

Salvation—Sanctification (9th)

(Today we will continue studying the *experimental* aspect of sanctification in the life of the believer as he lives here on earth. We will briefly discuss *perfectionism* and *progressive sanctification* in this lesson.)

Previous lessons were devoted to the truth that experimental sanctification begins with the new birth or regeneration. It was further demonstrated that this is performed by the power of God immediately by the Holy Spirit. When we use the word immediate we mean that God does this directly to the individual apart from means. If a person is unregenerate he is described as being “dead in trespasses and sins,” (Ephesians 2:1) and in this natural state he cannot receive “the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned,” I Corinthians 2:14. Since the gospel is a spiritual matter, clearly a person must first be born again before he can hear the gospel or exercise faith. Remember that faith is a fruit of the Spirit and not a product of a dead sinner. However, after a person is regenerated he can hear the gospel and exercise faith; this is conversion.

Some people combine regeneration and conversion but I believe it is needful to separate the two to prevent confusion and better understand the workings of God. Yes, it may be that the Lord will perform both initially when a person is born from above. Far be it from us to put the Lord in a bottle and say that He must always work in a specific way. I believe our forefathers were wise in saying that the Lord “worketh when, and where, and how He pleaseth.” (From the “*1689 London Baptist Confession*,” Chapter 10, Article 3.) Nevertheless, from our side of viewing things we can only determine if a person is regenerated by the work of conversion. This is how Paul described it regarding the Thessalonian saints: “Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God. For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake. And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost: So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia,” I Thessalonians 1:4-7. The Lord Jesus affirmed this same principle when speaking of false prophets: “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither *can* a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them,” Matthew 7:15-20.

Before looking at sanctification more specifically, I will briefly address two subjects: “progressive sanctification” and what is known as “perfectionism.” I will speak to the latter subject first. Though there are various forms of perfectionism, the basic idea is that the Christian can live without sinning. Some affirm that the overall way of life of a person is sinless while others may promote that the Christian may at times be sinless while having laps of sin. If you desire to study the history of this belief I would suggest by starting with the classic book entitled *Perfectionism* by Benjamin B. Warfield. Arthur W. Pink also addresses this subject somewhat in his book *The Doctrine of Sanctification*. Personally, I have only met one individual that claimed to be sinless. I reminded him of verses eight and ten of the epistle of I John: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” And, “If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” Immediately, he became irritated and irate and was quiet out-of-sorts, to say the least. When I pointed out, what I considered his sinful behavior, he rationalized and justified his behavior by saying that it was “righteousness indignation.” Obviously, it is impossible to reason with such people and the best thing is to follow the directions of Christ and “let them alone” (Matthew 15:14), or do not “cast ye your pearls before” them, Matthew 7:6.

Concerning the term “progressive sanctification,” it is essential that we are clear as to what is meant. Too often terms or phrases are interjected in sermons, books, or writings that can be misleading. The term “progressive sanctification” is one such term. Why is this? It is because two different ideas or concepts may be intended by the use of this term. One thought is that it is simply a way of speaking the same things that Peter sets forth in his epistle: “But grow in grace, and *in* the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him *be* glory both now and for ever,” II Peter 3:18. The other idea is that as the Christian lives out his life, he dies more and more unto sin and as he reaches the end of his life sin is almost eradicated in him. Regarding this view, I concur with Arthur W. Pink:

Nor does the idea of a progressive sanctification, by which the Christian “more and more dies unto sin,” agree with the recorded experience of the most mature saints. The godly John Newton (author of “How sweet the name of Jesus sounds,” etc.) when speaking of the expectations which he cherished at the outset of his Christian life, wrote, “But alas! these my golden expectations have been like South Sea dreams. I have lived hitherto a poor sinner, and I believe I shall die one. Have I, then, gained nothing? Yes, I have gained that which I once would rather have been without — such accumulated proof of the deceitfulness and desperate wickedness of my heart as I hope by the Lord’s blessing has, in some measure, taught me to know what I mean when I say, ‘Behold I am vile!’ I was ashamed of myself when I began to serve Him, I am more ashamed of myself now, and I expect to be most ashamed of myself when He comes to receive me to Himself. But oh! I rejoice in Him, that He is not ashamed of me!” Ah, as the Christian grows in grace, he grows more and more *out of love with himself*. P. 124.

When such terms or phrases can present different concepts, I find it best to avoid altogether using them or if doing so to be extremely careful to explain exactly what is meant by the term. Yet, again, to me it is best and less confusing for the listener to simply avoid the term and strive to use the clear and precise language of the Scriptures. It is for this reason I seek to avoid using the English word “church” and use either “congregation” or “assembly” with speaking of the “house of God” (I Timothy 3:15), and use terms such as “the elect,” “the sheep,” “the believer,” “saints,” “the family of God,” or other such like expressions to refer to the people of God. Often when hearing a sermon or reading some author I am uncertain what he means by using the word “church.” This English word is used to refer to a congregation, a building, the elect, the believers on earth, believers in general, the elect that have died, the congregation of Israel in the wilderness, the form of worship in the Old Testament or New Testament, Christian religion in general, a denomination, a philosophy, a way of life, and many other nebulous ideas or opinions. As a minister of the Lord, I believe we are to “read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and” give “the sense, and caused” the people “to understand the reading,” Nehemiah 8:8. What better way for the Christian to know how he is to be holy as God is holy (Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7; I Peter 1:15-16) or to live perfectly as his “Father which is in heaven is perfect,” Matthew 5:48?

It is clear that the apostle Paul did not suggest the idea that he or any Christian “more and more died to sin.” When writing to the saints at Rome, Paul said of himself “I am carnal, sold under sin,” “for I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing,” “the good that I would I do not,” “the evil which I would not, that I do,” “sin that dwelleth in me,” “O wretched man that I am,” and “with the flesh” he served “the law of sin,” Romans 7:14-25. This is true not only of Paul but of every born again child of grace. This is reiterated in Galatians 5:17: “For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.” In other words, the flesh lusts or wars against the Spirit preventing us from living as holy and righteous as we desire otherwise, and equally the Spirit desires or fights against the flesh to keep us from going into the depth of sin that we would otherwise. There is a constant battle between the flesh and Holy Spirit that resides in the heart and soul of the child of grace. As long as the believer lives in this world he will have

the battle of putting off the old man and putting on the new man. (See Ephesians 4:20-24; Colossians 3:5-13.) Equally, I remind you that I John 1:8 plainly says, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” It did not say “if we did not sin in the past,” but “if we say that we have” (that is, currently have) “no sin, we deceive ourselves.” In other words, there is no time in which we do not have sin as long as we live in these sinful bodies. I have spoken to godly believers as old as one hundred years and their testimony is that of John Newton, the author of “Amazing Grace,” at the age of eighty-two: “My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner — and that Christ is a great Savior!”

The Lord willing in future studies we will look more specifically to sanctification in the life of the believer as he lives in this low ground of sin and sorrow, but our time is up for today. Farewell.