

Holiness and Experience -- First Work of Grace

by Lewis T. Corlett

The sermon explores the transformative power of God's grace through holiness and the essential experiences of regeneration and faith in a believer's life.

Scripture: Psalm 32:1, John 3:16, Romans 5:5-8, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 5:22, 1 John 1:9, 1 John 3:1

Topics: "Regeneration", "Holiness"

Description

Lewis T. Corlett preaches about how the plan of God aims to bring holiness from the infinite into the realm of man, restoring man to fellowship with the Divine. Despite man's fall and inability to save himself, God's love led Him to send Jesus Christ to bridge the gap between sinful mankind and a holy God, providing a way for man to partake in His holiness. The first step in God's plan is regeneration, where man experiences a marked crisis, a definite work by God, peace with God, reception of the Holy Spirit, possession of divine love, the new birth, witness of the Spirit, becoming a member of the family of God, and maintaining this relationship by faith.

Transcript

The plan of God brings holiness out of the infinite into the realm of man. God has set up His whole system of redemption with one purpose in view -- the restoration of man to a plane where he can have fellowship with the Divine. Each step in the process, whether it be on God's part or man's decision, is arranged to bring the character of man into harmony with divine will and purpose. Man, being made in the image of God, is better understood by his Creator than by another human being. Man's fall kept him from being the recipient of the benefits through the divine program. This left man helpless and hopeless as far as any human ingenuity or method was concerned. There was no way in which man could deliver himself from the captivity into which the race had been plunged. There was no avenue of approach to God whereby man could again walk and talk with his Creator. Man was left with an empty, aching void in his inner life crying for something he could not reach and craving for someone he could not approach. The emptiness of man's soul cried out for holiness; but the justice and righteousness of God abhorred sin both in deed and in nature, and the guilty man was held back from approaching the offended God.

Jesus Christ Made Holiness Accessible To Man

God did not leave man in this hopeless state. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). He could not be satisfied without going beyond what reason would dictate. Love moved the great heart of God. Paul

states this very emphatically in Rom. 5:8: "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." The sacrifice of Jesus Christ upon the Cross was a twofold answer to man's need. First of all it bridged the gap between sinful mankind and the holy God; and, secondly, it provided the way and means whereby men could both come into harmony with the divine will and at the same time be "partakers of his holiness." If man is fully to enjoy anything, he must experience it. God knew that, and so in His great and marvelous plan of redemption He arranged that man could come into two definite experiences of grace while in this world. He could come into that state where his inner life was in complete harmony with God and where he was enjoying the nature of divine holiness in his heart and life. These two experiences did not seal man so that he was eternally the Lord's without further choices; but it made the provision whereby he could have fellowship with his God and momentarily keep himself aligned with divine purpose and character.

Holiness Begins In Regeneration

The first crisis experience in God's program for man has been known by different terms such as "regeneration," "justification," "conversion," and "new birth." These all indicate different phases of one experience. They are not separate steps, but explanations of what happens to an individual in what is known as the first work of grace. This experience is received by faith, whereby Jesus Christ is taken as a personal Saviour. Man cannot believe without bringing himself into harmony with God's purpose; so penitence of soul, with readjustment of the past in restitution and confession, is necessary. Man must repent of his transgressions before God can operate, since God cannot approve of sin in any form. In the processes of conviction the Holy Spirit reveals the past to the seeking soul; and when he is willing to follow the divine directions, he brings himself into that position whereby faith can claim the benefits of the atonement through Jesus Christ, the Saviour. The matter of repentance is a process whereby the desire for God brings an individual gradually to the place where he makes his final decision to turn from those things antagonistic to God, to lay down his arms of rebellion against God, and voluntarily to accept Christ as his personal Saviour. When this decision is reached, the Spirit of God in instantaneous operation does His work of regenerating, justifying, adopting, and witnessing to His own presence in the heart. This is a marvelous experience. It is widely comprehensive in its scope and very beneficial in its effect on human personality.

Characteristics Of This Experience

1. A Marked Crisis

Regeneration is a marked crisis in the life of the individual. It marks an epoch in man's life when, under the conviction of the Spirit of God, he responds to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and brings himself into a position where God can perform a work of righteousness in his soul. It is a crucial period, as man has forsaken sin and made a definite decision to turn from his evil ways and to accept Jesus Christ as his personal Saviour. It is a very decisive moment for the penitent soul because it marks the time when he renounces his personal rebellion against God, swears allegiance to the God of the skies, and declares that from this moment henceforth he will walk according to the doctrines of truth, righteousness, and God.

2. A Definite Work by God

Regeneration is a definite work of the Spirit of God in the heart of man. It is the response of divine will to the obedience of man's soul. It is the action of a holy God meeting the crisis and need of a hungry soul. It is what Paul talked about when he said, "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God

through our Lord Jesus Christ: by whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:1-2). The individual soul is justified before God. The record is clear of all past transgressions. The iniquities are blotted out. "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile" (Ps. 32:1-2).

3. Peace with God

The individual is placed in a position where his past record is cleared and he is given a clean sheet before his Maker. But more than that, "being justified by faith," he has "peace with God." The guilt of unconfessed sin is gone. The uneasiness of a condemning conscience has been removed. God has met him in response to His promise, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

4. Reception of the Holy Spirit

It is the assurance that the life is no longer frowned upon by the Spirit of God but that the repentance has been accepted and the faith of the penitent has linked itself with the Divine, which brings soul ease in the presence of God. This consciousness of acceptance marks the walk of the soul with the Saviour, and it is an assurance from the Divine that God will never bring up those sins again -- that He will remember them against him no more forever. In this first work of grace God not only removes the condemnation caused by man's guilty past, but He also gives to him the Holy Spirit, "And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us" (Rom. 5:5). New life is brought into being in the soul of man by the coming of the Spirit into his heart, and he becomes a new creation in Christ, Things are different! "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (II Cor. 5:17). Paul was conscious of this in his own experience and emphatically states to the Romans, "But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you, Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his" (Rom. 8:9). The Spirit forgives, the Spirit regenerates, the Spirit quickens, and the Spirit brings the assurance of acceptance with God. He takes up His abode in the heart of man, witnessing to him that his confession and penitence have been accepted and that his past has been cleared, and making him conscious of new life through the presence of the Spirit.

5. Possession of Divine Love

With the reception of the Spirit of God he becomes conscious of the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost, which is given unto him. Hatred toward God and man has been removed, and a spirit of compassion and mercy has taken its place. The believer is conscious that there is a deeper motivation in his heart than mere human sympathy. It is the working out of the essence of the Divine Spirit in his individual life. This is what John recognized when he was writing his First Epistle and called on others to be more conscious of it. "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not" (1 John 3:1). The entire First Epistle of John centers around his discussion of the child of God in this love-relationship to the Lord. He explains more fully: "And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him" (1 John 4:16). Also he says, "We love him, because he first loved us."

John emphatically states that this love has its reaction in the attitudes and principles of life. It becomes both a controlling principle in man's heart and a criterion by which the child of God is recognized. "In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother" (I John 3:10). This love life and the other graces of the Spirit are the result of the individual's coming into possession of the nature of God. Peter described this, "According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust" (II Pet. 1:3-4). The Spirit by this new creation brings into the inner life of man the various phases of the fruit of the Spirit described in Galatians 5:22-23: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law."

6. The New Birth

It is the experience that Christ talked about to Nicodemus. "Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). The motivating principle of man's life is controlled and regulated by the character of this life man receives from God. His Christian living is not merely the result of man's decision to reform: but it is this coupled with divine transformation which renews character, changes attitudes, enlarges horizons, and gives a strong motivation. The Christian unconsciously finds himself taking the same attitude that Christ took. He loves as Christ loved; he is compassionate as Christ was compassionate; he is merciful like his Master; he is kind like his great Teacher. In fact, the cry of his heart is "More like the Master I would ever be."

7. Witness of the Spirit

The Spirit not only regenerates and takes up His abode in the heart, but He also bears witness to the individual to the fact that he has entered into fellowship with the Divine and become a member of the family of God. The consciousness of this witness does not come in the same manner to every individual. But there is one distinct fact in this witness; it is that the individual becomes conscious that he is a child of God. Paul describes this very clearly: "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together" (Rom. 8:14-17).

8. Member of the Family of God

The believing soul has a definite sense of belonging to Someone worthwhile and to something intensely creative. Paul used the expression "in Christ" many times, and other writers expressed this feeling of unity with the Divine in different terms; but all are definite in that when the Spirit regenerates He bears testimony to the consciousness of man that he is a member of the family of God and the fellowship of the Church invisible and triumphant. The assurance and sense of belonging brings a stability to the mind of the seeking soul. It gives a definite consciousness that the divine Saviour has accepted the penitent one and by accepting has justified him freely, giving new life through the Holy Spirit, who has taken up His abode in his life.

9. Maintained by Faith

Many people have jumped to wrong conclusions regarding this experience. They have misinterpreted Paul's expression, "Ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance, until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1:13-14). The Spirit of God truly seals the transaction of the believer's acceptance and acknowledges that the individual belongs to God. This is the meaning of the sealing of the Spirit. This experience in the first work of grace is not a static position before God wherein the believer surrenders his own sovereignty; it is rather a state of living relationship whereby the child of God walks in the light shed upon his pathway by the Spirit, and God, in His infinite grace, sustains the individual as long as he keeps himself in accord with the purposes and attitudes which brought him into this experience.

To get this acceptance of God the individual turned his back on sin and wrong with a definite, voluntary decision to live for God according to His dictates. God gave man divine life when he was willing to meet God's commands. Man must continue to keep these divine commandments if he would continue to receive God's mercy and grace. Thus this experience, as well as all other spiritual experiences, is a living relationship sustained by man's decision and God's grace. Man received it by faith, and by faith he must walk in harmony and fellowship with the Divine to maintain it. God does not force man in this relationship, but God does give grace and glory to the one who keeps his life according to the divine statutes. The individual must avoid all known sin because sin is rebellion against God, and God cannot sustain one who deliberately violates known law. But as the individual maintains his position of separation from actual sinning, he finds the comfort and strength that fellowship with the Divine can give.

10. The Sin Question

This first work of grace settles the sinning question as far as acts and deeds of disobedience and rebellion to God are concerned. It does not take care of the nature of sin with which man was born. Every evangelical church in the world recognizes this, and in the statement of creed each expresses in some manner the fact that after an individual is born again there remains a seed principle of sin in the heart of man. This sin principle has been called by various names: "inherited sin," "inbred sin," "carnal nature," "the old man," "the sin which dwelleth in you," "the root of bitterness," etc. These are not names of different things, but are names applied to this sin principle by various people in an endeavor to describe it in its entirety. It takes a further work of grace in the heart of man to solve the problems of this sin principle. Various groups of religious thought advocate one way or another. The holiness people believe that God removes this sin nature in what is known as a "second work of grace."

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