

Sanctification--No. 5

by Charles Finney

Charles Finney's sermon emphasizes the attainability of entire sanctification, using the Apostle Paul's life as a key example.

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:23

Topics: "Holiness", "Sanctification"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the attainability of entire sanctification in this life, arguing that it is crucial for the Church to recognize that such a state has been achieved, particularly by the Apostle Paul. He examines various scriptures to demonstrate that Paul lived a life of holiness and blamelessness, asserting that Paul's own declarations of purity and integrity serve as powerful evidence of the possibility of complete sanctification. Finney contends that the belief in Paul's sinlessness is not merely an encouragement but a necessary truth for believers to aspire to. He concludes that to deny Paul's sanctification is to undermine the grace of the gospel and the transformative power of Christ.

Transcript

TEXT.--1 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.

I might urge a great many other considerations, and as I have said, fill a book with scriptures, and arguments, and demonstrations, of the attainability of entire sanctification in this life.

But I forbear, and at present will urge only one more consideration, a consideration which has great weight in some minds. It is a question of great importance, at least in some minds, whether any actually ever did attain this state. Some who believe it attainable, do not consider it of much importance to show that it has actually been attained. Now I freely admit, that it may be attainable, although it never has been attained. Yet it appears to me that as a matter of encouragement to the Church, it is of great importance whether, as a matter of fact, a state of entire holiness has been attained in this life. This question covers much ground. But for the sake of brevity, I design to examine but one case, and see whether there is reason to believe that in one instance, at least, it has been attained. The case to which I allude is that of Paul. And I propose to take up and examine the passages that speak of him, for the purpose of ascertaining whether there is evidence that he ever attained to this state in this life.

And here let me say that to my own mind it seems plain, that Paul and John, to say nothing of the other Apostles, designed and expected the Church to understand them as speaking from experience, and as having received of that fulness which they taught to be in Christ and in His gospel.

And I wish to say again and more expressly, that I do not rest the practicability of attaining a state of entire holiness at all upon the question, whether any ever have attained it any more than I would rest the question, whether the world ever will be converted upon the fact whether it ever has been converted. I have been surprised, when the fact that a state of entire holiness has been attained, is urged as one argument among a great many to prove its attainability, and that too merely as an encouragement to Christians to lay hold upon this blessing, that objectors and reviewers fasten upon this as the doctrine of sanctification, as if by calling this particular question in doubt, they could overthrow all the other proof of its attainability. Now this is utterly absurd. When, then, I examine the character of Paul with this object in view, if it should not appear clear to you that he did attain this state, you are not to overlook the fact, that its attainability is settled by other arguments, on grounds entirely independent of the question whether it has been attained or not; and that I merely use this as an argument, simply because to me it appears forcible, and to afford great encouragement to Christians to press after this state.

I will first make some remarks in regard to the manner in which the language of Paul, when speaking of himself, should be understood; and then proceed to an examination of the passages which speak of his Christian character.

1. His revealed character, demands that we should understand him to mean all that he says, when speaking in his own favor.
2. The Spirit of inspiration would guard him against speaking too highly of himself.
3. No man ever seemed to possess greater modesty, and to feel more unwilling to exalt his own attainments.
4. If he considered himself as not having attained a state of entire sanctification, and as often, if not in all things, falling short of his duty, we may expect to find him acknowledging this in the deepest self-abasement.
5. If he is charged with living in sin, and with being wicked in any thing, we may expect him, when speaking under inspiration, not to justify, but unequivocally condemn himself in those things.

Now in view of these facts, let us examine those scriptures in which he speaks of himself and is spoken of by others.

(1.) 1 Thess. 2:10: "Ye are witnesses, and God also, how holily, and justly, and unblamably, we behaved ourselves among you that believe." Upon this text I remark:

(a) Here he unqualifiedly asserts his own holiness. This language is very strong, "How holily, justly, and unblamably." If to be holy, just, and unblamable, be not entire sanctification, what is?

(b) He appeals to the heart-searching God for the truth of what he says, and to their own observation; calling on God and on them also to bear witness, that he had been holy and without blame.

(c) Here we have the testimony of an inspired Apostle, in the most unqualified language, asserting his own entire sanctification. Was he deceived? Can it be that he knew himself all the time to have been living in sin? If such language as this does not amount to an unqualified assertion that he had lived among them without sin, what can be known by the use of human language?

(2.) 2 Cor. 6:3-7: "Giving no offence in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed: but in all things, approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in watchings, in fastings; by pureness, by knowledge, by long-suffering, by kindness, by the Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned, by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left." Upon these verses I remark:

(a) Paul asserts that he gave no offence in any thing, but in all things approved himself as a minister of God. Among other things he did this, "by pureness," "by the Holy Ghost," "by love unfeigned," "and by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left." How could so modest a man as Paul speak of himself in this manner, unless he knew himself to be in a state of entire sanctification, and thought it of great importance that the Church should know it?

(3.) 2 Cor. 1:12: "For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-ward." This passage plainly implies the same thing, and was manifestly said for the same purpose--to declare the greatness of the grace of God as manifested in himself.

(4.) Acts 24:16: "And herein do I exercise myself to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men." Paul doubtless at this time had an enlightened conscience. If an inspired Apostle could affirm, that he "always" had a "conscience void of offence toward God and toward men", must he not have been in a state of entire sanctification?

(5.) 2 Tim. 1:3: "I thank God, whom I serve from my forefathers with a pure conscience, that without ceasing I have remembrance of thee in my prayers night and day." Here again he affirms, that he serves God with a pure conscience. Could this be, if he was often, and perhaps every day, as some suppose, violating his conscience?

(6.) Gal. 2:20: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me." This does not assert, but strongly implies that he lived without sin.

(7.) Gal. 6:14: "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world." This text also affords the same inference as above.

(8.) Phil. 1:21: "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Here the Apostle affirms that for him to live was as if Christ lived in the Church. How could he say this, unless his example, and doctrine, and spirit, were those of Christ?

(9.) Acts 20:26: "Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men." Upon this I remark:

(a) This passage, taken in its connection, shows clearly, the impression that Paul desired to make upon the minds of those to whom he speaks.

(b) It is certain that he could in no proper sense be "pure of the blood of all men," unless he had done his whole duty. If he had been sinfully lacking in any grace, or virtue, or labor, could he have said this? Certainly not.

(10.) 1 Cor. 4:16, 17: "Wherefore, I beseech you, be ye followers of me. For this cause have I sent unto you Timotheus, who is my beloved son, and faithful in the Lord, who shall bring you into remembrance of my ways which be in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every Church." I remark:

(a) Here Paul manifestly sets himself up as an example to the Church. How could he do this, if he were living in sin?

(b) He sent Timotheus to them to refresh their memories, in regard to his doctrine and practice; implying that what he taught in every Church, he himself practiced.

(11.) 1 Cor. 11:1: "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ." Here Paul commands them to follow him, "as he followed Christ;" not so far as he followed Christ, as some seem to understand it, but to follow him because he followed Christ. How could he, in this unqualified manner, command the Church to copy his example, unless he knew himself to be blameless?

(12.) Phil. 3:17, 20: "Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample." "For our conversation is in heaven, from whence we also look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." Here again, Paul calls upon the Church to follow him, and particularly to notice those that did copy his example, and assigns as the reason, "for our conversation is in heaven."

(13.) Phil. 4:9: "Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do; and the God of peace shall be with you." The Philippians were commanded to "do those things which they had learned, and received, and SEEN in him." And then he adds, that if they "do those things, the God of peace shall be with them." Now can it be that he meant that they should understand any thing less, than that he had lived without sin among them?

I will next examine those passages which are supposed by some, to imply that Paul was not in a state of entire sanctification.

(14.) Acts 15:36-40: "And some days after, Paul said unto Barnabas, Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they do. And Barnabas determined to take with them John, whose surname was Mark. But Paul thought not good to take him with them, who departed from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work. And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed to Cyprus: and Paul chose Silas, and departed, being recommended by the brethren, unto the grace of God." Upon this passage I remark:

(a) This contention between Paul and Barnabas was founded upon the fact, that John, who was a nephew of Barnabas, had once abruptly left them in their travels, it would seem without any justifiable reason, and had returned home.

(b) It appears that the confidence of Barnabas in his nephew was restored.

(c) That Paul was not as yet satisfied of the stability of his character, and thought it dangerous to trust him as a traveling companion and fellow-laborer. It is not intimated, nor can it be fairly implied that either of

them sinned in this contention.

(d) It sufficiently accounts for what occurred, that they disagreed in their views of the expediency of taking John with them.

(e) Being men of principle, neither of them felt it to be his duty to yield to the opinion of the other.

(f) If either were to be blamed, it seems that Barnabas was in fault, rather than Paul, inasmuch as he determined to take John with him without having consulted Paul. And he persisted in this determination until he met with such firm resistance on the part of Paul, that he took John and sailed abruptly for Cyprus; while Paul choosing Silas, as he companion, was recommended by the brethren to the grace of God, and departed. Now certainly there is nothing in this transaction, that Paul or any good man, or an angel, under the circumstances, need to have been ashamed of, that we can discover. It does not appear, that Paul ever acted more from a regard to the glory of God and the good of religion, than in this transaction. And I would humbly inquire what spirit is that which finds sufficient evidence in this case to charge an inspired Apostle with rebellion against God? But even admitting that he did sin in this case, where is the evidence that he was not afterwards sanctified when he wrote the epistles?--for this was before the writing of any of his epistles.

(15.) Acts 23:1-5: "And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day. And the high priest Ananias commanded them that stood by him to smite him on the mouth. Then said Paul unto him, God shall smite thee, thou whited wall; for sittest thou to judge me after the law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law? And they that stood by said, Revilest thou God's high priest? Then said Paul, I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest: for it is written, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people." In this case sinful anger has been imputed to Paul; but so far as I can see, without any just reason. To my mind it seems plain, that the contrary is to be inferred. It appears that Paul was not personally acquainted with the then officiating high priest. And he manifested the utmost regard to the authority of God in quoting from the Old Testament, "Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people"--implying, that not withstanding the abuse he had received, he should not have made the reply, had he known him to have been the high priest.

(16.) Rom. 7: from the 14th to the 25th verse, have by many been supposed to be an epitome of Paul's experience at the time he wrote the epistle. Upon this I remark:

(a) The connection and drift of Paul's reasoning shows that the case of which he was speaking, whether his own or the case of some one else, was adduced by him to illustrate the influence of the law upon the carnal mind.

(b) This is a case in which sin had the entire dominion, and overcame all his resolutions of obedience.

(c) That his use of the singular pronoun and in the first person, proves nothing in regard to whether or not he was speaking of himself, for this is common with him, and with other writers, when using illustrations.

(d) He keeps up the personal pronoun and passes into the 8th chapter; at the beginning of which, he represents himself or the person of whom he is speaking, as being not only in a different but in an exactly opposite state of mind. Now if the seventh chapter contains Paul's experience, whose experience is this in the eighth chapter? Are we to understand them both as the experience of Paul? If so, we must understand him as first speaking of his experience before and then after he was sanctified. He begins the eighth

chapter by saying, "There is now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit," and assigns as a reason, that "the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus had made him free from the law of sin and death." The law of sin and death was that law in his members, or the influence of the flesh, of which he had so bitterly complained in the seventh chapter. But now it appears that he has passed into a state in which he is made free from this influence of the flesh--is emancipated and dead to the world, and to the flesh, and in a state in which "there is no condemnation." Now if there was no condemnation in the state in which he was, it must have been, either because he did not sin; or, if he did sin, because the law did not condemn him; or because the law of God was repealed or abrogated. Now if the penalty of the law was so set aside in his case, that he could sin without condemnation, this is a real abrogation of the law. For a law without a penalty is no law, and if the law is set aside, there is no longer any standard, and he was neither sinful nor holy. But as the law was not and cannot be set aside, its penalty was not and cannot be so abrogated as not to condemn every sin. If Paul lived without condemnation, it must be because he lived without sin.

To me it does not appear as if Paul speaks of his own experience in the seventh chapter of Romans, but that he merely supposes a case by way of illustration, and speaks in the first person and in the present tense, simply because it was convenient and suitable to his purpose. His object manifestly was, in this and in the beginning of the eighth chapter, to contrast the influence of the law and of the gospel--to describe in the seventh chapter the state of a man who was living in sin, and every day condemned by the law, convicted and constantly struggling with his own corruptions, but continually overcome,--and in the eighth chapter to exhibit a person in the enjoyment of gospel liberty, where the righteousness of the law was fulfilled in the heart by the grace of Christ. The seventh chapter may well apply either to a person in a backslidden state, or to a convicted person who had never been converted. The eighth chapter can clearly be applicable to none but to those who are in a state of entire sanctification.

I have already said that the seventh chapter contains the history of one over whom sin has dominion. Now to suppose that this was the experience of Paul when he wrote the epistle, or of any one who was in the liberty of the gospel, is absurd and contrary to the experience of every person who ever enjoyed gospel liberty. And further, this is expressly contradicted in the sixth chapter as it can be. As I said, the seventh chapter exhibits one over whom sin has dominion; but God says, in the sixth chapter and fourteenth verse, "For sin shall not have dominion over you, for ye are not under the law, but under grace."

I remark finally upon the passage, that if Paul was speaking of himself in the seventh chapter of Romans, and really giving a history of his own experience, it proves nothing at all in regard to his subsequent sanctification; for,

(e) If this was his experience at the time he wrote the epistle, it would prove nothing in regard to what afterwards transpired in his own experience.

(f) The eighth chapter shows conclusively, that it was not this experience at the time he wrote the epistle. The fact that the translators have separated the seventh and eighth chapters, as I have before said, has led to much error in the understanding of this passage. Nothing is more certain than that the two chapters were designed to describe not only different experiences, but experiences opposite to each other. And that both these experiences should belong to the same person at the same time, is manifestly impossible. If therefore Paul is speaking in this connection of his own experience, we are bound to understand the eighth chapter as describing his experience at the time he wrote the epistle; and the seventh chapter as descriptive of a former experience.

Now therefore, if any one understands the seventh chapter as describing a christian experience, he must understand it as giving the exercises of one in a very imperfect state; and the eighth chapter as descriptive of a soul in a state of entire sanctification. So that this epistle, instead of militating against the idea of Paul's entire sanctification, upon the supposition that he was speaking of himself, fully establishes the fact that he was in that state.

(17.) Phil. 3:10-15: "That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead. Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you." Upon this passage I remark:

(a) Here is plain allusion to the Olympic games, in which men ran for a prize, and were not crowned until the end of the race, however well they might run.

(b) Paul speaks of two kinds of perfection here, one of which he claims to have attained, and the other he had not. The perfection which he had not attained, was that which he did not expect to attain until the end of his race, nor indeed until he had attained the resurrection from the dead. Until then he was not and did not expect to be perfect, in the sense that he should "apprehend all that for which he was apprehended of Christ Jesus." But all this does not imply that he was not living without sin, any more than it implies that Christ was living in sin when he said, "I must walk to-day and to-morrow, and the third day I shall be perfected." In this Christ speaks of a perfection which he had not attained.

Now it is manifest that it was the glorified state to which Paul had not attained, and which perfection he was pressing after. But in the 15th verse, he speaks of another kind of perfection which he professed to have attained. "Let us therefore," he says, "as many as are perfect, be thus minded;" i.e. let us be pressing after this high state of perfection in glory, "if by any means we may attain unto the resurrection of the dead."

Now it is manifest to my mind, that Paul does not in this passage, teach expressly or impliedly that he was living in sin, but the direct opposite--that he meant to say as he had said in many other places, that he was unblamable in respect to sin, but that he was aspiring after higher attainments, and meant to be aspiring after higher attainments, and meant to be satisfied with nothing short of eternal glory.

In relation to the character of Paul, let me say:

(a) If Paul was not sinless, he was an extravagant boaster, and such language used by any minister in these days would be considered as the language of an extravagant boaster.

(b) This setting himself up as an example, so frequently and fully, without any caution or qualification, was highly dangerous to the interests of the Church, if he were not in a state of entire sanctification.

(c) It was as wicked as it was dangerous.

(d) His language in appealing to God, that in his life and heart he was blameless, was blasphemous, unless he was really what he professed to be; and if he was what he professed to be, he was in a state of

entire sanctification.

(e) There is no reason for doubting his having attained this state.

(f) It is doing dishonor to God, to maintain, under these circumstances, that Paul had not attained the blessing of entire sanctification.

(g) He nowhere confesses sin after he became an Apostle, but invariably justifies himself, appealing to man and to God, for his entire integrity and blamelessness of heart and life.

(h) To accuse him of sin in these circumstances, without evidence, is not only highly injurious to him, but disgraceful to the cause of religion.

(i) To charge him with sin, when he claims to have been blameless, is either to accuse him of falsehood or delusion.

(k) To maintain the sinfulness of this Apostle, is to deny the grace of the gospel, and charge God foolishly. And I cannot but inquire, why is this great effort in the Church to maintain, that Paul lived in sin, and was never wholly sanctified till death?

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