

THE DOCTRINE OF SANCTIFICATION *by Arthur W. Pink*

Chapter 29

The Progress of Sanctification

Normal Christian experience is a progress in practical holiness. Where there is life there is growth, and even when growth ceases there is a development and maturing of what is grown, unto increasing fruitfulness or usefulness. We say "normal," for even in the natural (which ever adumbrates the spiritual) there is such a thing as stunted growth and arrested development--alas that we so often see examples of this among the Lord's people. Yet those very failures only emphasize the fact--testified to by every Christian conscience--that we ought to go on "from strength to strength" (Psa. 84:7), that we should be "changed into" the image of the Lord "from glory to glory" (2 Cor. 3:18), that is, from one degree of it to another. That such progress is our duty is clear from many passages: "Furthermore then we beseech you, brethren, and exhort you by the Lord Jesus, that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would abound more and more" (1 Thess. 4:1).

It seems strange that there are those who not only repudiate in toto any such thing as "progressive sanctification," but who are bitterly opposed to those who contend for the same, even though our contention be scripturally and soberly conducted; stranger still that those very men belong to the same denomination as John Gill. They know quite well that those whom they condemn do not advocate any refining of the old nature or spiritualizing of the old man, nor have the slightest leanings to the evil dogma of fleshly perfection. Nevertheless, they continue to misrepresent and denounce them. It is quite true that the believer possesses a sanctification which is absolute and perfect, admitting of no degrees or improvements. Yet

that does not alter the fact that there is another sense in which the believer's sanctification is a relative and imperfect one, and that the pursuit of holiness is to be his chief quest. Why confuse two totally different aspects of the subject, and refuse to recognize they both exist?!

"The adjuncts or properties of sanctification. First, it is imperfect in the present state, though it will most certainly be made perfect; where the work is begun it will be performed. Sanctification in Christ is perfect, but sanctification in the saints themselves is imperfect: it is perfect with respect to parts, but not with respect to degrees. Sanctification, as a principle, which is the new creature or new man, has all its parts; though these are not grown up to the measure of the fullness of the stature of Christ, as they will do. Where there is one grace, there is every grace, though none perfect. There is a comparative perfection in the saints when compared with what they themselves once were, and others are; and when compared even with other saints, for one saint may have a greater degree of grace and holiness than another: 'let us therefore, as many as be perfect' (Phil. 3:15); and yet the greatest of those was not absolutely perfect, even the Apostle himself, who said so in Philippians 3:12" (John Gill).

That sanctification in the best of men is imperfect appears unmistakably from various considerations. First, from the continual wants of the saints. In this life they "hunger and thirst after righteousness" which shows they are not yet filled. They own themselves to be "poor and needy" (Psa. 86:11): their strength is feeble, and they constantly require fresh supplies of grace to subdue sin, resist temptation, perform duties, and persevere in faith and in obedience. True, the grace of God is sufficient for them, yet they are bidden to seek it (Heb. 4:16; James 1:5). Second, it appears from the confessions of the same: "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect" (Phil. 3:12). Third, it appears from the defects of their graces. Let us ask those who repudiate "progressive sanctification," Is your faith such that there is no need for it to be increased-

-your love, hope, patience, meekness, goodness, self-control, such that there is no room for improvement?

But though our practical sanctification be imperfect, it is progressive: "But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day" (Prov. 4:18). Various figures are employed in Scripture to set this forth. The increase of grace in the believer was likened by Christ to "first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear." The Apostle John distinguishes the various stages of Christian growth by likening young converts to "little children," whose knowledge is small and strength weak; then to "young men," who are strong and vigorous and have overcome the Wicked One, and then to "fathers" in Christ, who are mature and fruitful (1 John 2:13, 14). At first, light and discernment is very dim, like the sight of the man whose eyes Christ opened: he saw men like trees walking, but later all things clearly (Mark 8:24, 25). There is such a thing as growing in grace, increasing in the knowledge of God, becoming more fruitful. To admit this, is to grant a progress in practical holiness.

An increase of holiness should be desired and sought by us above everything else. What a high price should we set upon closer conformity to Christ. How diligently should we hide God's Word in our hearts that we sin not against Him. How earnestly and frequently should we pray for the cleansing of our hearts and the renewing of a right spirit within us. Heavenly grace is to be prized above all the comforts, honours and riches of this passing world. The approbation of God is to be greatly preferred to the good opinion of men. Trials and afflictions are to be valued if they promote (as they should) our practical sanctification. If we are willing to take bitter medicine for the removal of bodily disorders, shall we murmur at bitter experiences sent for the purging of our lusts? If we can bear the pain of lancing a festered limb, shall we fight against the knife of the Great Physician when He would let out some of our corruptions? Let, then, growth in grace be made the chief business of life, no matter what temporal sacrifices it involves.

"And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; that ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ. Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God" (Phil. 1:9-11). Those prayers recorded in Scripture are the outbreathings of holy men, expressing their deepest longings after those things which the Spirit in them deemed to be most excellent. Here the Apostle besought God on behalf of the Philippian saints. First, for those graces in them which are the inward springs of holiness: love, and knowledge and judgment. Second, that they might perform their duties with sincere hearts and God's approval to the end of their course. Third, that they might be increasingly fruitful.

"That your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment" (v. 9). Why is love first. Do not faith and knowledge, in the order of nature, go before "love"? Must we not know and trust a person before we can love him? Ah, it is the springs of holiness which are here in view, and love is the more immediate, for "faith worketh by love" (Gal. 5:6). "Provoke one another unto love and to good works" (Heb. 10:24) is the order: stir up the principle of love till it be enkindled, and good works, as the flame, will arise. We are predestinated to be holy before Him in love (Eph. 1:4)--holiness arises from love, and therefore is love the fulfilling of the Law. It is love which makes the Divine commandments to be "not grievous" unto us (1 John 5:3). Let us, then, see to it that our hearts be inflamed with the wondrous love of God for us.

The Apostle adds "that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge" (Phil. 1:9). Generally Christians have to pray that their love might keep pace with their knowledge; but here Paul prays that their knowledge might be equal unto their love. Usually, the believer's intelligence is ahead of his affections; it was, it seems, otherwise with the Philippians. No doubt the reader has observed that there are, broadly speaking, two sorts of saints: affectionate souls, whose hearts are warm toward Christ and his

people, but less intelligent in spiritual things; others more knowing, yet less passionate, though equally Christians. The primitive times give instances of each. The Corinthians were very intelligent (see 1 Cor. 4, 5), but they were short in love (1 Cor. 8:2, 3). The Thessalonian and Philippian saints were a more simple and affectionate sort of Christian, whose love exceeded their knowledge--hence this particular prayer on their behalf.

There is nothing more painful to behold than Christians, who are truly sincere in love and warm in zeal of God, falling into wrong courses through lack of needful light, by which to distinguish between truth and error, duty and sin, bringing dishonour upon the Lord and being a stumblingblock to their fellows. Yet so it sometimes happens: if there are those who possess much light and knowledge, who are not so exercised about the sincerity of their heart and the uprightness of their walk as they ought to be--there are others whose affections are warm and who are conscious of their sincerity, yet largely ignorant of God's revealed will, nevertheless confident that their course is right, and unwilling to study the Word or listen to those who desire to teach them the way of the Lord more perfectly. It is the part of wisdom to be slow in engaging in any new course, for once we are committed to it, pride makes it very hard to acknowledge we are wrong.

Love, then, needs the adjunct of light. Our affections require directing if they are to issue in righteousness. A longing to please God is the first essential; willingness to be instructed by Him therein is the second. Therefore Paul here prayed for the Philippian saints that their love might "abound yet more and more in knowledge and all judgment," that is, that they might ever be able to distinguish between right and wrong and discern their duty in every case, however dark and doubtful or disputable it might appear. That "knowledge" is only obtainable through the Scriptures, and effectual by the Spirit's powerful application of the same. There is much fanaticism on this point today, which though having a pious sound is most dishonouring to God. We have personally heard more than one assert very emphatically that they were "prompted by the Spirit" to do a thing God has

expressly forbidden. My reader, the Holy Spirit never prompts one to do anything which is contrary to the Scriptures, so a knowledge of them is essential if we are to ascertain whether our "prompting" be of the Spirit or the restless urge of the flesh.

The Apostle adds to knowledge "and in all judgment," or as the margin gives (preferably, we believe) "sense." This is where he places the emphasis--"in all sense"--to denote this is of the greatest importance: such "knowledge" as has sense added to it. Thomas Goodwin very helpfully suggested that this term has a threefold force. First, as added to "knowledge" the two words together signify the same as the term faith. What is "faith" but a spiritual perception of spiritual things? As God has placed in our bodies senses suited to the material objects we come into contact with, so at regeneration He communicates that which is suited to the spiritual realm. There is no bodily sense but what faith is expressed by it: "Taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psa. 34:8); "My sheep hear My voice" (John 10:27); "which our hands have handled" (1 John 1:1)--all referring to actions of faith.

Second, by "sense" is meant experience, which is a distinct thing from faith, as is clear from Romans 5:1-4. "Tribulation worketh patience" or submission to God, "and patience, experience." Did we not find in our afflictions that, after we had submitted to God (humbly bowed to His rod), He either delivered us from them or manifestly supported us under them? Thereby faith was strengthened against the next trial, for experience breeds "hope" or a confidence that God will conduct us safely through this wilderness and land us eventually in Canaan. Experience, then, is an acquired knowledge based on sense. The possessor of it has learned for himself the reality of God and the sufficiency of His grace. Contrariwise, just so far as the tried Christian turns from God to self or the creature for help, will he discover how worthless it is to lean upon an arm of flesh. It is thus "by reason of use" that we learn to have our "senses exercised to discern both good and evil" (Heb. 5:14).

Third, by "sense" is meant those deep and blessed impressions on the soul, over and above the light of faith or knowledge by ordinary experiences. Such impressions truly are sense rather than knowledge, as all find who are favoured with them. They are therefore said to "pass knowledge" (Eph. 3:19) and are entitled "the peace of God which passeth all understanding" (Phil. 4:7). The same is hinted at in Romans 5. First, the believer through being justified by faith, has peace with God (v. 1). Later, his passing through tribulations develops his graces; patience is strengthened, hope is kindled, "and hope maketh not ashamed, because the love of God is shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Spirit" (v. 5). This assurance of God's love, then, is not apprehended so much by knowledge, as it is shed abroad--not in the understanding, but in the heart! So too "Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see Him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory" (1 Peter 1:8): a high and heavenly sense of Christ is what is meant--compare John 14:21.

"That ye may approve things that are excellent" or (margin) "try things that differ" (Phil. 1:10). An increase in love, knowledge and sense issues in an enlarged ability in the understanding to discern, judge of, and approve spiritual things: there is more discretion to choose that which is best. What is here mentioned has reference to the capacity to detect counterfeits and contrary, with the additional idea of the judgment relishing, closing with and cleaving to that which is perceived to be good. The same term occurs again in "Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect, will of God" (Rom. 12:2)--i.e., not only discern the will of God in its truth from falsehood, in all the latitude of it, but approve it. There is a variety and vastness in the duties commanded (and the sins forbidden), and to discern this, especially the spiritual part of them, calls for much holiness of heart and discernment of mind.

As there is a double meaning to the term "approve" (discern and esteem), so the objects approved may be understood in a twofold way. First,

as "the things that are excellent," which agrees with "approve." Second, "things which differ" which corresponds to "try" or "discern" between good and evil. An increase of holiness in the heart enables the understanding to distinguish more readily between true and false doctrine, wherein so many go astray. Not only so, there is a choosing of and cleaving to the former, and a rejection of the latter. So very much depends upon the state of our hearts; where that is healthy and the understanding properly enlightened, there will be wisdom in matters doctrinal and prudence in matters practical. "I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil. 3:8) is the sure consequence of "love abounding yet more and more."

"That ye may be sincere" is the next consequence which follows from increasing holiness. Sincerity is opposed to what is counterfeit: "sincerity and truth" are joined together in 1 Corinthians 5:8. That is sincere which is genuine, right, true. "Sincere" (according to the derivation of our English word) means without mixture of wax; there is no pretense or mingling of the false with the true. In connection with piety, sincerity signifies a right intention Godwards. In 2 Corinthians 1:12 we read of "godly sincerity": a sincerity of which God is witness. It is joined there with "simplicity," which is explained in "if thine eye be single" (Matt. 6:22)--the same word. We cannot, as the whitewashed worldling desires, serve two masters or mix fleshly craftiness with spiritual purity. Sincerity, then, is uprightness of heart, purity in its motives, aiming solely at the pleasing and glorifying of God.

"And without offense till the day of Christ" (Phil. 1:10). The word for "offense" signifies the mistreadings, stumblings, and bruising of the feet in walking. As in "sincerity" the intention of the mind is compared to the ("single") eye, so our actions are likened unto steppings. To be "without offense" is to avoid such ways as would induce others to sin or be occasions of stumbling. It is to give no scandal. Second, it is to refrain from any action contrary to the principles we profess before others: hence we find Paul

blaming Peter and others for their departing from the Truth of the Gospel and "not walking uprightly" (Gal. 2:14). Third, it is to keep from anything contrary to that light which the conscience has received to walk by. Now in order to this blameless walk we need to "exercise" ourselves (Acts 24:16), and promptly confess and seek cleansing (1 John 1:9) wherein we have failed.

"Being filled with the fruits of righteousness" is the final issue of increased holiness. Now a tree is said to be full of fruit when all its branches are laden therewith; a Christian is full of fruit when all the faculties of his soul and members of his body are active in obedience to God. As there is a superfluity of evil flowing from the unregenerate, so there should be an abounding of goodness from the regenerate: "unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work" (Col. 1:10). One virtue is to be added to another: 2 Peter 1:5-7. To be holy "in all manner of conversation" (1 Peter 1:15) is the standard at which we must aim; and that, not occasionally and spasmodically, but at all times, and that unto the very end of our earthly course--"till the day of Christ."

"Which are by Jesus Christ unto the glory and praise of God. Those fruits are "by Jesus Christ," first, because of our union with Him, as branches in the Vine. Second, because their life is that of the Spirit, which we have received from Christ. Third, because they are performed by motives drawn from Christ and are patterned after the example He has left us. Fourth, because it is for His sake God accepts them. And they are unto the "glory and praise of God" so far as that is our aim in them. Here, then, is what we understand by "progressive sanctification" or increasing holiness: our love for God and His principle waxing stronger and stronger, directed by spiritual knowledge and confirmed by spiritual perception--the result being that we have an enlightened understanding to perceive more clearly the path of duty, a heart that rings true before God, and a walk that is without scandal; making us fruitful both inwardly and outwardly, thereby honouring Christ

and pleasing God. (For part of the above we are indebted to Thomas Goodwin).

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