

# Sanctification--No. 6

by Charles Finney

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*Charles Finney's sermon emphasizes the attainability of entire sanctification for believers through faith and the transformative power of the New Covenant.*

**Scripture:** 1 Thessalonians 5:23

**Topics:** "Sanctification", "Grace and Holiness"

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## Description

Charles Finney addresses the doctrine of entire sanctification, emphasizing that while all have sinned, it does not negate the possibility of living a sin-free life through faith in Christ. He counters objections from scripture that suggest sin is unavoidable, arguing that the New Covenant offers greater grace and the potential for complete sanctification. Finney asserts that the teachings of Jesus and the promises of the New Testament affirm the attainability of holiness in this life. He encourages believers to reject doctrines that excuse sin and to embrace the transformative power of God's grace. Ultimately, he calls for a deeper understanding of faith and the responsibilities that accompany it in the pursuit of holiness.

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## 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.

In pursuing this subject, I am

VII. To answer some objections to the doctrine of entire sanctification.

In proceeding to answer some of the more prominent objections to the doctrine of entire sanctification in this life, I will begin with those passages of scripture that are supposed to contradict it.

1. 1 Kings 8:46: "If they sin against thee, (for there is no man that sinneth not,) and thou be angry with them, and deliver them to the enemy, so that they carry them away captives unto the land of the enemy, far or near." On this passage I remark:

(1.) That this sentiment, in nearly the same language, is repeated in 2 Chron. 6:26, and in Eccl. 7:20, where the same original word in the same form is used.

(2.) These are the strongest passages I know of in the Old Testament, and the same remarks are applicable to the three.

(3.) I will quote, for the satisfaction of the reader, the note of Adam Clarke upon this passage, and also that of Barclay, the celebrated and highly spiritual author of "An Apology for the True Christian Divinity." And let me say, that they appear to me to be satisfactory answers to the objection founded upon these passages.

CLARKE: "If they sin against thee."--This must refer to some general defection from truth; to some species of false worship, idolatry, or corruption of the truth and ordinances of the Most High; as for it, they are here stated to be delivered into the hands of their enemies, and carried away captive, which was the general punishment of idolatry; and what is called, ver. 47, acting perversely, and committing wickedness.

"If they sin against thee, for there is no man that sinneth not." The second clause, as it is here translated, renders the supposition, in the first clause, entirely nugatory; for, if there be no man that sinneth not, it is useless to say, IF they sin: but this contradiction is taken away by reference to the original *ki yechetau lak*, which should be translated IF they shall sin against thee: or, should they sin against thee, *ki ein Adam asher lo yecheta*; "For there is no man that may not sin:" i.e. there is no man impeccable, none infallible; none that is not liable to transgress. This is the true meaning of the phrase in various parts of the Bible, and so our translators have understood the original; for, even in the 31st verse of this chapter, they have translated *yecheta*, IF a man TRESPASS; which certainly implies he might or might not do it: and in this way they have translated the same word, IF a soul SIN, in Lev. 5:1, and 6:2, 1 Sam. 2:25, 2 Chron. 6:22, and in several other places. The truth is, the Hebrew has no mood to express words in the permissive or optative way, but to express this sense it uses the future tense of the conjugation *kal*.

"This text has been a wonderful strong-hold for all who believe that there is no redemption from sin in this life; that no man can live without committing sin: and that we cannot be entirely freed from it till we die. 1. The text speaks no such doctrine, it only speaks of the possibility of every man sinning; and this must be true of a state of probation. 2. There is not another text in the divine records that is more to the purpose than this. 3. The doctrine is flatly in opposition to the design of the gospel; for Jesus came to save his people from their sins, and to destroy the works of the devil. 4. It is a dangerous and destructive doctrine, and should be blotted out of every Christian's creed. There are too many who are seeking to excuse their crimes by all means in their power; and we need not embody their excuses in a creed, to complete their deception, by stating that their sins are unavoidable."

BARCLAY: "Secondly--Another objection is from two places of scripture, much of one signification. The one is, 1 Kings 8:46: For there is no man that sinneth not. The other is Eccl. 7:20: For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.

"I answer: 1. These affirm nothing of a daily and continual sinning, so as never to be redeemed from it; but only that all have sinned, or that there is none that doth not sin, though not always, so as never to cease to sin; and in this lies the question. Yea, in that place of the Kings he speaks within two verses of the returning of such with all their souls and hearts; which implies a possibility of leaving off sin. 2. There is a respect to be had to the seasons and dispensations; for if it should be granted that in Solomon's time there were none that sinned not, it will not follow that there are none such now, or that it is a thing not now attainable by the grace of God under the gospel. 3. And lastly, This whole objection hangs upon a false interpretation; for the original Hebrew word may be read in the Potential Mood, thus, There is no man who

may not sin, as well as in the Indicative; so both the Old Latin, Junius, and Tremellius, and Votablus, have it; and the same word is so used, Psalm 119:11: Thy word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against thee, in the Potential Mood, and not in the Indicative; which being more answerable to the universal scope of the scriptures, the testimony of the truth, and the sense of almost all interpreters, doubtless ought to be so understood, and the other interpretation rejected as spurious."

(4.) Whatever may be thought of the views of these authors, to me, it is a plain and satisfactory answer to the objection founded upon these passages, that the objection might be strictly true under the Old Testament dispensation, and prove nothing in regard to the attainability of a state of entire sanctification under the New. What, does the New Testament dispensation differ nothing from the Old in its advantages for the acquisition of holiness? If it be true that no one under the comparatively dark dispensation of Judaism, attained a state of entire and permanent sanctification, does that prove such a state unattainable under the Gospel? It is expressly stated in the Epistle to the Hebrews, that "the Old Covenant made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did." Under the Old Covenant, God expressly promised that He would make a new one with the house of Israel in "writing the law in their hearts," and in "engraving it in their inward parts." And this New Covenant was to be made with the house of Israel, under the Christian dispensation. What then do all such passages in the Old Testament prove in relation to the privileges and holiness of Christians under the New Testament?

(5.) Whether any of the Old Testament saints did so far receive the New Covenant by way of anticipation, as to enter upon a state of entire and permanent sanctification, it is not my present purpose to inquire. Nor will I inquire, whether, admitting that Solomon said in his day, that "there was not a just man upon the earth that liveth and sinneth not," the same could with equal truth have been asserted of every generation under the Jewish dispensation.

(6.) It is expressly asserted of Abraham and multitudes of the Old Testament saints, that they "died in faith, not having received the promises." Now what can this mean? It cannot be that they did not know the promises, for to them the promises were made. It cannot mean that they did not receive Christ, for the Bible expressly asserts that they did,--that "Abraham rejoiced to see Christ's day,"--that Moses, and indeed all the Old Testament saints, had so much knowledge of Christ, as a Savior to be revealed, as to bring them into a state of salvation. But still they did not receive the promise of the Spirit as it is poured out under the Christian dispensation. They did not receive the light, and the glory of the Christian dispensation, nor the fulness of the Holy Spirit. And it is asserted in the Bible, that "they without us," i.e. without our privileges, "could not be made perfect."

2. The next objection is founded upon the Lord's Prayer. In this, Christ has taught us to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Here it is objected that if a person should become entirely sanctified, he could no longer use this clause of this prayer, which it is said, was manifestly designed to be used by the Church to the end of time. Upon this prayer I remark:

(1.) Christ has taught us to pray for entire and permanent sanctification, "Thy will be done on earth as it is done in heaven."

(2.) He designed that we should expect this prayer to be answered, or that we should mock God, by asking what we did not believe was agreeable to His will, and that too, which we know could not consistently be granted; and that we are to repeat this insult to God as often as we pray.

(3.) The petition for forgiveness of our trespasses it is plain, must apply to past sins, and not to sins we are committing at the time we make the prayer; for it would be absurd and abominable to pray for the forgiveness of a sin which we were then in the act of committing.

(4.) This prayer cannot properly be made in respect to any sin of which we have not repented; for it would be highly abominable in the sight of God, to pray for the forgiveness of a sin of which we did not repent.

(5.) If there be any hour or day in which a man has committed no actual sin, he could not consistently make this prayer in reference to that hour or that day.

(6.) But at that very time, it would be highly proper for him to make this prayer in relation to all his past sins, and that too although he may have repented of and confessed them, and prayed for their forgiveness, a thousand times before.

(7.) And although his sins may be forgiven, he ought still to feel penitent in view of them,--to repent of them both in this world and in the world to come, as often as he remembers them. And it is perfectly suitable, so long as he lives in the world, to say the least, to repent and repeat the request for forgiveness. For myself, I am unable to see why this passage should be made a stumbling block; for if it be improper to pray for the forgiveness of past sins of which we have repented, then it is improper to pray for forgiveness at all. And if this prayer cannot be used with propriety in reference to past sins, of which we have already repented, it cannot properly be used at all, except upon the absurd supposition, that we are to pray for the forgiveness of sins which we are now committing, and of which we have not repented. And if it be improper to use this form of prayer in reference to all past sins of which we have repented, it is just as improper to use it in reference to sins committed to-day or yesterday, of which we have repented.

3. Another objection is founded on James 3:1, 2: "My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation. For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body." Upon this passage I remark:

(1.) The term rendered masters here, may be rendered teachers, critics, or sensors, and be understood either in a good or bad sense. The Apostle exhorts the brethren not to be many masters, because if they are so they will incur the greater condemnation; "for," says he, "in many things we offend all." The fact that we all offend is here urged as a reason why we should not be many masters; which shows that the term masters is here used in a bad sense. "Be not many masters," for if we are masters, "we shall receive the greater condemnation," because we are all offenders. Now I understand this to be the simple meaning of this passage; do not many [or any] of you become sensors, or critics, and set yourselves up to judge and condemn others. For inasmuch as you have all sinned yourselves, and we are all great offenders, we shall receive the greater condemnation, if we set ourselves as sensors. "For with what judgment ye judge ye shall judge, and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again."

(2.) It does not appear to me that the Apostle designs to affirm any thing at all of the present character of himself or of those to whom he wrote; nor to have had the remotest allusion to the doctrine of entire sanctification, but simply to affirm a well established truth in its application to a particular sin; that if they became sensors, and injuriously condemned others, inasmuch as they had all committed many sins, they should receive the greater condemnation.

(3.) That the Apostle did not design to deny the doctrine of Christian perfection or entire sanctification, as maintained in these lectures, seems evident from the fact that he immediately subjoins, "If any man offend

not in word, the same is a perfect man and able also to bridle the whole body."

4. Another objection is founded upon 1 John 1:8: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." Upon this I remark:

(1.) This verse is immediately preceded by the assertion that "the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin." Now it would be very remarkable, if immediately after this assertion, the Apostle should mean to say that it does not cleanse us from all sin, and if we say it does we deceive ourselves. But if this objection be true, it involves the Apostle in as palpable a contradiction as could be expressed.

(2.) If the Apostle meant to say that we deceive ourselves, if we suppose ourselves to be in a state of entire sanctification, his assertion in the next verse is truly another wonderful contradiction. "If," he continues, "we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." In another place he says, "all unrighteousness is sin." Now, if it be true that God is really just to forgive and cleanse us from all unrighteousness or from all sin, and "the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us"--not shall, but actually does cleanse us,--"from all sin;" how remarkable it would be, if, between two such assertions as these, the Apostle meant to be understood to teach, that if we say His blood cleanseth us from all unrighteousness, we deceive ourselves!

(3.) But the tenth verse shows plainly what the Apostle meant, for he merely repeats what he had said in the eighth verse: "If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar."

This then is the meaning of the whole passage. If we say that we are not sinners, i.e. have no sin to need the blood of Christ, that we have never sinned, and consequently need no Savior, we deceive ourselves. For we have sinned, and nothing but the blood of Christ cleanseth us from sin. And now, if we will not deny but confess that we have sinned, "He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." "But if we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us."

5. It has been objected to the view I have given of Jer. 31:31-34, that if that passage is to be considered as a promise of entire sanctification, this proves too much. Inasmuch as it is said, "they shall all know the Lord from the least to the greatest," therefore, says the objector, it would prove that all the Church has been in a state of entire sanctification ever since the commencement of the New Testament dispensation. To this objection I answer:

(1.) I have already, I trust, shown that this promise is conditioned upon faith, and that the blessing cannot possibly be received but by faith.

(2.) It is doubtless true that many have received this covenant in its fulness.

(3.) A promise may be unconditional or absolute, and certain of a fulfillment in relation to the whole Church as a body, in some period of its history, which is nevertheless conditional in relation to its application to any particular individuals or generation of individuals.

(4.) I think it is in entire keeping with the prophecies to understand this passage as expressly promising to the Church a day, when all her members shall be sanctified, and when "holiness to the Lord shall be written upon the bells of the horses." Indeed it appears to be abundantly foretold that the Church as a body shall, in this world, enter into a state of entire sanctification, in some period of her history; and that this will be the carrying out of these promises of the New Covenant, of which we are speaking. But it is by no means an objection to this view of the subject, that all the Church have not yet entered into this state.

It has been maintained, that this promise in Jer. has been fulfilled already. This has been argued--

(1.) From the fact that the promise has no condition, expressed or implied, and the responsibility therefore, rests with God.

(2.) That the Apostle, in his Epistle to the Hebrews quotes it as to be fulfilled at the advent of Christ. Now to this I answer:

It might as well be argued that all the rest of the promises and prophecies relating to the gospel day were fulfilled, because the time had come when the promise was due. Suppose it were denied that the world would ever be converted, or that there ever would be any more piety in the world than there has been and is at present; and when the promises and prophecies respecting the latter day glory, and the conversion of the world, should be adduced in proof that the world is to be converted, it should be replied that these promises had already been fulfilled--that they were unconditional--and that the advent of the Messiah, was the time when they became due. But suppose, that in answer to this, it should be urged that nothing has ever yet occurred in the history of this world that seems at all to have come up to the meaning of these promises and prophecies--that the world has never been in the state which seems to be plainly described in these promises and prophecies--and that it cannot be that any thing the world has yet experienced is what is meant by such language as is used in the Bible, in relation to the future state of the world. Now suppose, to this it should be replied, that the event has shown what the promises and prophecies really meant--that we are to interpret the language by the fact--that as the promises and prophecies were unconditional, and the gospel day has really come when they were to be fulfilled, we certainly know, whatever their language may be, that they meant nothing more than what the world has already realized? This would be precisely like the reasoning of some persons in relation to Jer. 31:31-34. They say--

(a) The promises are without condition.

(b) The time has come for their fulfillment. Therefore the world has realized their fulfillment, and all that was intended by them; that the facts in the case settle the question of construction and interpretation; and we know that they never intended to promise a state of entire sanctification, because as a matter of fact no such state has been realized by the Church. Indeed! Then the Bible is the most hyperbolic, not to say ridiculous book in the universe. If what the world has seen in regard to the extension and universal prevalence of the Redeemer's kingdom, is all that the promises relating to these events really mean, then the Bible of all books in the world, is the most calculated to deceive mankind. But who, after all, in the exercise of his sober sense, will admit any such reasoning as this? Who does not know, or may not know, if he will use his common sense, that although these promises and prophecies are unconditionally expressed, yet that they are as a matter of fact really conditioned upon a right exercise of human agency, and that a time is to come, when the world shall be converted; and that the conversion of the world implies in itself a vastly higher state of religious feeling and action in the Church than has, for centuries, or perhaps ever been witnessed--and that the promise of the New Covenant is still to be fulfilled in a higher sense than it ever has been? If any man doubts this, I must believe that he does not understand his Bible.

Faith, then, is an indispensable condition of the fulfillment of all promises of spiritual blessings, the reception of which involves the exercise of our agency.

Again, it is not a little curious, that those who give this interpretation to these promises imagine that they see a very close connection, if not an absolute identity of our views and those of modern Antinomian Perfectionists. Now it is of importance to remark, that this is one of the leading peculiarities of that sect.

They insist that these are promises without condition, and that consequently their own watchfulness, prayers, exertions, and the right exercise of their own agency, are not at all to be taken into the account in the matter of their perseverance in holiness--that the responsibility is thrown entirely upon Christ, inasmuch as His promises are without condition. The thing that He has promised, say they, is that, without any condition, He will keep them in a state of entire sanctification--that therefore, for them to confess sin, is to accuse Christ of breaking His promises. For them to make any efforts at perseverance in holiness is to set aside the gospel and go back to the law. For them even to fear that they shall sin, is to fear that Christ will tell a lie.

The fact is that this, and their setting aside the moral law, are the two great errors of their whole system. It would be easy to show, that the adoption of this sentiment, that these promises are without condition, expressed or implied, has led to some of their most fanatical and absurd opinions and practices. They take the ground that no condition is expressed, and that therefore none is implied; overlooking the fact, that the very nature of the thing promised, implies that faith is the condition upon which its fulfillment must depend. It is hoped, therefore, that our brethren who charge us with perfectionism, will be led to see that to themselves, and not to us, does this charge belong.

These are the principal passages that occur to my mind, and those I believe upon which the principal stress has been laid by the opposers of this doctrine. And as I do not wish to protract the discussion, I shall omit the examination of other passages, as I design in my future lectures to answer such objections as may seem to be of weight. This I design to do without either the spirit or the form of controversy, noticing and answering such objections as may from time to time occur to my own mind, or as may be suggested by others.

[Objections concluded in our next.]

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