, to console individuals, in view of death, by the consideration, that it would be the termination of all their sin. And how almost universal has been the custom in consoling the friends of deceased saints, to mention this as a most important fact, that now they had ceased from sin. Now if death is the termination of sin in the saints, and if they never cease to sin until they pass into eternity, too much stress never has been or can be laid upon that circumstance; and it seems utterly incredible that no inspired writer should ever have noticed the fact. The representations of scripture are all right over against this idea. It is said, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord, for they rest from their labors, and their works do follow them." Here it is not intimated that they rest from their sins, but from their good works in this life; such works as shall follow, not to curse but to bless them. The representations of scripture are that death is the termination of the saint's suffering and labors of love, for the good of men and the glory of God, in this world. But no where in the Bible is it intimated that the death of a saint is the termination of his serving the devil.

But if it be true that Christians continue to sin till they die, and death is the termination, and the only termination of their sin, it seems to me impossible that the scripture representations on the subject should be what they are.

15. The Bible representations of death are utterly inconsistent with its being an indispensable means of sanctification. Death is represented as an enemy in the Bible. But if death is the only condition upon which men are brought into a state of entire sanctification, his agency is as important and as indispensable as the influence of the Holy Ghost. When death is represented in the Bible as any thing else than an enemy, it is because he cuts short the sufferings of the saints, and introduces them into a state of eternal glory--not because he breaks them off from communion with the devil! How striking is the contrast between the language of the Church and that of inspiration on this subject! The Church is consoling the Christian in view of death, that it will be the termination of his sins,--that he will then cease to serve the devil and his own lusts. The language of inspiration, on the other hand, is that he will cease, not from wicked but from good works, and labors, and sufferings for God in this world. The language of the Church is that then he will enter upon a life of unalterable holiness--that then, and not till then, he shall be entirely sanctified. The language of inspiration is, that because he is sanctified, death shall be an entrance into a state of eternal glory.

16. Ministers are certainly bound to set up some definite standard, to which as the ministers of God, they are bound to insist upon complete conformity. And now I would ask, what other standard can they and dare they set up than this? To insist upon any thing less than this, is to turn Pope and grant an indulgence to sin. But to set up this standard, and then inculcate that conformity to it is not, as a matter of fact, attainable in this life, is as absolutely to take the part of sin against God, as it would be to insist upon repentance in theory, and then avow that in practice it was not attainable.

And here let me ask Christians what they expect ministers to preach? Do you think they have a right to connive at any sin in you, or to insist upon any thing else as a practicable fact than that you should abandon every iniquity? It is sometimes said, that with us entire sanctification is a hobby. But I would humbly ask what else can we preach? Is not every minister bound to insist in every sermon that men shall wholly obey God? And because they will not compromise with any degree or form of sin, are they to be reproached for making the subject of entire obedience a hobby? I ask, by what authority can a minister preach any thing less? And how shall any minister dare to inculcate the duty as a theory, and yet not insist upon it as a practical matter, as something to be expected of every subject of God's kingdom?

17. A denial of this doctrine has the natural tendency to beget the very apathy witnessed in the Church. Professors of religion go on in sin, without much conviction of its wickedness. Sin unblushingly stalks abroad even in the Church of God, and does not fill Christians with horror, because they expect its existence as a thing of course. Tell a young convert that he must expect to back-slide, and he will do so of course, and with comparatively little remorse, because he looks upon it as a kind of necessity. And being led to expect it, you find him in a few months after his conversion away from God, and not at all horrified with his state. Just so you inculcate the idea among Christians that they are not expected to abandon all sin, and they will of course go on in sin with comparative indifference. You reprove them for their sins, and they will say, "O we are imperfect creatures; we do not pretend to be perfect, nor do we expect we ever shall be in this world." Many such answers as these will show you at once the God dishonoring and soul-ruining tendency of a denial of this doctrine.

18. A denial of this doctrine prepares the minds of ministers to temporize and wink at great iniquity in their churches. Feeling as they certainly must, if they disbelieve this doctrine, that a great amount of sin in all believers is to be expected as a thing of course, their whole preaching, and spirit, and demeanor, will be such as to beget a great degree of apathy among Christians in regard to their abominable sins.

19. If this doctrine is not true, how profane and blasphemous is the covenant of every church of every evangelical denomination. Every church requires its members to make a solemn covenant with God and with the church, in the presence of God and angels, and with their hands upon the emblems of the broken body and shed blood of the blessed Jesus, "to abstain from all ungodliness and every worldly lust, to live soberly and righteously in this present world." Now if the doctrine of the attainability of entire sanctification in this life is not true, what profane mockery is this covenant! It is a covenant to live in a state of entire sanctification, made under the most solemn circumstances, enforced by the most awful sanctions, and insisted upon by the minister of God standing at the altar. Now what right has any man on earth to require less than this?

And again, what right has any man on earth to require this, unless it is a practical thing?

Suppose when this covenant was proposed to a convert about to unite with the church, he should take it to his closet, and spread it before the Lord, and inquire whether it was right for him to make such a

covenant--and whether the grace of the gospel can enable him to fulfill it. Do you suppose the Lord Jesus would reply, that if he made that covenant, he certainly would, and must as a matter of course live in the habitual violation of it, as long as he live, and that His grace was not sufficient to enable him to keep it? Would he in such a case have any right to take upon himself this covenant? No, no more than he would have a right to lie.

20. It has long been maintained by orthodox divines, that a person is not a Christian who does not aim at living without sin--that unless he aim at perfection, he manifestly consents to live in sin; and is therefore certainly impenitent. It has been, and I think truly, said, that if a man does not in the fixed purpose of his heart, aim at total abstinence from sin, and at being wholly conformed to the will of God, he is not yet regenerated, and does not so much as mean to cease from abusing God.

Now if this is so, and I believe it certainly is, I would ask how a person can aim at and intend to do what he knows to be impossible. Is it not a contradiction to say that a man can intend to do what he knows he cannot do? To this it has been objected, that if true, it proves too much--that it would prove that no man ever was a Christian who did not believe in this doctrine. To this I reply:

(1.) A man may believe in the attainability of and aim at attaining what is really a state of entire sanctification, although he may not call it by that name. This I believe to be the real fact with Christians: and they would much more frequently attain what they aim at, did they know how to appropriate the grace of Christ to their own circumstances. Mrs. President Edwards, for example, firmly believed that she could attain to a state of entire consecration. She aimed at and manifestly attained it, and yet such were her views of physical depravity, that she did not call her state one of entire sanctification. It has been common for Christians to suppose that a state of entire consecration was attainable; but while they believed in physical depravity, they would not of course call even entire consecration, entire sanctification. Mrs. Edwards believed in, aimed at, and attained, entire consecration. She aimed at what she believed was attainable, and nothing more. She attained what she aimed at and nothing more. She called it by the same name with her husband, who was opposed to the doctrine of christian perfection, as held by the Wesleyan Methodists; manifestly on the ground of his notions of physical depravity. I care not what this state is called, if the thing be fully explained and insisted upon, together with the means of attaining it. Call it what you please, christian perfection, heavenly mindedness, or a state of entire consecration; by all these I understand the same thing. And it is certain, that by whatever name it is called, the thing must be aimed at to be attained. The practicability of its attainment must be admitted, or it cannot be aimed at.

And now I would humbly inquire whether it is not true, that to preach any thing short of this is not to give countenance to sin?

21. Another argument in favor of this doctrine is that the gospel, as a matter of fact, has often, not only temporarily but permanently and perfectly overcome every form of sin, in different individuals. Who has not seen the most beastly lusts, drunkenness, lasciviousness, and every kind of abomination, long indulged and fully ripe, entirely and for ever slain by the power of the grace of God? Now how was this done? Only by bringing this sin fully into the light of the gospel, and showing the individual the relation that sin sustained to the death of Christ.

Now nothing is wanting to slay any and every sin, but for the mind to be fully baptized into the death of Christ, and to see the bearings of one's own sins upon the sufferings and agonies and death of the blessed Jesus. Let me state a fact to illustrate my meaning. A habitual and most inveterate smoker of

tobacco, of my acquaintance, after having been plied with almost every argument to induce him to break the power of the habit, and relinquish its use, in vain, on a certain occasion, lighted his pipe and was about to put it to his mouth, when the inquiry was started, did Christ die to purchase this vile indulgence for me? He hesitated, but the inquiry pressed him, Did Christ die to purchase this vile indulgence for me? The relation of this conduct to the death of Christ, instantly broke the power of the habit, and from that day he has been free.

I could relate many other facts more striking than this, where a similar view of the relation of a particular sin to the atonement of Christ, has in a moment, not only broken the power of the habit, but destroyed entirely and for ever, the appetite for similar indulgences.

If the most inveterate habits of sin, and even those that involve physical consequences, and have deeply debased the physical constitution, and rendered it a source of overpowering temptation to the mind, can be and often have been utterly broken up, and for ever slain, by the grace of God, why should it be doubted that by the same grace, a man can triumph over all sin, and that for ever.

22. If this doctrine is not true, what is true upon the subject? It is certainly of great importance that ministers should be definite in their instructions, and if Christians are not expected to be wholly conformed to the will of God in this life, how much is expected of them? Who can say, hitherto canst thou, must thou come, but no further? It is certainly absurd, not to say ridiculous, for ministers to be for ever pressing Christians up to higher and higher attainments, saying at every step you can and must go higher, and yet all along informing them that they are expected to fall short of their whole duty--that they can as a matter of fact, be better than they are, far better, indefinitely better; but still it is not expected that they will do their whole duty. I have often been pained to hear men preach who are afraid to commit themselves in favor of the whole truth; and who are yet evidently afraid of falling short, in their instructions of insisting that men shall stand "perfect and complete in all the will of God." They are evidently sadly perplexed to be consistent, and well they may be, for in truth there is no consistency in their views and teachings. If they do not inculcate, as a matter of fact, that men ought to do and are expected to do their whole duty, they are sadly at a loss to know what to inculcate. They have evidently many misgivings about insisting upon less than this, and they fear to go to the full extent of apostolic teaching on this subject. And in their attempts to throw in qualifying terms and caveats, to avoid the impression that they believe in the doctrine of entire sanctification, they place themselves in a truly awkward position. Cases have occurred in which ministers have been asked, how far we may go, must go, and are expected to go, in depending upon the grace of Christ, and how holy men may be, and are expected to be, and must be, in this life? They could give no other answer to this, than that they can be a great deal better than they are. Now this indefiniteness is a great stumbling block to the Church. It cannot be according to the teachings of the Holy Ghost.

23. The tendency of a denial of this doctrine is, to my mind, conclusive proof that the doctrine itself must be true. Many developments in the recent history of the Church throw light upon this subject. Who does not see that the facts developed in the temperance reformation, have a direct and powerful bearing upon this question? It has been ascertained that there is no possibility of completing the temperance reformation, except by adopting the principle of total abstinence from all intoxicating drinks. Let a temperance lecturer go forth, as an Evangelist to promote revivals on the subject of temperance--let him inveigh against drunkenness, while he admits and defends the moderate use of alcohol, or insinuates, at least, that total abstinence is not expected or practicable. In this stage of the temperance reformation every one can see that such a man could make no progress; that he would be employed like a child in

building dams of sand to obstruct the rushing of mighty waters. It is as certain as that causes produce their effects, that no permanent reformation could be effected, short of adopting the total abstinence principle.

And now if this is true as it respects the temperance reformation, how much more so when applied to the subjects of holiness and sin. A man might by some possibility, even in his own strength, over come his habits of drunkenness, and retain, what might be called the temperate use of alcohol. But no such thing is possible in a reformation from sin. Sin is never overcome by any man in his own strength. If he admits into this creed the necessity of any degree of sin, or if he allows in practice any degree of sin, he becomes impenitent--consents to live in sin--and is of course abandoned by the Holy Spirit, the certain result of which is, a relapsing into a state of legal bondage to sin. And this is probably a true history of ninety-nine one hundredths of the Church. It is just what might be expected from the views and practice of the Church upon this subject.

The secret of backsliding is that reformations are not carried deep enough. Christians are not set with all their hearts to aim at a speedy deliverance from all sin. But on the contrary are left and in many instances taught to indulge the expectation that they shall sin as long as they live. I never shall forget probably, the effect produced on my mind by reading, when a young convert, in the diary of David Brainerd, that he never expected to make any considerable attainments in holiness in this life. I can now easily see that this was a natural inference from the theory of physical depravity which he held. But not perceiving this at the time, I doubt not that this expression of his views had a very injurious effect upon me for many years. It led me to reason thus, "If such a man as David Brainerd did not expect to make much advancement in holiness in this life, it is vain for me to expect such a thing."

The fact is, if there be any thing that is important to high attainments in holiness, and to the progress of the work of sanctification in this life, it is the adoption of the principle of total abstinence from sin. Total abstinence from sin, must be every man's motto, or sin will certainly sweep him away as a flood. That cannot possibly be a true principle in temperance, that leaves the causes which produce drunkenness to operate in their full strength. Nor can that be true in holiness which leaves the root unextracted, and the certain causes of spiritual decline and backsliding at work in the very heart of the Church. And I am fully convinced that until Evangelists and Pastors adopt and carry out in principle and practice the principle of total abstinence from all sin, they will as certainly find themselves every few months, called to do their work over again, as a temperance lecturer would who should admit the moderate use of alcohol.

24. Again, the tendency of the opposite view of this subject, shows that that cannot be true. Who does not know, that to call upon sinners to repent, and at the same time to inform them that they will not, and cannot, and are not expected to repent, would for ever prevent their repentance. Suppose you say to a sinner, you are naturally able to repent; but it is certain that you never will repent in this life, either with or without the Holy Ghost. Who does not see that such teaching would as surely prevent his repentance as he believed it? So, say to a professor of religion, you are naturally able to be wholly conformed to God; but it is certain that you never will be in this life, either in your own strength or by the grace of God. If this teaching be believed, it will just as certainly prevent his sanctification as the other teaching would the repentance of the sinner. I can speak from experience on this subject. While I inculcated the common views, I was often instrumental in bringing Christians under great conviction, and into a state of temporary repentance and faith. But falling short of urging them up to a point where they would become so acquainted with Christ, as to abide in Him, they would of course soon relapse again into their former state. I never saw, and can now understand that I had no reason to expect to see, under the instructions which I then gave, such a state of religious feeling, such steady and confirmed walking with God, among

Christians, as I have seen since the change in my views and instructions.

Some further considerations under this head, I must defer till my next.

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