

Sanctification and Ethics

by Daniel Steele

Daniel Steele's sermon explores the relationship between entire sanctification and moral ethics, emphasizing the transformative role of the Holy Spirit in aligning believers' wills with God's desires.

Scripture: Psalm 86:11, 2 Corinthians 7:1, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Hebrews 5:14, 1 John 1:7

Topics: "Sanctification", "Moral Development"

Description

Daniel Steele delves into the relation of entire sanctification to man's moral nature and habits, addressing misconceptions and errors surrounding the doctrine of evangelical perfection. He explains that while there may be hypocritical professors and those deceived about their spiritual state, true sanctification involves a complete alignment of the soul's forces towards God, resulting in perfect love and obedience. Steele emphasizes the impulsive and discriminating power of conscience, highlighting the need for progressive sanctification and the continuous development of moral discernment through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Transcript

IT is time that there was a thorough discussion of the relation of entire sanctification to man's moral nature and habits. On no other point is there so much need of light, as on none other are there more widespread and damaging errors. It is alleged that Christians of the most advanced attainments are not perfectly conscientious, and, moreover, that the doctrine of evangelical perfection itself tends to divorce morality from religion. To this grave charge we feel called upon to respond, having long waited for a more competent pen to take up the theme. The accusation has some apparent grounds on which it rests: --

1. We admit that there may be hypocritical professors of holiness to the Lord, whose lives dishonour the high confession, as there may be counterfeits of justifying grace. The more valuable a coin, the stronger the temptation to counterfeit it. In our charity we believe that the number of hypocrites purposely wearing the mask of Christian perfection is very small.

2. We fear that there is a larger class who are deceived with respect to their actual spiritual state. They have construed an extraordinary emotional experience into the deep and perfect work of the Sanctifier, and have unadvisedly assumed a false position by a hasty profession of the highest state of grace this side of heaven. The defective characters of this class are of course accredited to the doctrine and experience of entire sanctification. But this is done just as illogically as all the persecutions and crimes perpetrated by people bearing the name of Christians are chargeable to the Gospel of the sinless man of Nazareth. Men may call arsenic, wheat flour, and manufacture it into bread, and sell it, and credit the

disastrous consequences to the innocent wheat, with just as much logical consistency.

3. There is an element of moral fallibility in all professors of perfect holiness, as there must inevitably be in all fallen men so long as they live in this world. To elucidate this element is the purpose of this chapter.

The conscience has a twofold efficiency -- the impulsive and the discriminating power. The first is moral sensibility or feeling. In all holy beings this impulse toward the right is round, full, and complete, a movement of the soul along the line of perceived rectitude, with no drawbacks, antagonisms, nor counter-currents within itself. There is a delightful consciousness of an inward harmony of forces all moving in one direction. For this the Psalmist prayed when, distracted by conflicting inward impulses, he cried out, "Unite my heart to fear Thy name" -- a model petition for all believers aspiring to the legacy of Jesus, "My peace I give unto you." This peace is not a product of nature; it is a gift. No man can completely harmonize the felt antagonism between his sense of right and his selfish desires and passions, because he cannot, without the aid of the Spirit, die unto sin; nor can he find a motive to self-crucifixion till he, with anointed vision, gazes upon the cross where hangs the Son of God, bowing His head in death for his complete salvation. When the Holy Spirit unveils to the believer this wonderful sight, and he realizes the truth of the words, so often on his lips, "For me my Lord is crucified," under the magnetism of the cross, all the forces of his being begin to flow in one direction. The impulsive power of conscience has been suddenly reinforced. Right is no longer a dry abstraction; it has found an embodiment in a personality the most attractive in the universe. He now delights to obey the law, because he loves the Lawgiver. His affections have been suddenly purified by being withdrawn from all unworthy objects, and centered on Jesus Christ. His will, the flinty centre of his personality and the head and front of all his former antagonism to perfect righteousness, has suddenly been fused into the will of Christ under the furnace blasts of His mighty love. Says Mr. Fletcher: "Christian perfection extends chiefly to the will, which is the capital moral power of the soul, leaving the understanding ignorant of ten thousand things, and the body dead because of sin." In this identification of the will with the "sweet will of God" -- in this interfusion of all the currents of the soul in one channel and wide, ever flowing toward the heart of Jesus -- is found the first experience of perfect freedom.

"And He hath breathed into my soul,

A perfect love of Thee,

A love to lose my will in His,

And by that loss be free."

Let us now make use of an illustration borrowed from the science of mechanics. At any point in space, conceive of a knot of forces pulling in opposite directions. The result will be that the point will move in the direction of the greatest force. Now just the same law is found in the spiritual realm. In the unregenerate the force is depravity, and the motion is away from God. In the justified the force is love to Christ, and the motion is God-ward. But in each case the opposing forces may be so great as to almost counterbalance the greater force, so that the resultant force is feeble, and the motion is slow. Now, let all the opposing forces in the sinner's soul wheel round into line with his depraved inclinations, and he rushes with fearful velocity down to perdition, like an express train upon a downgrade, with no brakes upon the wheels, and a dozen firemen shoveling in the coal. Here you have the picture of a sinner abandoned of the Holy Spirit, and given over to the delusions he has willfully chosen. On the other hand, let all the forces in the soul of the justified person wheel into line with the dominant force, love to God, then the soul mounts swiftly

upward, like a balloon when the ropes are all cut and the sand bags are all cast out. We may now better understand what is signified by the blending of all the forces of the soul into one God-ward impulse. It can be easily seen, moreover, that there is a limit to this unifying of our internal forces. When the last antagonism is either destroyed or brought into perfect accord with the upward impulse of the soul, the unification has become complete. This is Christian perfection: perfect love is the perfect fulfilling of the law. This is the sum and substance of Wesleyan teaching in respect to this doctrine: the sum of our impulses toward the right and toward God may become absolutely complete through divine grace. They may daily become stronger, but they can never become more than total. We wish this distinction between totality and strength could be clearly seen and kept in mind. The totality of one man's capacity may be a thousand-fold in strength the totality of another's, who loves God up to the full measure of his power. A thimble may be as full as a hog's head. All that I am required to do is to love God with the full measure of my present powers, crippled and dwarfed by original and actual sin. When I do this I am perfect in love in the evangelical sense -- not when I fulfil that ideal moral capacity which I should have if I had been the sinless offspring of a sinless ancestry. Objectors may demur against this, and stigmatize it as neonomianism, the setting up of a new law of life in place of the law of perfect obedience given to our first parents in Eden and never repealed. But we find in the New Testament that the law of love is the sum of human duty, which absorbs into itself the substance of the law of Adamic perfection.

But let us now examine the second element of conscience, the discriminating power, and see what relation this sustains to entire sanctification. Our analysis of this power resolves it into a moral intuition, and an act of the intellect, or a judgment. The moral intuition, which is infallible within the sphere of motives, never failing to condemn the wrong motive and to approve the right one, deals with the abstract in ethics, such, for instance, as the duty to love a benefactor, while the intellect is employed with the determining of right in the concrete, right in specific instances, my duty toward this or that man. The moral intuition gives us the principles of immutable morality. Ask any sane moral intelligence in Christendom or heathendom, in earth, heaven, or hell, whether it is ever right to hate a benefactor, and he will be constrained by the clear, intuitive insight of his own moral nature to answer: "It is wrong." But most of the moral questions which we are called to decide are not of the abstract kind; they are concrete, and involve specific examination by our power of reasoning before the decision can be made. They are practical, and not theoretical. They all need the help of our intellectual powers, our enlightened judgments, to discover their bearings and relations, before our moral intuitions can discover their moral character. If our intellectual judgments were infallible, our moral verdicts would be unerring in every instance. But, alas! our intellects are weakened and darkened, and they often hand over to our moral perception fallacious conclusions for it to act upon.

Does not entire sanctification bring a perfect remedy for this sad effect? Does it not perfectly repair the derangement which sin has wrought in the reasoning powers? Does it not make us good logicians, enabling us to detect sophisms at a glance? This does not seem to be the province of the Sanctifier. Some indirect benefit he bestows upon our reflective powers, by banishing the clouds exhaled by the appetites and passions, and greatly clarifying the atmosphere in which the intellectual eye is to be used. But the eye itself he does not make perfect, "For now we see through a glass darkly but then, face to face." Hence the discriminating power of the holiest man's conscience, outside the sphere of motives, must be imperfect so long as he dwells in an earthly tabernacle. Hence his moral judgments, and his acts founded on these judgments, may be condemned by the superior judgment of another who makes no profession of perfect love to God, nor any degree of love toward God. He may have better data, and a stronger reasoning faculty, and arrive at a more correct conclusion, and put forth more commendable action in this particular

case.

Here, then, is the broad ground for charity. Judge charitably, "as being yourselves also in the body." Here, also, is scope for progressive sanctification, through a prayerful culture of our intellects, attaining more light today in which to see yesterday's mistakes, and avoiding them in the future. Hence the duty enjoined in 2 Cor. vii, 1, of "perfecting holiness," is a progressive work, realizing or carrying into practice, the cleansing from all filthiness, instantaneously wrought within. There is no man, however pure, whose increased intelligence may not discover in his past conduct acts or omissions not in accordance with the standard of perfect righteousness. Even if the moral eye is too dull to make such a discovery, the very possibility that he is an unconscious transgressor should send him to the blood-sprinkled mercy-seat, exclaiming with Paul, "For I know nothing of [against] myself; yet am I not hereby justified." Here also is the reason for praying daily, "Forgive us our debts."

It is the suggestion of Whewell that no act is morally indifferent, and that there seems to be a broad field of indifferent acts simply because our moral discrimination is not sufficiently acute to discern the moral element in them; that as this insight of the conscience is quickened, this field of acts morally indifferent will grow narrow, till at last it will entirely disappear. Then there will be discovered a moral character in the question: Shall I ride or walk? Shall I read this newspaper or that? Shall I eat this kind of food or that? Shall I wear garments of this color or that? That persons ever attentive to the moral quality of even trifling acts may, approximate this state by the constant exercise of the conscience, there is no ground for reasonable doubt. To this Paul exhorts when he says: Whether therefore ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God." A conscience thus developed in its impulsive and discriminating power by the operation of the Holy Spirit, and by a long experience in dealing with the subtleties of temptation, we think is to be preferred to that Adamic perfection which everybody is eager to disclaim as altogether too high for us to aspire to. We know of many Christians, of whose continued obedience we are more sure than the angels were of Adam's, when he walked forth from his Creator's hand, a great baby, toddling amid Satanic snares and pitfalls. Bishop Butler seems to be right when he says that it is impossible for God to create a moral being with good habits. "Nor do we know," says he, "how far it is possible, in the nature of things, that effects should be wrought in use, once equivalent to habits, that is, what is wrought by use and exercise." If, through grace, any of us have become fortified by virtuous habits, let us thank God for an estate in one respect, at least, better than Adam's when "freshest from the hand of God."

There are several important inferences which this discussion suggests: --

1. That the discovery made after entire sanctification, by our increasing power of moral discrimination, of a want of conformity to the law of holiness, in any of our acts, is by no means a proof of inbred sin still lurking within the soul; the sum total of the inward impulses may be toward God, and the blood of His Son may be cleansing us, keeping us clean, from all sin.
2. Doubtless, thousands of believers are fully sanctified, but, finding their moral perceptions still imperfect, they refuse to give glory to the Sanctifier for His great work, and at length fall back into their former mixed state of sin and holiness, of sinning and repenting. Hence the necessity of proper instruction on this point by all our religious teachers. In the absence of such oral instruction, the best written substitute, next to the Bible, is Wesley's "Plain Account of Christian Perfection."
3. We see more clearly the ground for the Wesleyan paradox, that entire sanctification is both instantaneous and gradual. In the entire cleansing from inward sin, and the impulsive power imparted to

the conscience, it is instantaneous; in the discriminating power of the moral sense, through exercise, it is gradual. Both are commanded in 2 Cor. vii. 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."

In the baptism, anointing, and fullness of the Spirit, and in the coming of the abiding Comforter, which are terms inclusive of entire sanctification, His work is instantaneous, so also the revelation of Christ, as in Paul after his justification (Gal. i. 15, 16). The prayers for entire sanctification imply a distinct work, limited in time, because it is to be followed by certain effects called fruits. On the other hand, the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews intimates that perfection is reached by a process involving the element of time in the proper development of the power of moral discrimination. "But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age [perfect,] even those who by reason of use [habit] have their senses [moral perceptions] exercised to discern both good and evil" (Heb. v. 14). Here the two words "use" and "exercised" imply a gradual sanctification in the only department appropriate for it, namely, in the power of moral discernment. Thus we ground our discussion on the Word of God.

Finally, the above reflections may enable us to determine what is meant by the unscriptural expression used by some, "sanctified up to knowledge." The great work of the Holy Spirit in entire sanctification which is always instantaneous in fact, and usually instantaneous in the consciousness of the believer, is to rectify the will, poise the passions aright, hold in check all innocent, and eradicate all unholy appetites, and to enthrone the conscience over a realm in which no rebel lurks.

The unfolding of the moral discernment under an ever increasing intelligence is a work which still remains to be done. In view of the incompleteness of this work at any given point, a person may very well say of his life and practice, "sanctified up to knowledge." But respecting his heart he may say, "sanctified wholly," throughout the conscious and unconscious realm of soul and spirit. For when the Holy Spirit witnesses to this work of His, He attests according to His own omniscient glance, and not according to the imperfect self-knowledge of the individual; "for the Spirit searcheth all things."

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