

Biblical Sanctification - Part 4

(A Series from Terry Landrum)

To admire ourselves, as we are, is to have no wish to change. And with those who don't want to change, the soul is dead.

William Barclay (1907-1978)

Every time we say, "I believe in the Holy Spirit," we mean that we believe that there is a living God able and willing to enter human personality and change it.

J. B. Phillips (1906-1982)

As we have seen, the prerequisite for sanctification is the Holy Spirit's presence in the life of a regenerate person. Sanctification means change. It means more than learning what the Bible teaches. It involves personal change. If we hold a view that there is no possibility for genuine personality change, then that view is unscriptural. God's Word changes us. It changes our thinking, changes our decisions, and changes our behavior. The Scriptures everywhere anticipate change. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of change. Everywhere in the Bible, His activity is shown as the power behind the personality changes in God's people. Wherever the Holy Spirit's activity is demonstrated, people are changed. God says, "Grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." Where there is life there is growth and growth means change. Growth means maturation; it means refining our ideas and ways of doing things. Change for some of us is difficult to accept. Change is difficult because change means doing something new, something unusual, and something not done before. It usually means exchanging old habit patterns for new ones. Such change is a threat. However, we sin if we become a person who fears positive biblical change and clings to the past, either in our personality growth, in our life decisions, or in our manner of living. To resist sanctifying change is to resist and grieve the Holy Spirit. The scriptural doctrine of sanctification necessarily involves growth in holiness. We, Christians, must change in order to become more like Christ. Growth means changing into the fullness of the stature of Christ. In principle it is true that believers have been declared perfect in Christ, but now we must grow more like Christ in practice. (Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, pg 73-77)

God is in the business of changing lives. Every change that God promises is possible. Every quality that God requires in His redeemed children can be attained. Every resource that is needed God has supplied. Change is what the Christian ought to expect, ought to demand of himself, and ought to learn to live with. By the grace of God, a Christian should have every hope of change. (Adams, *Christian Counselor's Manual*, pg 29-30)

God intends for His children to be godly. It is clear that He wants us to be godly, since He orders us to discipline ourselves for godliness.

1 Tim 4:7-8

7 But have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women. On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness;

8 for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.

God's tells us to "be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16). When Paul writes that "we are a new creature, all things have become new," he is telling us that the Holy Spirit has oriented us towards God and His holiness, and He has put a new focus on our life. But that does not

automatically make us godly. Because of the work of Christ we have been counted perfect in God's sight, but in actuality, we are still far from the goal. Our problem is that although our basic orientation is new, many of our day-by-day practices are not yet oriented towards godliness. The "old man" is still our unwelcome companion.

Now, it is certain that we will never reach perfection in this life (1 John 1:8), but godliness is the goal toward which every believer must discipline himself and toward which he must move every day. This means becoming more like God Himself each day. The godly man leads a life that reflects God. We must please God by being, thinking, doing, saying, and feeling in the ways that He wants us to.

So, practically speaking, what does this involve?

Romans 12:2

2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 13:14

14 But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.

Ephesians 4:22-24

*22 that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit,
23 and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind,
24 and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.*

Colossians 3:10

10 and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him

James 1:21

21 Therefore putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.

Luke 9:23

23 And He was saying to them all, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.

Denying ourselves, taking up our cross daily, and following Jesus is how we become more like God Himself each day. When Jesus says "take up your cross daily," He does not mean denying ourselves something. He means denying the self. To be more specific, Jesus insists that we deny the self within ourselves. By the self, He meant our old desires, our old ways, our old practices, and our old habit patterns that we acquired before our conversion. These have become so much a part of our day-by-day practice that they have become our second nature. We were born sinners, but it took practice to develop our particular *styles* of sinning. Our old life was disciplined toward ungodliness. Daily denial of the self indicates the presence of a day-by-day battle inside of us. We must take up the cross as an instrument of death upon which to

crucify our self every day. Taking up the cross doesn't mean carrying some heavy burden. It is not enduring a trial. Taking up the cross means going to the place of death and putting to death the old life patterns of the old man. (Adams, *Godliness Through Discipline*, pg 7-8).

This is what Paul means when he says to "put off the old man." But that isn't enough. Whenever God says to "put off" He also says to "put on." On the positive side, each day we must also seek to "follow" Jesus. It means to continue to say "no" to self and to say "yes" to Christ every day until one by one all of the old habitual ways are replaced by new ones. Finally, we will find at length that doing so will become more natural to us than not doing so. (Adams, *ibid*, pg 8)

Now, we learned last week that the reason that we continue to sin, and to be frustrated with our sins, is that we still have an indwelling principle of sin in us that corrupts every part of us. This principle is referred to as "the flesh." Our flesh is in constant conflict with the Spirit of God and it represents everything within us that attempts to make life work apart from God. Our fleshly natures are always at war with God. It should come as no surprise, then, that when we begin to submit to the Holy Spirit as He works in our lives that our flesh is going to rise up and resist that work. This sin principal, which we are referring to here as "the flesh", wants to darken our understanding, dull our consciences, and twist our mind and affections against the will of God. This is why we need continual reminders to keep seeking the things above, and to set our minds on the things above, not on the things that are on earth (Col 3:1-2).

This is not some game that we are playing. This is spiritual warfare. The principal fight of the Christian is with the world, the flesh, and the devil. This is why the Scriptures tell us that

Rom 8:13

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.

1 Peter 2:11

11 Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul.

Gal 5:16-17

*16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.
17 For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.*

Gal 6:8

8 For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption,

Now, if we are going to wage war against "the flesh," then we need to know something about what it is. Scripture indicates that the seat of indwelling sin is the heart (see Mark 7:21-23; Gen 6:5; Luke 6:45). Heart in Scripture is used in various ways. Generally it denotes the mind as it reasons, discerns, and judges; the emotions as they like or dislike; the conscience as it determines and warns; and the will as it chooses or refuses. As all of these faculties work together in doing good or evil, they are referred to collectively as the "heart." The Bible tells us that the heart is deceitful and unsearchable to any but God alone (Jeremiah 17:9-10). Even as believers we do not know our own hearts (1 Cor 4:3-5). Our deceitful heart excuses,

rationalizes, and justifies our sinful actions. It blinds us to entire areas of sin in our lives. (Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness*, pp 63-69)

Indwelling sin generates lies and deceives our minds. Once our minds are deceived, then we are sure to sin. The seventeenth-century Puritan preacher John Owen describes this influence of deception on our minds.

The basis for the efficacy of deceit is its effect upon the mind. For sin deceives the mind. When sin attempts to enter into the soul by some other way (such as by the affections), the mind checks and controls it. But when deceit influences the mind, the chance of sinning multiplies. The mind is the leading faculty of the soul. When the mind fixes upon an object or course of action, the will and the affections follow suit. They are incapable of any other consideration. Thus, while the entanglement of the affections in sin is often very troublesome, it is the deceit of the mind that is always the most dangerous situation because of its role in all other operations of the soul. The mind's office is to guide, to direct, to choose, and to lead. "If therefore the light that is in us be darkness, how great is that darkness!" (Matt 6:23) (Owen, *Sin*, pp. 36-37)

This is why the renewing of our mind is so critical. If our mind is deceived, then the battle is lost. Knowing that indwelling sin occupies a heart that is deceitful and unsearchable should make us extremely wary. We need to ask God daily to search our hearts for sin that we cannot or will not see. This was David's prayer:

Ps 139:23-24

23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts;

24 And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way.

The more we sin, the more we are inclined to sin. John Owen expressed it this way, "Repeated acts of the consent of the will unto sin may beget a disposition and inclineableness of the will unto a proneness and readiness to consent unto sin upon easy solicitation." (Owen, *Temptation and Sin*, p 253). Every sin we commit reinforces our habits of sinning and makes it easier for us to sin. It is our will that ultimately makes us choose whether we will sin or obey. It is our will that chooses to yield to temptation, or to say no. It is our will that determines whether we will be holy or unholy in our character and conduct. It is important to understand how our wills function. (Bridges, *Pursuit of Holiness*, pp 131)

Owen said that the heart as used in the Bible generally denotes all the faculties of the soul as they work together in doing good or evil - the mind, the emotions, the conscience, and the will. These faculties were all implanted in us by God, and when God originally created man, the reason, emotions, and the will all worked in perfect harmony. Reason led the way in understanding the will of God, the will consented to God's will and the emotions delighted in doing it. However, these faculties were corrupted through man's fall in the Garden. Our reason (or understanding) was darkened (Eph 4:18), our desires were entangled (Eph 2:3), and our will was perverted (John 5:40). These faculties work at cross-purposes to one another and to God. Our wills have become stubborn and rebellious and won't consent to that which reason knows to be the will of God. Or, more commonly, our emotions get the upper hand and draw away both our reason and will from obedience to God. With our new birth our reason is again enlightened, our affections and desires are redirected, and our wills are subdued. But, remember, our experience of these things is a growing process. We are told to renew our minds (Rom 12:2), set our affections on things above (Col 3:1), and to submit our wills to God (James 4:7). (Ibid)

The point of all of this is to emphasize and help us to understand the interrelation of the mind, emotions, and the will. While our will is the ultimate determiner of all our choices, it never the less, is influenced by forces brought to bear against it. It may be the suggestions of Satan and his world system (Eph 2:2) or the evil enticements of our own sinful nature (James 1:14). Whatever source they come from, they reach our wills through either our reason or our emotions. Therefore, we must guard what enters our mind and what influences our emotions. I'll have more to say about this in future lessons. (Ibid)

In his books, *Competent to Counsel* and *The Christian Counselor's Manual*, Jay Adams states that our personalities are based on our past. Adams defines personality as the sum total of all that we are by nature and nurture. By nature, he means our inherited nature. By nurture, he means our learned habits. So what we are today is a composite of our past. At birth, God gave each of us a basic deposit of inherited stuff that Scripture calls *phusis* (nature). This is our genetic makeup. *Phusis* is not personality, since our personality includes learned behavior. Of importance to us in understanding sanctification is that while our *phusis* is genetic and largely unchangeable, we can change the ways in which we use our nature, and thus, we can change our personalities. Sinful response patterns are inevitable, because we are born at enmity with God, but the particular patterns developed and the particular styles of sinful expression are not; they are learned. Temperament, for instance, may be attributable to a given trait (e.g., I may have an inherited trait of persistence). But how this temperament develops and is used is my responsibility before God. For example, my trait of persistence may develop into stubbornness, hardheadedness, etc. Or, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, it may develop into patience and endurance. So, in this way, I am responsible even for my inherited nature. Therefore, how I use my *phusis* in responding to life's problems and life's challenges determines my personality. These response patterns may become deeply etched over a period of time. Our lifestyles and habit patterns may become so much a part of our personality and behavior that we confuse them with hereditary traits. At length, they may seem to be, as we say, "second nature," i.e., almost as "given" as the original *phusis*. Now, all of this is important to our study because if we are to learn how to make biblical changes, we must learn to stop confusing our learned behavior patterns with our inherited nature. (Jay Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, pp 74-75; *The Christian Counselor's Manual*, p 174)

As followers of reformed theology, we believe the Scriptures teach that man does not learn his responses as a passive, neutral being. Rather, from birth, man is an active, committed organism with a nature disposed toward sin because he is at enmity toward God. All of us are born with the same basic sinful heart, but each of us has a heart that demands to have its *own* way.

James 1:14

14 But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.

While all of us are born with certain natural desires of the body, such as food, water, and air, most of the rest of the things we desire are learned from our surroundings. They have been nurtured (i.e., taught from the earliest stages of life). For example, a baby comes out of the womb hungry (a natural bodily desire) but is not born with an innate desire for designer clothes or for a certain kind of music. The baby learns from his family, culture, and peers to want those things, as he or she grows older. These desires are called "desires of the flesh and of the mind" in Eph 2:3. They are created by the way we think. (Berg, *Changed Into His Image*, pp. 49-50)

This ability of man to learn to desire something can be illustrated by considering the field of advertising. Companies spend a lot of money teaching us that life will be happier, more

healthful, and more successful, etc., if we will only buy their products. If we begin thinking about the benefits of the product and begin to imagine ourselves possessing the product, then we probably will start desiring it. We can think about the product so much that we feel that we can't live life without it. Of course, that is exactly what the manufacturer wants us to think. Then it's only a small step from having a strong desire to buy something to actually making the decision to buy it. Fortunately, desires that are learned can be unlearned. For example, fashions that were desired by teens a decade ago are no longer desired by today's teens. The desires changed when the thinking changed about the importance or desirability of the fashion. (Ibid)

As we look around us, we will notice that not everyone seems to have the same *own way*. In James 1:14, the Greek word translated "own" is a word from which we get our English word "idiosyncrasy." Idiosyncrasy is something that is peculiar or unique to an individual. Although every temptation that a believer can experience is "common to man" (1 Cor 10:13), our lusts or strong desires are uniquely our own in their strength and combinations. They are as uniquely ours as our fingerprints. What this means is that the rebellion of our own way manifests itself differently in each of us. That is why we can observe someone whose own way is different from ours and wonder, "How could someone do something like that? It doesn't make any sense." It doesn't make sense to us, but it makes perfect sense to the other person. (Ibid)

Everyone is a unique mixture of strengths and weaknesses. When warning his readers about the propensity of their heart to certain temptations, John Owen wrote,

It is not enough to watch our circumstances to detect the times of temptation. We must also watch our heart to know when temptation might approach us. We need to know our own heart, our natural disposition, and the lusts, corruptions, and spiritual weaknesses that beset us. Our Savior told the disciples, "Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of" (Luke 9:55). They had ambition and the desire for revenge. Had they known it, they would have watched themselves. David tells us he considered his ways and kept himself from the iniquity to which he was prone (Psalm 18:23).

Just as people have differing and distinctive personalities, so they are also affected by distinctive temptations. These relate to their nature, education, and other factors. Unless we are conscious of these propensities, relationships, and dynamic possibilities, temptation will constantly entangle us. This is why it is so important to know ourselves - our temperaments and our attitudes. If people did not remain strangers to themselves, they would not maintain all their lives in the same paralyzed state. But they give flattering names to their own natural weaknesses. They try to justify, palliate, or excuse the evils of their own hearts, rather than uproot and destroy them ruthlessly. They never gain a realistic view of themselves. Ineffective lives and scandal grow like branches out of this root of self-ignorance. How few truly seek to know themselves, or possess the courage to do so. (Owen, sin, 130-132)

We should study our sinful desires and how they rise up against us. Owen said, "To labor to be acquainted with the ways, wiles, methods, advantages, and occasions of the success of sin, is the beginning to this warfare." (Owen, Temptation and Sin, p.31)

John MacArthur writes in the Introduction to his book, *How to Meet the Enemy - Arming Yourself for Spiritual Warfare*,

"Some Christians are materialists who fail to understand that the Christian life is a fierce spiritual battle. One reason for a materialistic attitude is indifference. When your world is an easy place to live in, it's easy to forget that a spiritual war is going on. It's easy to forget that millions of souls in the world are in the grasp of Satan. And it's easy to forget that Satan always takes advantage of Christians who are lethargic, indolent, or spiritually stagnant. He loves it when Christians try to hole up in a sanctified environment instead of fighting the battle. . . . People are trying desperately to enjoy fellowship while remaining indifferent to the battle. Another reason for being materialistic is worldliness. Too many Christians crave earthly, temporal pleasures instead of the rigors of warfare. They seek a life of ease - a life of entertainment and activities, never realizing their role in the battle of the ages. A believer who invests his or her resources in mundane things won't understand spiritual warfare. . . .It's vital that we take spiritual inventory by asking, *Am I making a difference in the fight?*"

Conclusion

From time to time, lobsters have to leave their shells in order to grow. They need the shell to protect them from being torn apart, yet when they grow, the old shell must be abandoned. If they did not abandon it, the old shell would soon become their prison--and finally their casket. The tricky part for the lobster is the brief period of time between when the old shell is discarded and the new one is formed. During that terribly vulnerable period, the transition must be scary to the lobster. Currents gleefully cartwheel them from coral to kelp. Hungry schools of fish are ready to make them a part of their food chain. For a while at least, that old shell must look pretty good. We are not so different from lobsters. To change and grow, we must sometimes shed our shells--a structure, a framework--we've depended on. Discipleship means being so committed to Christ that when he bids us to follow, we will change, risk, grow, and leave our "shells" behind. Brent Mitchell in *Fresh Illustrations for Preaching & Teaching* (Baker)