

Romans #52 – Putting It Into Practice (1)

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Romans - GIW

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Bible Text: Romans 8:12-13
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Let me read again the text for today. It is found in Romans 8:12 and 13.

12 So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh-- 13 for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

So we come here at verse 12 to a new section of this great letter to the Romans and because of the climate in which we are living today, it is my view that it is particularly an important section of the Bible. I say this because today so many people have been misled by a false doctrine of sanctification. Thank God, not so many from our Reformed congregations but even from them there have been those who have been led away by this great error and what is that error? It is the error that you can be sanctified in a moment of time without struggle and striving.

Now, I think you can see why this teaching has a great attraction today for many people. I am not exaggerating when I say that the ungodliness and worldliness of much of the church is nothing less than shocking. When you look at the church as it is today and many parts thereof, and then you look at the Bible, and especially at the early church as it is depicted in the book of Acts, the contrast is so enormous that it is little wonder that people come to the conclusion that there must be something radically wrong and that there must be some solution. Add to this the fact that you find in the word of God an abundance of commands to be holy. Indeed, our Lord Jesus Christ said that you should be holy even as your Father in heaven is holy; you should be perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect. Then it is not hard to imagine how people can at last come to the conclusion that there must be a solution and since they are not finding it, then maybe this alluring promise of an instant and complete sanctification through the gift of the Holy Spirit, sometimes called the baptism of the Holy Spirit, becomes, indeed, a very attractive option.

So one of the teachings that is quite popular now is that the answer is perfectly simple. You are going along in a defeated Christian life, what you need is the blessing of the baptism of the Spirit. One of the slogans that these people use is this: you need to let go and let God. In other words, you need to do with the problem of sanctification the same

thing that you did with the problem of justification. Now, what happened when you were justified in Christ? Well, you came to Christ with nothing. You gave up, as it were, trying to justify yourself. You threw yourselves on the arms of Jesus and just because you could do nothing, it was the Almighty God who in Jesus Christ justified you in a moment of time and made you holy and righteous in his sight. Why not, then, do the same thing when it comes to the inward problem of the conquest of the power of sin? Why not put yourself in the hands of Jesus and let him work out the problem?

Some of the advocates of this view liken the Christian to a piece of cold iron or steel. They say, "Well, that's the trouble, you see, that's what you are in yourself. Now what you need is to simply put yourself in the fire of the love of Jesus." But what happens when you take that piece of steel or iron and put it in the fire? Well, as you know, it begins to glow. It becomes white-hot. In exactly the same way, they say, that if you will let go and let God, that's what God will do with you. The power of Christ and the Holy Spirit will then flood into your being and you will be completely holy. Another illustration that these people use is the illustration of a man who is not very good at swimming. He is struggling in the water and he can hardly keep his head above water. You wonder if he isn't going to gulp and go down for the last time. What does he need? Well, he needs to put himself in the great life preserver. If he wraps this life preserver around him, then he will be able to float on the waves. He needs to let go and let the life preserver do that which he is so futilely struggling to do.

So the picture is one of a completely helpless and forlorn individual who is not able to get anywhere in this great task of perfecting holiness and so he is invited to realize that what he needs is to let go and let God work this wonder and then he receives the baptism of the Holy Spirit and in an instant and in a moment of time, he is sanctified and he is holy. Well, that can be made to sound very pious. It can be made to sound like a tremendous recognition of the glory of Christ and the insignificance of self. But the question is, and this is always the question: does it really agree with the Bible? Is that what the Bible teaches about the problem of sanctification? Does the Bible say that you, having been justified in Christ, should now let go and let God? Well, the answer is: no, it does not. Quite the contrary, it says that you, just because you are a new creature in Christ, you have a great obligation. You have the obligation. So then, brethren, we are under obligation not to the flesh to live according to the flesh, and by implication and by inference the opposite immediately suggest itself as virtually all commentators admit, but to the Spirit to live according to the Spirit.

Well, as you see in so many of these places in Paul's argumentation, what he is doing is bringing us the consequences of all the things that he has been saying before this. Those two little words "so then" are like a mighty hinge upon which the great door of truth turns, and what he is saying is, "Now if you've understood all of these things that I have been saying of you, and you really possess them, well, then you can see and you ought to understand that this is your obligation."

Now, what are some of these things that the apostle has been teaching us in the previous section? Let me just briefly remind you of them. One of them is that we are not under the

law anymore. We are not under the old covenant of works that God made with Adam. God does not say to you and to me anymore, "First you have to keep all my commandments and then after you have kept them, we'll give you your great reward." That's not what God says to us because we are under grace. He has given us the gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord and it is out of that gift that we go on to live the life of obedience to Jesus. Another thing that he says is that we're not under the dominion of sin. We were. In our original and fallen estate we were under sin's tyranny and dominion. It was the absolute ruler over us. We couldn't make a move without the tyrannical dictation of the power of sin in our nature. But that's not true anymore. We're not under the dominion of sin for we have been set free by the power of Jesus and that's the same as to say that we are now new creatures. We have been made new creatures in Jesus and the Holy Spirit of the living God dwells now in our nature.

Now there is a lot more you could say but focus on those few things, those central facts: you are not dead, you're alive; you're not under the old covenant, you're under the new covenant; you're not under the power and dominion of sin anymore, you're under the power and dominion of the third person of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit that now dwells in you. Well now, if you can see that, you can certainly see that it is not true; it's a thousand miles from being true to say that you can do nothing.

You see, one of the points of confusion sometimes even in Reformed congregations, is that that there is a failure to distinguish the difference between the old man and the new. Now when I came to Christ, it was 100% true that I could do nothing. I was dead in sin. Sin had the dominion. I had no power and no strength. If I was to be saved, it had to come from God Almighty and from him alone. That's 100% true but that's not true anymore. As a new creature in Christ, I cannot say I can do nothing. I can say, "Oh yes, I know that in me, that is in my old nature, there dwells no good thing." Paul says that but you notice he says "in my old nature." It's quite true that if God were to leave me to stand on my own in my old original sinful nature, if God were to leave me to that for one moment, I couldn't do anything. That's true but that's not the way it is. He doesn't leave me to my old nature. I'm a new creature in Christ. I've risen from the dead. The Holy Spirit dwells in me. It is not true to say then of myself, "Poor me. I can do nothing," because that is a terrible denial of all of the great and wonderful work of God which was accomplished when I was born again, and when I was converted, and when all my sin was forgiven, and when I was adopted into the family of God, and when he promised that he would complete that good work which he began in me even to the day of Jesus. Now of course, if I only thought I was converted, if I only imagined that I became a new creature, that could be true of me. But if I really am a Christian, if you really are a Christian, then it's not true that you can do nothing. To the contrary, it is rather true that you can say with Paul, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," and that's why our text says that we have this obligation. "So then, brethren," because everything I've told you in the first seven and a half chapters of the book of Romans is true, "So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to live anymore according to the flesh but to live according to the Spirit."

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says that in the years of his ministry in Westminster Chapel in London, over and over people would come to him with this problem, they seemed to be absolutely stuck in the mud, as we say, mired down in the rut getting nowhere in sanctification. And so they would come to this famous preacher and they would say, "What's the matter with me? And what can I do about it?" And he says they usually expected some kind of a perfectionist solution, the very kind of thing that is so tempting and alluring to so many of God's people. But he didn't tell them that. No, he said, "Well, your problem is that you haven't yet come to realize what you are. You have not yet come to really fathom what it means to be a new creature in Christ and you haven't begun to realize the resources that belong to you as a Christian." Well, that's exactly the teaching of this portion of the word of God, "So then, brethren, we are under obligation."

Now, the second thing that you see in this text is the undeniable fact that sanctification is a long and difficult process. It is a struggle in which you, by the Spirit of God, must put the deeds of the body to death. Well, killing, you know, is a hard job and I think that is why this heresy today has so much appeal. If I offered you today the choice between something hard and something easy, which would you choose? And if I not only said this one is hard and this one is easy but the hard one takes a long long time and the easy one, well, that's right now, which one would you choose? Well, my dear friends, that's why so many people today are becoming Pentecostal. They want it quick and they want it easy but that's not the way it actually works in the kingdom of God because God says you have to put to death, and it's a continuous idea, it is a constant daily putting to death, it's the present continual in the Greek language, you have to put to death the deeds of the body.

Now, I think you can see from your own knowledge of the Bible that there is absolutely no other doctrine that can ever have a hope of squaring with Scripture because you know as well as I do that every one of the great men of God that are mentioned in the Bible did it that way. Did holiness come quick and easy for Abraham? Well, you know it didn't. It was a lifelong struggle. Did holiness come quick and easy for the Apostle Paul? And I think everyone recognizes that there is no superior to the Apostle Paul living on earth today. There is no superior to Paul but did he find holiness as a thing that came quick and easy? Far from it. He says, "I know that in me, that is in my old nature, my flesh, there dwells no good thing. O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me?" And does he say a little bit later on in his apostolic career, "Well, now I've made it"? No, he says, "I do not consider that I have attained. I have not reached the goal. Only one thing I do," he says, "forgetting the things that are behind," and it's hard to tell there whether he means the sins or the little accomplishments, maybe he means the little accomplishments, "the little ways I have come, I forget that," he says "because I'm pressing on toward the goal of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. No," he says, "I do not say that I have attained but," he says, "I know one thing, I have been apprehended by Jesus."

Well now, that's the way it actually works in the life of the Christian and that's why all the way through the word of God we have a multitude of exhortations. What does the Bible exhort you to do? Let go and let God? Not on your life. It says you've got to take the whole armor of God, and then after you've taken the whole armor of God, you have to

stand and you have to fight the good fight of faith. So one of the emblems used in the Bible to describe this great work of sanctification is a soldier in battle. Another is a Greek athlete in the Coliseum, "Run with patience the race that is set before you, looking to Jesus, the author and finisher of your faith, and realize that you are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses." Paul uses there something very familiar in the ancient world, the picture of a man who has gone to the great stadium to see one of the great athletic contests and he says, "Well, you're the man that is there running in the race and it's not going to be easy. It's not going to come to you without effort. You have to run the race with patience, the race that is set before you." And he even uses the simile of the gladiatorial contest where you have to take these weapons and battle to the death your enemy that seeks to destroy you.

Everything you read in the Bible in the New Testament about the task of perfecting holiness indicates that it is a struggle, it is a battle, it is a conflict and a striving, but that's exactly why we should take hope for the Bible says you are "to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling because you know it is God who is working in you to will and to do of his good pleasure." It's precisely when the battle becomes hard and the heat of the day beats down upon you, it's precisely then just because you are going on fighting the good fight that there should be great joy and peace in your heart because you know that you are a believer.

That brings me to the final point that I want to make from this text and that is the certainty of the connection between these two things because if you, by the Spirit, are putting to death the deeds of the body, my beloved brother and sister, you will live. Now, the world might laugh at you. They say, "Look at that guy struggling and striving, always fighting that bitter battle against sin in his own nature, oftentimes with tears. Look at that fool." But the Bible says, "No, he is a wise man and he is going to live. He's going to live forever. Just as the man who is living according to the flesh, that man is going to die."

Now this is not a prophecy. If a mother says to her little child, "Johnny, if you touch the stove, you will get burned," it's not a prophecy, it is a statement about an absolutely certain connection between these two things. If you put your hand on a red hot stove, you are going to get burned, and if you are living according to the flesh, you are going to die. If you go on living according to the flesh, then you are going to die because the wages of sin is death and the man who is living according to the flesh is the man who is not a new creature, and he is not liberated from the dominion of sin, and he is under the law, and on the last day when he stands before the judgment of God, he is going to be sentenced to eternal death.

Now, I say to you that there should be no reason for you to doubt which of these you are. If you are living according to the flesh, you're not fighting any great battle against sin; you're not putting to death the deeds of the body. But if you are living according to the Spirit, you are a Christian, you are a child of God, you have been born again, you are putting to death the deeds of the body, and you know something about how painful and difficult that is. It's not easy but it's the very thing of what you're doing that certifies to you that you are not the old man anymore and that in you dwells the Spirit of Jesus.

Well, I think you can see from that what a delusion it is to think that the way of blessing is to be passive, to relax, to let go and let God. That's exactly the opposite of what the Bible means by its doctrine of sanctification. It is the man who is working in an agonizing way, working out his salvation, who has a right to know that it is the Spirit of God that is working in him to will and to do of his good pleasure.

As a great preacher once said, for the Christian, not for the unbeliever but for the Christian, the true concept of the Christian life is not a hospital but a military barracks. Now, if you happen to be an unbeliever, the hospital picture is a good one for you because a hospital is where they bring people who are dying and they do things to them to make them live: they massage the heart; they give them a transfusion; they give them a shot to jolt their heart back into activity. Now, when you are dead in sin, that's what you need. You've got to be born again by the almighty power of God. You have to have an operation to change your nature. And you have to have the great load of your sin like a great tumor taken out and thrown away. It's like a hospital, all right, to become a Christian but after you're a Christian, it's like a military barracks where you take the armor of God and you get ready to go into battle. You're not helpless and it's not hopeless and it is the very fact that you are doing this that you know that you belong to Jesus.

The Bible says there is no greater delusion than that of a man who says, "I haven't got any sin anymore. I've arrived." The Bible says that if a man says that, the truth is not in him and the tragedy is there are a lot of people today who are suffering under that delusion. They just built one of the biggest religious houses of worship in all of New Zealand right up there in Auckland for people suffering this delusion. It's part of the unpaid bills of a church that has not instructed God's people. That's why that has happened. But on the other hand, there is something else just as bad and that is for us to act as if we are in a rut and there is no way we can get out of it; as if there is no way in which we can be different from the people of this generation. Perfectionism is the one error, status quo antinomianism is the other, and it's hard to say which is the greatest of the two.

I don't expect any of you to arrive in this life at total perfection, and if any of you ever think you are near it, I'll try to wake you up to the fact that you aren't. But I warn you that you will not enter the kingdom of God if you become cold and complacent so that your life begins to look exactly the same as that unbeliever and you're not even disturbed about it and you are not fighting, really fighting to put to death the deeds of the body. Status quo is not good enough for God's people.

We are under a great obligation and I think the whole problem with our spiritual life is simply the fact that we have not fathomed that enough. The Heidelberg Catechism is right when it speaks of the debt of gratitude. If you really understood what it cost Jesus to do what he did for you, if you really understood what an almighty act of God it was to make you alive from the dead, then you'd see what a tremendous obligation you have to put to death the deeds of the body by the power of the Spirit of the living God who dwells right there in your nature. O, may God wake us up to that obligation and by his Spirit

drive us on in the great task of perfecting holiness in the fear of God for the Bible says without that, we will not see him. May God grant it for Christ's sake. Amen.

We thank you gracious God for the warning of your word, but also its encouragement. Grant that we may now rise up in the strength of our great Redeemer and the gifts that he has given us to fight the good fight of the faith with renewed zeal so that we may win the crown of life. This we ask for Christ's sake only. Amen.