

The Nature of Sanctification

by T. Austin-Sparks

Sanctification is a progressive and ongoing process of becoming holy, marked by the growth of the spirit and the distinction between soul and spirit.

Scripture: Romans 7:14

Topics: "Sanctification", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks explores the nature of sanctification, emphasizing the distinction between the soul and spirit as crucial to understanding spiritual growth. He argues that sanctification is a progressive continuation of regeneration, where the spirit is born anew while the soul remains susceptible to sin. Sparks addresses the confusion surrounding sanctification, particularly in relation to Romans 7 and 1 John, asserting that true sanctification involves a dynamic relationship with Christ and a continual striving for holiness. He highlights that spiritual education and sanctification go hand in hand, leading believers toward maturity in Christ. Ultimately, the sermon underscores that sanctification is not merely a one-time event but an ongoing journey of faith and transformation.

Transcript

While we cannot extend ourselves to a comprehensive consideration of the subject of sanctification, we are sure that a very great deal of confusion through false conceptions would be removed if it were seen in the light of the difference between soul and spirit. For, indeed, this is the key of the matter. As sanctification is but the continuation of regeneration, because regeneration is but sanctification begun, it has to be seen as in the same sphere as new birth. We have said that in new birth it is not the soul but the spirit that is born from above--or born again.

The soul remains prone to evil to the end. This fact constitutes the basis for the whole doctrine of sanctification, inasmuch as the New Testament is one big exhortation to spiritual progress by spiritual ascendancy. There is ever an enemy to holiness in man's own nature, and holiness in us is not fixed and static, it is progressive. All trial, testing, chastening and suffering lose their meaning if there is no ground or fear of failure. Enlargement has ever been, and ever is, by conflict. There has only been One in Whose nature there existed no actual and positive evil or sin.

The question of sanctification has been greatly confused because certain Scriptures have been made basic which really were not meant primarily to deal with sanctification in itself.

The Problem of Romans 7 and 1 John, etc.

For instance, we have Romans 7, and the first Letter of John. We cannot quote the entire text, but we extract the salient parts.

"...the law is spiritual: but I am carnal... For that which I do I know not: for not what I would, that do I practise; but what I hate, that I do... I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me, but to do that which is good is not". "...I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but I see a different law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity under the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me out of the body of this death? (or, this body of death). I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then I myself with the mind serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin. There is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus that the ordinance of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit... They that are after the spirit (do mind) the things of the spirit... the mind of the spirit is life and peace... But ye are... in the spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you... If Christ is in you... the spirit is life because of righteousness... If by the spirit ye do mortify the deeds of the body ye shall live" (Rom 7,8).

"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us". "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive... If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us". "Everyone that doeth sin doeth also lawlessness". "Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither knoweth him". "He that doeth sin is of the devil". "Whosoever is begotten of God doeth no sin, because his seed abideth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is begotten of God". (1 John 1:8,9,10; 3:4,6,8,9).

On the face of it, these last Scriptures appear to present a contradiction of the first magnitude, but as the Word of God cannot contradict itself there must be some way in which they are all true.

But first let us repeat that these Scriptures were not written in the first instance in connection with sanctification. Romans 7 was written in relation to justification and deliverance from the law. 1 John was written in relation to a true and a false Christianity, the genuine new birth, and the claim of some to be Christians. The two categories are represented by two clauses or phrases: "We know"; "He that saith". One indicates living experience, the other the unsubstantiated claim. Apostasy was in view with John.

But in both cases one thing is common; it is the nature of the new birth and its outworking in life afterward. Sanctification comes up as one with regeneration in nature, but as the issue and progressive outworking of regeneration. We cannot therefore read Romans 7 without going on into Chapter 8, and we cannot read 1 John without noting all of its governing words, such as "walk", "abide", "practise". We will touch that again.

The Place in Experience of Romans 7

We must first of all place this chapter. To what part of man's history or experience does it belong? Is it the experience of one who has no inward work of the Holy Spirit, or is it that of one who has been spiritually quickened? We think that it is the latter. There are several reasons for this conclusion. Firstly, the letter was written to believers, amongst whom were Jewish converts whose clean cut with the law had not been made, and who, on the one hand, were in a state of unsettled and restless or uncertain spiritual life, really neither one thing nor the other as to daily experience, failing and repenting, failing and repenting in

monotonous repetition, and almost despairing of victory; and, on the other hand, needing further enlightenment and instruction as to what being "in Christ Jesus" really means. They were not in liberty or deliverance because of an inadequate apprehension of the death and resurrection of Christ; that is, of its representative aspect as in addition to its substitutionary. Secondly, Paul, having already stated what identification with Christ really means (Chapter 6), goes on to show that its result is to draw a line between the flesh and the spirit in the believer, and makes the demand that the "walk" shall be in the spirit. Failure to do this always produces the state set forth in Chapter 7. It was a condition not uncommon amongst Christians even in New Testament times, as see 1 Corinthians and Galatians, and which drew out the mass of New Testament writings.

The Effect of Spiritual Awakening

Thirdly (and this is a fairly strong point) writing many years later the Apostle said that in his unregenerate days his position as to the righteousness which is of the law was "found blameless" (see Phil 3). He puts himself into Romans 7 and there says that the law was too much for him; it smote him; it slew him; he could not stand up to it. Under its burden he cried "O wretched man", not "found blameless". Something must have happened to disturb his complacency and make him such a divided man with civil war raging within. In the unregenerate man conscience was hiding behind the ritual and observance of the law. Rigid observance of its forms and rites made conscience play deceiving tricks; saying peace, peace, when there was no peace. But when the time of spiritual awakening comes, this kind of thing can go on no longer. It cannot play deceit any more, and, while there may be some flirting with sin on the part of the soul, the awakened and quickened spirit hates and loathes its own soul and calls a spade a spade--that is, calls sin sin! Instead of treating the ceremonial law as an offset to the moral, it sees that the latter is the important one, and that "to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams" (1 Sam 15:22).

Two Possible Evils--Romans 7, or Antinomianism

Unless the meaning and value of the death and resurrection of Christ is known, and the truth of identification by faith therewith, one of two terrible things will follow. Either there will be a history such as is set forth in Romans 7, a history of struggle, longing and defeat: fear of going back on faith in Christ, and yet deep disappointment with the Christian life: leading ever nearer to despair and gloom; or else there will set in that terrible, conscious-searing, spirit-deadening evil known as antinomianism. It might be useful to state here what that doctrine is. The word is--anti, against, and nomos, law. The term was first used by Luther as a designation of the followers of John Agricola, who maintained that the moral law was not binding, as such, upon Christians. But the thing itself existed long before Luther's time or the name given to it. From the earliest Christian times, there have been those who have denied that the law was of use or obligation under the Gospel dispensation. It would appear from several passages in the New Testament (Rom 3:8,31; 6:1; Eph 5:6; 2 Peter 2:18,19), that the principle was at work even in Apostolic times, for in those passages the Apostles warn their converts against perversions of their teaching as an excuse for licentiousness. At the heart of this doctrine there lies a mistaken interpretation of the doctrine of justification by faith. Some have in the past even taught that, being spiritual, their nature could not be corrupted, whatever their moral conduct might be; or that an elect person did not sin even when he committed actions in themselves evil.

Now, no one would sponsor such a doctrine deliberately, but the principle may operate all the same. Justification by faith: having finality and fullness of perfection in Christ: Final Perseverance, i.e. once in grace always in grace: and suchlike beliefs, can--strange to say--produce a hard and legal kind of

Christianity if wrongly held, and result in many things which may be either positively evil, questionable, or other than according to the graciousness of Christ.

Two Doctrines of Sanctification

From the Scriptures it is possible to frame two mutually exclusive doctrines of sanctification. One is that our sanctification is in Christ Jesus, complete and perfect, and, having taken Him as our holiness objectively, we must just trust that He answers for us in all Divine demands and requirements. We in ourselves are not holy, and it can only be contrary to faith, and an unhealthy introspection or subjectivity, if we become intensely occupied with the matter of personal holiness. We must believe that His Cross has done something which holds good in the sight of God in spite of our state, and "looking unto Jesus", or the attitude of faith, is the way, and the only way, of deliverance from despair or unrest. We have no hesitation in saying that such is a mixed and indefinite position. It uses certain glorious truths to obscure other equally glorious truths. This is a position which makes it necessary for those who hold it to keep ever on their guard lest their defences are broken down. They are always having to go round to see if their position is intact. It really does not settle the question when they either fall into sin and its resultant shame, or meet another and more desirable position in teaching, or those who have it. They know that they cannot accept an alternative position which to them goes to the other extreme, and so they have to dig themselves into that which is not perfectly satisfactory.

The other doctrine is that which, with varying forms of words and phraseology, and minor shades of differences, means that sanctification is the rooting out, eradication, cleansing, destroying of all sin, so that a sanctified person does not sin, and cannot sin; the sin nature has been fully dealt with. To those who hold this view, sanctification--in this sense here mentioned--is an act, a conclusive experience at a given moment, just as is new birth; and it is to be taken as such by faith.

Here, again, we have to say that there is mixture and a position which has brought a very great number of believers into confusion and despair. We say that both of these positions have Scripture used for their support, and when you look at the Scriptures, on the face of them, there seems to be such support.

The passages cited from John's Epistle appear to present a contradiction:

"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us".

"He that doeth sin is of the devil".

"Whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither knoweth him".

"Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not".

"Whosoever is begotten of God doeth no sin:... he cannot sin".

These words must be regarded as all addressed to Christians. This seems proved by Chapter 1:7: "If we walk in the light... the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth (Gk., cleanses, or is cleansing; present active tense) us from all sin".

Here, then, is the position. A child of God has to walk in the light, confess his sins, acknowledge sinfulness, and, as he does so, the Blood keeps on cleansing. At the same time "He that doeth sin is of the devil", and "Whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither knoweth him". And yet, again, at the same time

"Whosoever is begotten of God doeth no sin...he cannot sin".

The usual way through the apparent dilemma is to correct the translation, and this is certainly a help; but it does not give anything like a final clearance. Let us get the help that lies in that course by trying to retranslate the passages more accurately and literally. The reader of the English will understand that different Greek words are used for one common English word in certain places, and certain Greek words mean more than the English word employed for them.

(1 John 2:29) "Everyone that practiseth (or, is practising) righteousness is begotten of him".

(1 John 3:4) "Everyone who practiseth (or, is practising)* iniquity practiseth lawlessness".

*FOOTNOTE: A.T. Robertson says: "The present active principle (poion) means the habit of doing".

(1 John 3:6) "Whosoever abideth in him does not wander from (or, miss) the right path" ("sinneth not", Gk. harmartano = to miss the mark or the right way). Or, "Whosoever abideth in him is not missing the mark".

(1 John 3:7) "He that doeth (or, is practising) righteousness is righteous".

(1 John 3:9) "Whosoever hath been born of God is not practising sin (or, is not missing the mark) because a seed of him abideth in him and he cannot be practising sin" (moral aberration).

The help given by a knowledge of the actual words employed lies mainly in the word 'practise' as representing both an habitual course and a present--ever-present--conduct.

The Real Key to Sanctification

But all this does not settle the whole matter. We therefore submit that the key to this dilemma is the difference between soul and spirit. We have said that what begins in regeneration proceeds in sanctification. The carry-over of the atonement as a sanctifying power is thus: there is in the born-again spirit a striving after holiness as well as a new desire for the Lord. When the spirit is renewed and quickened, something happens. That spirit itself is that in man which is the image or likeness of God (spirit). It has been dead--that is, it has been severed from its life in God, and has ceased to function in any Divine way. The Holy Spirit, in virtue of the atonement, first renews it by cleansing and quickening, and also imparts Divine life (eternal life) in Christ to it, thus making it one in nature and fellowship with God. The spirit, when thus dealt with, is that seed or has that seed of God which is said by the Apostle to be unable to practise sin--"cannot sin". This new 'inner man' cannot be committing or practising sin. The dilemma of many is that there are two natures and two springs of life in believers. One gives forth sweet water and the other bitter, and the Bible says that a fountain cannot do this. "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?" (Jer 13:23). Therefore there must be two fountains.

The soul, which is the fountain of the natural life, is poisoned and impure. It is ever prone to evil, like the "flesh" in it. The soul is that which has to be continually subdued, won and eventually saved (Heb 10:39, etc.).

The renewed spirit is prone to good; its course is naturally upward. The life in it makes it gravitate to its source--God. It judges and condemns all the motions of the flesh. It strives, as energized by the indwelling Holy Spirit, to make the whole man go Godward. Its nature is Divine, although it does not become the Divine Person. It is here that "there is a new creation" (2 Cor 5:17), and that which "is being renewed...

after the image of him that created him" (Col 3:10).

As we have pointed out elsewhere, this is all a deeper reality than the life and motions of the soul, and registers itself continually against ourselves in the natural. There are stages in spiritual experience, more or less pronounced in different cases for certain reasons. The first phase may be a great and overflowing joy, with a marvellous sense of emancipation. In this phase extravagant things are often said as to total deliverance and final victory. An earnest of the ultimate is often given with the incoming of the Holy Spirit. He is that earnest, and His advent in the human spirit is celebrated with glory.

Then there may, and often does, come a phase of which inward conflict is the chief feature. It may be very much of a Romans 7 experience. This will lead under the Lord's hand to several things; firstly, to the fuller knowledge of the meaning of identification with Christ, as in Romans 6. Happy the man who has been instructed in this from the beginning.

Sanctification and Education go Together

Then it will introduce to the way of spiritual education. Sanctification and spiritual education are one, as Hebrews 7:1-13 makes clear. The advance in this double course is marked by the growth of the spirit. When the spirit is first quickened, it is barely able to show its existence. It is far from able to show its mastery over soul and body. The advance of sanctification is marked by a growth of the spirit. It begins to assert its supremacy, to compel the physical and animal life to know their bounds, and to obey God. The more sanctification advances, the more marked is the spiritual intelligence, power and life, until at last it reaches its coming-of-age in "the revealing of the sons of God... conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom 8:19,29). This education and sanctification is the result of walking, "not after the flesh, but after the spirit". Such a walk leads away from carnality and babyhood, as 1 Corinthians 3 shows.

There may be crises in this course marked by definite and tremendous experiences. But no such crisis is final: every one has to have an outgrowth leading to greater fullnesses. It is fatal to relate everything to a crisis or experience of years ago, and to stop there. So the distinction between soul and spirit is the true key to sanctification, for sanctification must not be negative like innocence, but positive in the sense that it goes along with spiritual understanding and responsibility. Sonship, which is all of a piece with sanctification (see Rom 8) is a matter of spiritual and moral responsibility in God's house. We are born "children"; we are adopted "sons". "Adoption" in the New Testament is not bringing an outsider into the family, but the born one reaching his majority and being made his father's responsible representative with 'rights'. Romans 7 has to do with condemnation by the law, and the big question is that of deliverance from the death which has become such a real, terrible and intolerable thing because of spiritual awakening. Romans 6 shows that such deliverance from death and condemnation, is by union with Christ's death and resurrection. Romans 8 transfers the law from the outside as an obligation imposed, to the inside as a power imparted. Thus, in the spirit, the new covenant is written by the Spirit of the living God (2 Cor 3 & 4).

It will help us if we get Paul's mental picture again. He had in mind the gladiators in the arena. (Remember, the letter was to the Romans, and familiar scenes in Rome were drawn upon.) When the victorious gladiator had been given the 'thumb-down' signal from the judge, which meant 'kill', it was incumbent upon him to drag his victim's body round the arena for the spectators to applaud. It was a horrible and loathsome thing, and the one who had to do it would be longing to reach the exit. Paul imagined such an one saying to himself, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from this dead body?" and then, espying an exit, he cried, 'Thank God, through here!' This was carried over into Christian

truth, and the way out for the "wretched man" was "through our Lord Jesus Christ". This has been more fully explained as being through His death, burial and resurrection. So then, the death of Christ is something to be made good in a believer's life by the Holy Spirit, through faith's deliberate identification. Then the resurrection of Christ is likewise proved to be a present mighty, delivering power; or the power by which the believer, by the spirit, puts to death the doings of the flesh.

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