

What Attainments Christians May Reasonably Expect to Make in This Life

by Charles Finney

Sanctification is the process of becoming holy, pure, and benevolent, which is the ultimate intention of the mind, consisting in obedience to the requirements of the law of God.

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:23

Topics: "Sanctification", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the concept of sanctification, explaining that it is the process of being made holy and set apart for God. He clarifies what sanctification is and is not, asserting that while Christians cannot expect to be free from temptation or sin in this life, they can reasonably anticipate growth in grace and obedience to God's law. Finney encourages believers to aim for a higher standard of holiness, grounded in the promises of God, and to understand that sanctification involves the whole being--body, soul, and spirit--being aligned with God's will. He concludes that the expectation of attaining a greater degree of holiness is not only reasonable but essential for spiritual progress.

Transcript

"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."--1 Thess. 5:23, 24.

In this lecture I shall consider,

I. WHAT SANCTIFICATION IS.

II. WHAT IS NOT IMPLIED IN IT.

III. WHAT IS IMPLIED IN IT.

IV. WHAT IS INTENDED BY THE SANCTIFICATION OF BODY, SOUL, AND SPIRIT.

V. WHAT IS NOT IMPLIED IN THE SANCTIFICATION OF BODY, SOUL, AND SPIRIT.

VI. WHAT IS IMPLIED IN IT.

VII. WHAT ATTAINMENTS CHRISTIANS CANNOT EXPECT IN THIS LIFE.

VIII. WHAT ATTAINMENTS THEY MAY REASONABLY EXPECT TO MAKE IN THIS LIFE.

I. What Sanctification is.

1. To sanctify, is to make holy, to set apart, to consecrate. Both the Old and the New Testaments use the word in this sense. For God to sanctify us, is for Him to secure in us the consecration of ourselves to Him. To sanctify ourselves, is to consecrate ourselves wholly to Him.

2. Sanctification, then, is holiness, purity, or benevolence. Benevolence, as we have seen in former lectures, is good willing, and is the ultimate intention of the mind; in other words, it is obedience to the requirements of the law of God; it is what the Bible means by love, which it declares to be the fulfilling of the law.

II. What is not implied in it.

1. It does not imply any change in the constitution.

2. Nor any such change in the temper, disposition, or state of the mind, that we cannot sin. To suppose this is absurd. The angels which kept not their first estate, were certainly sanctified, but they sinned, and so did Adam.

3. Nor is it implied in sanctification that we are not liable to sin.

4. Nor that it is certain that we shall not sin, immediately, and surely, unless supported by the Spirit of God. There is no evidence that even the saints in heaven, would continue their obedience, if the Holy Spirit were withdrawn.

5. Nor is it implied that a sanctified soul has no farther warfare with temptation. I showed, in my lecture on the Christian warfare, that this would have existed if man had never fallen, and will exist, in some form, forever.

6. Nor, that there is no farther growth in grace. The Lord Jesus Christ, all admit, was sanctified, but He grew in grace. And so shall we, as fast as our knowledge increases, not only in this, but in the future world.

7. Nor does it imply freedom from errors in judgment, or opinion. I don't know how it could be shown either from the Bible, or the nature of the case, that this is implied in sanctification, even of the saints in heaven.

8. Nor does it imply a uniform state of the emotions. Christ's emotions were not always the same. He had his sorrows and his joys, and, from the very nature of the sensibility, the feelings must vary as the circumstances do.

9. Nor does it imply a constant, and great excitement. The idea that a great excitement of the emotions is essential to sanctification, has arisen out of a radical mistake respecting the nature of religion. It has been supposed that the love required by the law of God, consists in the highest possible state of the emotions. Now, if this is so, or if emotion constitutes any part of religion, then Christ was often in sin, for He did not exhibit any more excitement than other men. Those who maintain this sentiment, then, overlook the fact that religion consists in benevolence, and that emotion is no part of it.

10. It does not imply the same degree or strength of love which we might have exercised had we never sinned. There is not a saint in heaven who does this, and the law requires no such thing. It only requires us to exercise all the strength we have.

11. It does not require a constant tension or strain of the mind.

12. Nor does it imply a state of mind of which we cannot be certain by consciousness. It would be strange legislation indeed which should require such a mysterious, intangible state of mind as that. The truth is, it is naturally impossible that such a state should be required by an intelligible law. Indeed, how could one repent, or know it if he did, under such a requirement, or perform any other duty?

III. What is implied in it.

1. It does imply present obedience to the law of God, that is, benevolence. Benevolence, consists in regarding and treating every known interest according to its relative value, and as I have shown in a former lecture, it is a unit--a simple choice--a choosing good for its own sake.

2. We have also seen that bodily actions are connected with, and controlled by the will, so that willing necessitates corresponding outward actions. Sanctification, therefore, implies outward obedience--a correct life. We have also seen that emotions, desires, and thoughts, are connected with and controlled by the will indirectly. Sanctification, therefore, implies thoughts, desires, and feelings, corresponding to the state of the will, so far as they can be regulated by it. Some have less control over their attention, and consequently over their thoughts and emotions, than others, but whatever is possible to any one, he can do by willing, and nothing beyond this is obligatory.

3.* It implies an honest intention to promote the glory of God, and the highest good of being, to the full extent of our ability. Such an intention necessarily embraces the following elements.

(1) It is disinterested. It chooses universal well-being for its own sake.

(2) It is impartial respecting all interests, whether of friends or foes, rich or poor, bond or free, alike; that is, in exact accordance with their perceived value.

(3) It embraces all future time with the present.

(4) It is supreme to God, because his happiness is the supreme good.

(5) It is equal to men.

Now if you drop either of these elements, it is no longer virtue.

4. We have seen that intention, or the choice of an end, necessitates the adoption of corresponding means, therefore, sanctification implies the choice of appropriate means to the universal good of being.

5. It implies charitable judgments--these are the natural results of benevolence. 'Charity thinketh no evil.' When you see a person making severe and harsh judgments, you at least have reason to fear he is not sanctified.

6. It implies peace of mind. 'My peace I leave with you,' says Christ.

7. Joy in God.

8. Absence of condemnation-- 'There is, therefore, now, no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.'

9. Implicit faith. The sanctified soul really believes, so far as he understands the truth of God.

10. Delight in all the ordinances and duties of religion so far as they are understood.

11. A compassionate temper, and whenever it is seen that persons have not this spirit, you may know that they are not sanctified.

12. The absence of all selfishness. Selfishness, in any degree, is inconsistent with sanctification.

13. Implicit and universal reliance on Christ for support and aid. You cannot remain obedient any longer than you remember where your strength is.

14. The holding all we are and have entirely at the divine disposal. Sanctification must include all these, fully up to the light possessed by each individual.

IV. What is intended by the sanctification of body, soul, and spirit.

1. By the language, 'body, soul, and spirit,' we are to understand, the whole being, and the thing intended is, the perfect subjection of all the appetites and propensities, to the entire control of the will of God. Some of these appetites and propensities originate in the body, and some in the mind; but all must be controlled in reference to the highest good of being.

2. The harmonious development of the sensibility so that it shall respond to all perceived truths and relations, is intended in this language. In my sermon, on the Christian warfare, I spoke of the monstrous development of the sensibility, and of the influence it has upon the will, in the direction in which it is developed. I there remarked that a perfect balancing of all its susceptibilities, would greatly abate the force of temptation. Every one knows how forcibly the appetites and passions wake up and clamor for indulgence. Now, although neither holiness, nor sin, belong to these, in themselves, yet it would be vastly favorable to virtue, if they were all brought into harmonious subjection to the law of the reason. Here let me say that no physical influence is exerted on the mind or body by the Spirit, to change the sensibility. The mother, whose sensibility is so developed by the loss of her child, is not brought into such a state, by any physical influence; nor is such an influence needed to secure such effects. Let sinners see the love of Christ in its real relation to themselves, and it is directly adapted to enkindle their emotions. It is the Spirit's office to take the things of Christ, and show to them; and thus secure this result. This He actually effects in Christians. To be sanctified, then, is to have not only the will consecrated to God, but the sensibility brought into harmonious action under the control of the will.

V. What is not implied in the sanctification of body, soul, and spirit.

1. It is not implied that the constitutional appetites, passions, and propensities, are extinct. They certainly were not in the Lord Jesus Christ, and whoever supposes this necessary in order to sanctification, has not well considered the matter. Without their continued existence, we should be incapable of any moral action whatever.

2. Nor that their nature is so changed, that they all exclusively impel the will to obey the law of the reason. It belongs to their very nature, each to seek its appropriate object. for its own sake: For example, the

appetite for food, seeks food, not for the glory of God, but for its own sake. So it is with every other appetite and desire of the soul. Each is blind to every thing else than its own object, and seeks that, for its own sake. To say then, that they must be so changed, as to impel the mind only in the right direction, is to say that their very nature must be changed. Each of them, naturally, impels the will to seek its object, for its own sake, and it is the province of reason to give direction to their blindness, and of the will to gratify them in strict subjection to the law which reason prescribes.

3. Nor that they are so far suppressed or annihilated, as to be in no degree a temptation. They were not so in Eve, for she fell under the temptation presented by her appetite for food; and we need not expect ever to get into any such state.

VI. What is implied in it.

1. That these propensities are all harmoniously developed according to the light enjoyed; and,
2. That they become easily controlled by the will, as in the person of Christ.

VII. What attainments Christians cannot expect in this life.

1. They cannot expect to get above what Christ was. It is enough for the servant to be as his Master.
2. Of course they cannot reasonably expect to get beyond a state of warfare. Christ had a warfare, not with sin, not with conscience, for it would be nonsense to call this Christian warfare, but with temptation, and no one will deny that He was entirely sanctified. And here I wish to notice a very singular fact. Those who deny this doctrine say that if Christians were perfect, they would have no further warfare. But where do they get that idea? Not from the Bible, for there is not a single passage in it, that I know of, which teaches any such thing.
3. They cannot expect to get beyond the necessity and capacity of growth in grace; I mean growth in degree, not in kind. We shall doubtless grow in grace to all eternity. The Bible says that Christ grew in favor with God, that is, grace, and so will every Christian.
4. They cannot expect to get beyond the possibility or liability of sinning. This would be to get beyond the possibility of obedience, and to cease from being a moral agent.
5. Nor, may they expect to get so far as not to need the means of grace. They must, of necessity, need the assistance of the Spirit, of the ordinances, of prayer, and of the Sabbath. To deny this is downright nonsense. While human nature remains what it is, it must need the means of grace, as much as it needs food, or light, or any thing else which is indispensable to well-being. God never makes minds holy by physical force, but by means, and therefore, means will always be necessary. Did not Christ Himself use them?

VIII. What attainments they may reasonably expect to make in this life.

1. God does not, and cannot, reasonably, require impossibilities of moral agents.
2. It is reasonable, then, to think that we can do whatever He requires of us, and to expect to do it. Our ability to comply with his requirements, is implied as strongly as possible in the command itself. If not, it can be of no binding force upon us.

3. God cannot lie. It is, therefore, reasonable to expect to receive any measure of grace, which He has expressly promised. Not to expect such grace, is to distrust God.

4. God has commanded us to obey his law; and we must intend to obey it or we are not Christians. But we cannot intend to obey it unless we consider it possible; this is naturally impossible. I appeal to every hearer. Can you really intend to render a hearty obedience to what you regard as impossible? We cannot intend to obey, unless we believe it possible to obey the spirit of the law. We may, therefore, reasonably expect to keep the law.

5. The first verse in this text is the prayer of an inspired Apostle, for the sanctification, in this life, of the whole body, soul, and spirit of Christians, and that they may be preserved in this state, blameless, until the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, if this is an inspired prayer, it reveals the will of God on this subject. It is admitted that it includes all that I have said; that is, sanctification in the higher sense. Now observe, it is added, "Faithful is He that calleth you, who also will do it." It is reasonable, then, to expect its fulfillment.

6. But to this it is objected, that, although it is true that this, and kindred promises, do really pledge sufficient grace to secure this result, yet, as they are conditioned upon faith, it is unreasonable for us to expect to avail ourselves of them, unless others have done so before us. And in confirmation, you are pointed to the great and good men, who have lived in different periods of the Church, and told that they did not attain it. I waive, for the present, the answer to this objection, and pass to make several

REMARKS.

1. This must be an important question. I have been astonished beyond all measure, that this doctrine has been called a hobby. What! Is the fundamental doctrine of the degree of holiness attainable in this life, to be called a hobby? If so, then it is the hobby of the universe, and God, and every angel is intensely interested in securing its success.

2. We must hold up some standard. If you tell a sinner to repent, you hold up before him the standard to which he ought to conform, and even if he should deny that any had actually repented, you would still insist upon it, that it is his duty, whether others had or not, and also, that if he did not repent, he could not be saved.

3. Christians must aim at some standard, but they cannot aim at any state which they deem impossible; as well might they aim to fly. How essential then, that we should ascertain what the true standard is, and hold it up before them.

We have seen that sin consists in choosing self-gratification as the supreme end, and that holiness, on the contrary, consists in supremely choosing the glory of God and the good of his universe. We have also seen that they cannot co-exist in the same mind--that while the will or heart is right, that nothing can, for the time being, be morally wrong; and on the other hand, while the heart is wrong, all is wrong; that is, it is totally depraved. The only question then, is, can we reasonably expect to remain in that state. I said this expectation was supposed to be unreasonable, unless others could be pointed out as examples. But if no one has ever availed himself of these promises, it by no means follows that no one ever will; on the contrary, the progressive state of the world, and the progressive nature of religion, warrant and demand the belief that future generations will make indefinitely higher attainments than the past. The golden age has not gone by; those who think so, have not well considered the matter. If any one will compare the time of the Apostles with the present time, and take in all the characteristics of both, he will see, that on the

whole, the human family have made great progress. There is a radical error in the custom of looking back, instead of forward, for the golden age; and the common notion that the world is in its dotage, is exactly the reverse of truth. Every successive era is marked by a decided advance in science, art, philosophy and civilization; and this is in exact accordance with the whole tenor of prophecy, which warrants and demands the expectation of vastly higher attainments, in future, than have ever yet been made. The Temperance Reformation, shows that it is now common for drunkards to make attainments, which were once regarded as almost impossible. Who has not witnessed the Washingtonian, almost working miracles, in pulling the drunkard out of the gutter. And shall we extinguish hope respecting the Church, and make it an exception to the progress of the world?

4. One of the greatest obstacles in the way of both physical and moral improvement, is the existence of false opinions and expectations in regard to the degree of elevation, to which God desires to bring mankind in this world. I have examined Mr. Miller's theory, and am persuaded, that what he expects to come after the judgment, will come before it. Read the 65th chapter of Isaiah. The Prophet there speaks of the advancement to be made, as the creation of a new heavens and a new earth. The reason men have so little idea of the thing intended in such predictions, is that they have such meager views of the grace of God. If the world is to be converted to the present standard, it is true that such predictions cannot represent its state. What are the Church dreaming about, if they cannot see the necessity of a higher standard? The man who cannot see that, is as poor a philosopher as he is a Christian. Why, brethren, what would it avail, if the whole world were converted to the standard of the current religion?

5. Suppose this promise had been read to those to whom it was given, how could they have believed it, on the theory that they were not to expect higher attainments in the future than they then witnessed. Why they would have said, the world never will be converted, because it never has been; and what would you reply to that? Suppose the same objection were made now, and it were said, it was not done in the days of the Apostles, nor at any time since, and are we to expect to accomplish what never has been done? Suppose, farther, ministers were engaged in pointing back, to prove that the world can never be converted. Why, they would say, the Church never has converted the world, and therefore, it never will. You must be getting proud, if you think we shall do more than good men before us have done. And then, suppose they should go back, and hunt up all the fanaticism, and enthusiasm, and extravagancies of the Crusades, and other attempts to propagate the Christian religion, and instead of pointing out these evils, to guard the Church against similar ones in time to come, as they ought to do, they were doing it to prevent any attempts to convert the world now. What would be thought of all this? It would justly be regarded as ridiculous; and yet this is exactly the course adopted respecting the doctrine of sanctification. The fact, that the promises have not been considered as meaning so much, sufficiently accounts for the fact, that they have not been more generally realized in the experience of Christians.

6. To deny the reasonableness of this expectation, is to lay a stumbling block before the Church. Suppose you should exhort sinners to repent, and then tell them they could not, neither in their own strength, nor by any grace received. What else would that be than a stumbling block, over which, if they believed you, they would stumble into hell. So to tell Christians, that they ought to be sanctified and that it is attainable, and yet, that no one can, in this life attain it, is the very way to prevent them from attaining it. If they believe such instruction, it will as certainly prevent their spiritual progress, as a general outcry against missions would prevent the conversion of the world.

7. But if this expectation is unreasonable, what is reasonable? What may we expect? How much higher can we rise? Who can tell? Who will point to some definite standard?

8. Doubts as to the truth of the view I have here maintained, arise,

(1) From a false philosophy of depravity and holiness. When men make holiness consist in emotions instead of benevolence, they overlook the very nature of virtue, and are deluded as a matter of course.

(2) From unbelief. Our opinions on such questions, must depend on our faith, and the state of our hearts.

(3) From radically defective Christian experience, or rather, having had none but a legal experience.

(4) From overlooking the fulness of the Gospel provision.

(5) From confounding it with antinomian perfectionism.

(6) From false views with respect to what constitutes entire sanctification. Many say, the Bible represents the Christian warfare as continuing till death, and that this warfare consists in fighting with sin. Now where do they learn this, not in the Bible. The Bible does indeed represent the Christian warfare as continuing till death, but it never represents it as consisting in fighting with sin. What is sin? Why, sin is a heart, or will, or choice, contrary to the will of God. To fight with sin then, would be to fight with our own present choice or voluntary state of mind--a choice warring on or against itself--this is absurd. The Christian warfare consists in warring with temptation, not with sin. They say that christians are commanded to grow in grace, and if they once arrive at perfection, progress is at an end. They thus set up a man of straw, and then fight it.

9. This is a serious question to all christians, and I cannot tell how I feel, when I hear professors of religion say they cannot give time for its examination. Said a professor of religion to me not long since, "I cannot take time to examine this subject," and yet he had the strangest misapprehensions respecting it. It is enough to make one weep tears of blood to see the darkness which prevails, and yet the apathy and unwillingness to inquire. Beloved, let us know the truth that it may make us free. Let us give ourselves up to the teachings of the Spirit, that we may be 'sanctified wholly, and preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.'

* Number 3 was omitted in the Original text.

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