

Growing In Grace

When Jesus died on the cross, all the elect sinner's sins were laid upon Him and He expiated them, fully paying their price in His suffering and death. Upon this sinner's regeneration and belief in Christ as his Sin-Bearer, his conscience is purged from these sins, and all the righteous obedience of Christ is accounted as his own. This is justification full and complete, free from any contingency upon the convert's future obedience, or incumbency upon him to fulfill the righteousness of the law. The believer now finds himself a new creature, "*created according to God in righteousness and true holiness*" (Ephesians 4:24). He no longer aspires to a life of sin, but of perfect obedience to Christ. That law that once chafed and bound is now sweet, pleasant, fitting and liberating. The measure in which this believer's life actually conforms to God's righteousness is called sanctification or growth in grace.

But there is a wide disparity of views on sanctification. They range all the way from nothing to perfectionism. Some also view sanctification as climactic and instantaneous, others as a gradual process.

The Wretched Man

The extreme "wretched man" view of the Christian denies the possibility of any degree of personal sanctification. The believer's state is every bit as corrupt and depraved as it was before he was justified. He has a standing of perfect righteousness before God, has a longing to behave righteously, but is utterly unable to do one thing right or to restrain himself from any evil to which his inbred corruption coerces him. Whereas he was once a happy sinner, he is now a miserable one. The only hope of any victory over sin must wait until he puts off his mortal body. (It is only fair to say that not all who believe that the man in Romans seven is a Christian in a high state of grace go this far. Most give a qualified interpretation to the man's asserted slavery to sin and say that the passage only teaches that a Christian struggles with sin all his life. I wholeheartedly agree with that truth, but deny that this is what is pictured in Romans 7:15-24).

The Carnal Man

Another view grants that some degree of sanctification is possible, but not at all necessary. This is usually articulated as part of the "Carnal Christian" theory, and nearly always incorporates two-naturism. The believer, according to this view, retains his old sinful nature alongside his new Christian nature. It is entirely possible for him to live in either realm. Most Christians, it is taught, simply accept Christ as Saviour by faith, never repent or submit to His Lordship, and live out their entire lifetime no different from a lost sinner. It is possible for some, however, to take their salvation to a second stage, get "filled with the Spirit" or "make Jesus Lord of their lives", and begin to grow in grace. Those who do so experience a continual, inward battle between the "old man" and the "new man", or "two natures". This two-nature theory is utterly bereft of scriptural basis or support and exists only to buttress the wretched man view of Romans seven, or because it seems to provide a plausible explanation to the inward conflict that all Christians have with sin in their members. But its plausibility is a shallow illusion. It has no foundation from scriptural exegesis, and nature denies it. Each species of everything is only one thing naturally. It may indeed behave unnaturally, but when it does, it is influenced by forces alien to itself.

The Entirely Sanctified Man

Perfectionism teaches that entire sanctification is possible in the present life; that is, a person may reach a state of "perfect love" wherein he is utterly without sin in spirit or deed, and may live for an indefinite period of time in that state. This sort of sanctification is always a climactic experience involving those who believe in two or three state salvation . . . second and third "works of grace". Without intending any disrespect to do godly people who entertain such views, we must nevertheless insist that they can hold them only by grossly misinterpreting the Scriptures, ignoring sin in their lives, which is evident to everyone except themselves, and greatly exaggerating their spirituality. This doctrine, with few exceptions, is part of an Arminian package, which also envisions the possibility of not only losing the state of perfection, but salvation as well. How one could do that if he were incapable of sin, I do not know.

The New Man

A fourth view, the correct one, is that the Bible teaches that sanctification is not only possible, but certain for the genuine convert. It is inseparable, though distinct, from justification. Our old man's crucifixion with Christ, which assures our justification, liberates us from the effective power of sin in the body, so that we are no longer slaves to sin (Romans 6:6). Christ bore our sins in His Own body on the tree (Justification), that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness (Sanctification), by whose stripes we *are* healed (1 Peter 2:24). This healing is not just a possibility, but a certainty; and, flowing out of Christ's substitutionary suffering for sins, has to be a spiritual, rather than a bodily healing. It is not optional or selective, but is secured and applied to all the elect. The Bible also teaches that sanctification is not instantaneous, as in a climactic experience, but gradual and progressive. We *grow* in grace (Ephesians 4:14,15, Philippians 2:12-14, 1 Peter 2:2, 2 Peter 3:18, Jude 20). There is no Biblical or historical witness of any one having reached and maintained a state of sinless perfection in this present life. This unredeemed "body of death", which God has decreed we wear until the day of our complete adoption, will not permit sinlessness. We shall not rid ourselves of all sin in our lifetime.

Yet we do have power and resources in Christ to break with and have victory over *any known sin* (2 Peter 1:3-4, 2 Corinthians 2:14, Romans 8:37). It is ignorance and unbelief, not the irresistible power of sin, that limits our growth in grace. We are not longer slaves to sin. It has no power to bring us into bondage. "*The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made us free from the law of sin and death*" (Romans 8:2) "*that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us*" (Romans 8:4). We have nothing to blame for our continuing in sin but ignorance and/or unbelief. We may not excuse ourselves by blaming an omnipotent, inbred corruption which we know about, but have no resource in Christ to overcome.

Now, we may ask a number of questions about all this: Where does this sin and corruption reside? Of what essence is it? What is happening when we "grow in grace"? What is growing – being improved – being changed? What are we putting to death when we "mortify our members which are on the earth" (Colossians 3:5)?

Who Are We?

I cannot overemphasize how important it is that we have a right view of ourselves in our essential being as Christians. That is the first absolutely essential truth we must believe if we are to appreciate and reap the full joy and liberty of Christian sanctification. We must not make the deadly error of relying on our subjective experience, the limitations of carnal understanding, or the writings of “great men”, not even the Church Fathers or the Puritans. This truth may be infallibly discovered nowhere but in the sacred Scriptures. And we must be ready for our preconceptions, convictions and experiences to fall under the hammer of God’s Word. How shall we know if the doctrine is true? When we are ready for truth to be what it is, *and* to bow in obedience to it, we shall know whether it is from God or not (John 7:17).

The Bible tells us we have been born again of the Spirit of God (John 3:3-8), of incorruptible seed (1 Peter 1:23). We are “new creatures”, in which and to which “all things are become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17), created in Christ Jesus unto good works (Ephesians 2:10), according to God in righteousness and true holiness (Ephesians 4:24). The life we now have is eternal life (John 10:28). We have already been quickened from the dead (John 5:25), Ephesians 2:1,5). There will not be another new birth at the resurrection or the Lord’s return, only a changing of the body. Therefore, the life that we shall have eternally is nothing more or less than that which we now possess. Now, unless what is born of God is defective and needs improvement, or contaminated and needs purifying, we must confess that we are already in possession of the sinlessly perfect life in the *essence of our being as Christians*. We do not just have the sinless life of Jesus *imputed* to our account; His life is actually *imparted* to us (Galatians 2:20, 1 Corinthians 1:30). This is no fanciful, pietistic or perfectionist illusion. As Eve was of Adam, so are we bone of His bone and flesh of His flesh (Genesis 2:23, Ephesians 5:28-30). The cross is not only substitution, but identification. It is not only imputation, but impartation. We are actual partakers of Christ (Hebrews 3:14). This is nowhere more strikingly illustrated than in 1 Corinthians 2:11-12, where the Apostle first observes that only the Spirit of God may know the things of God, and then asserts that we have been given that very Spirit that we *may know the things of God which are freely given to us*. God has taken us into the innermost recesses of His being by imparting to us His life principle. That is our life in Christ.

This sinlessly perfect life is, of course, not yet fully evident. We are already children, offspring, of God, but it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but when He appears we shall be like Him (1 John 2:1-2). This true life of the believer is in the Spirit (Romans 8:1-10), not the fleshy body. Though invisible to the physical world, hidden in Christ with God (Colossians 3:3), it is nevertheless our true life. That is why the Apostle Paul can say, “I *myself* serve the law of God” (Romans 7:25), and John can say, “Whosoever is born of God does not commit sin” (1 John 3:9), for His seed remains in him, and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.

Such passages speak of the inner man, the born-again child of God in the narrow sense of his spiritual life being the true person, that which survives eternally. Other Scriptures, however, envision the whole man, including his mortal body, and these indeed reveal a creature who sins, who is far removed from perfection, and who will never even approximate spotless holiness in this present life.

That the only difference in the redeemed in heaven and the redeemed who yet live on earth is the body each wears is an inescapable truth. There is not the slightest indication of there being any change in the spirit life at the resurrection or the coming of Christ. In every reference to those blessed events, it is only the body that is changed. A natural body is exchanged for a spiritual body (1 Corinthians 15:44).

Our imperfection, therefore, does not flow out of an unfinished work of grace in the eternal soul of the new creation, but out of its restriction to an unsuited mortal body deeply contaminated with sin and hostility to God, righteousness and truth. This sin in the mortal members must not be confused with the Gnostic error of matter being evil. Flesh, bone and blood are neither good nor evil. To mortify our members which are upon the earth is not to pluck out eyes and cut off hands, but to put to death “*fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, covetousness, anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language*” (Colossians 3:5-8), and such like. These are the evil principles that yet reside in the mortal body of a regenerate man.

Where Does Sin Reside in the Believer?

Now, if this sin in the members is not of the essence of flesh itself, then of what essence is it? The Scriptures put it in the *mind*. Identifying this in the mortal body, we would find it principally in the brain itself, in its control of the motions and sensations and affections of every part of the body. I must quickly say that we cannot totally restrict the mind of man to his physical organs, for his consciousness survives the body’s demise. This is a mystery beyond our pale of understanding. But for our present purposes, we can be scripturally safe by saying that sin resides in man through contamination of his mind. Being lost is essentially a state of insanity, of hostility toward God and truth in the mind. Sin is illogical, irrational and unreasonable. A lost man’s mind is devoid of sound judgment. The scriptural proof of this is enormous: Ephesians 2:3, Colossians 1:21, 2 Corinthians 3:14, 4:4; Romans 1:28, Ephesians 4:17, Colossians 2:18, 1 Timothy 2:2, 2 Timothy 3:8, Titus 1:15, Romans 8:7. Regeneration restores a man to his right mind (Mark 5:15). It is nothing less than having rationality, reason, logic, understanding restored to a man’s thoughts. The difference in the wayside hearer and the good-ground hearer of Matthew 13 is that one did not *understand* the gospel and the other did. Gospel truth is addressed to the mind, the understanding, to reason. We sometimes say the “heart”, so as to exclude intellectual, disinterested consent only, which leaves the will, intents and affections unmoved. But by “heart” we can mean nothing more than a devout state of the mind. Man has no other faculty with which to receive truth. And it is truth received heartily in the regenerate mind that sets one free from sin, error and ruin.

When Adam sinned, the life of God left him, and the light went out in his mind. He died spiritually and fell into incompetent darkness. Satan promised that he would “know”, but the knowledge that old serpent intended to give him was all lies. The light that was in him became darkness. Having taken sides with the devil against God in the matter of truth, he, together with all his posterity, fell totally under the evil one’s influence, restrained only by common grace. All now walked, lived, and thought “*according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now works in the children of disobedience*” (Ephesians 2:2). As soon as a babe emerges from the womb, demons are busy with his mind, instilling rebellion, selfishness, anger, malice, lies, lusts and all sorts of wicked perversions. He is “*of his father, the devil, and his lusts he will do*”, the elect as well as the non-elect, for we all were “*by nature the children of wrath*” (Ephesians 2:3).

When the elect sinner is converted, the life of God and the light of his mind returns, enabling him to think clearly, soundly, to love and rejoice in the truth. He hears a voice and truth he has never heard before. Worldly vanities, demonic lies, irrational lusts, when exposed objectively alongside divine truths and eternal realities, are perceived for the deadly frauds they are. Repentance, then, is no dreary, sacrificial chore, but a blessed release from bondage into the glorious liberty of the children of God. When certain particular sins are vivid issues in a person's mind at the point of conversion, deliverance from them constitutes a wonderful catharsis, a glorious "conversion experience". Another person may be just as soundly converted, but with only a consciousness of general sinfulness . . . no particular individual sins impressed on his mind. The experience in such a case will not be as strongly exercised in the senses. In the former case, the joy and delight and love that absorbs all the new convert's sensibilities may lead him to feel that he is rid of all sin, has been made perfect in the love of Christ, and could never again give any thought or consideration to anything other than the altogether perfect and lovely will of God. But, as he will soon learn, there is an enormous body of sin, left untouched and undisturbed by his conversion.

All the evil, the lies, the perversions learned and experienced during the years in darkness still lie deeply embedded and entrenched in the new Christian's mind. The pleasures, sensations, thrills, habits and addictions are very much still present in the bodily members which had been given over to them in time past. These are the "strongholds", the "reasonings", the "high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God" that must be pulled down and be brought with "every thought to the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

In addition to this residual sin in our members, we are still assaulted by demons with their lies, seductions, harassments and hindrances. It is not flesh and blood, but "*principalities, powers, rulers of the darkness of this world, wicked spirits in the heavenlies*" (Ephesians 6:12). They are not silenced or rendered inactive by our conversion. They still have access to our unredeemed body, especially the mind. The difference is, that whereas formerly we had no light or truth or life in Christ to combat this darkness, we are now mightily enabled with weapons of warfare to cause us to triumph (Ephesians 6:13-18). The Spirit of Truth promised by Christ (John 14:17) has now come, so that we may now by Him put to death the deeds of the body (Romans 8:13).

What Are Our Resources For Growth in Grace?

Growth in grace is accomplished by hearing, believing, receiving and incorporating the truth of God's words into our lives, by shining the light of the glorious gospel into the darkened recesses of our mind, by rooting out these lies, perversions, habits and vanities, exposing them to the withering brilliance of divine revelation. We are being transformed "*by the renewing of the mind*" (Romans 12:2). We are being "*renewed in the spirit of our minds*" (Ephesians 2:23). Thus the veil of darkness is being progressively removed, and we are being transformed from "glory to glory," gazing on the glory of the Lord.

This will not be quick or easy, and it will not be completed until we "drop this robe of flesh and rise to seize the everlasting prize". The wailings and cries of denied flesh, the powerful drives of demonically induced desires, the perverted reasonings of old thought patterns will nearly overwhelm us. And we will be many times deceived into thinking that this is *us*, our true life in the inner person. It will be the most real thing visible to our spiritually dimmed eyes. In such circumstances our only, but certain, deliverance will be where sinking Peter found it: "Lord, help! I perish." But it must be found in His Word, in the truth which He declared will make us free. That truth is that we are not sinners, but saints. We are dead to sin. Sin has nothing for us. All these emotions and feelings are lies, and will deliver to us nothing but delusions and death. We must lay hold of the particular gospel truth that contradicts the lie espoused by the particular sin presently assailing us, choose to embrace and confess that truth, reject and deny that lie. The temptations will fade, the lies will lose their rationale, the evil one will lose his grip, and one more sin will be defeated and put behind.

Now, someone is going to say, "I tried that and it did not work." We have often heard the same sort of complaint from the person who claims he has been trying to get saved for years. Others seem to come to Christ and are received, but he just gets rejected. The only answer to that complaint is that someone is mistaken, and it isn't the Word of God. Just as truly as Christ receives all who come to Him, the truth will set the person free who believes and embraces it as reality. The Lord has assured us that He will quicken the *mortal body* in which His Spirit resides (Romans 8:11), that we "*as those alive from the dead may yield our members as instruments of righteousness unto God*" (Romans 6:13). The blame can only lie in one place – he has not chosen to believe and commit himself to the truth.

Sanctification, then, is that process wherein the new creature is set free from residual sin in his mortal body by bringing gospel truth to bear upon it. No wonder the saints hunger and thirst after righteousness and hungrily devour the Word of God. It is the fragrant, fresh-baked show bread illuminated by the lampstand of the Holy Spirit. In those blessed truths, they find water to quench their thirst, food to build sinew in their souls, and divine breezes making spiritual life soar into the heavenlies.

- C. M.