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LIFE IN THE SPIRIT (Part III)

How do we understand spirituality? What is it? What makes a person spiritual? One of the most common misconceptions in our day, especially with the New Age emphasis, is that spirituality is a matter of being in touch with one's own inner being, i.e., a deep sense of self-consciousness. In this context an interest in spirituality turns out to be nothing more than a fascination with ourselves![1] Many Christians have an equally unbiblical view of spirituality – a view that links spirituality directly to *feelings,* an inwardness of experience.[2] One of the more disturbing trends in much of contemporary Evangelicalism is its willingness to heavily accent the sensate and subjective dimension over against the cognitive and objective side of Christianity. The very real danger here is that this leads to a decidedly unbalanced mystical understanding of spirituality. In light of this, David Wells issues this sober warning: "The day will shortly be upon us when evangelical spirituality will become indistinguishable from New Age spirituality."[3] In the Bible, *spirituality* is always associated with *holiness,* and holiness *only* comes from the Holy Spirit. "Holy living," writes MacArthur, does not come from *our* performance for God but from *His* performance through us by His own Spirit."[4] Holiness is the fruit of the Spirit, displayed as the Christian walks by the Spirit. "Holiness," says Packer, "is consecrated closeness to God."[5]

The answer to the first question of Westminster Shorter Catechism, "What is the chief end of man? *To glorify God and enjoy Him forever,"* will be the focus of this series of messages that will address the doctrine of sanctification. Princeton sociologist and insightful culture observer, Robert Wuthnow (who is an evangelical), has noted how Americans have an overt tendency to psychologize life, and this in turn has had a direct impact on how the church functions. "At one time theologians argued that the chief purpose of humankind was to glorify God. Now it would seem that the logic has been reversed: the chief purpose of God is to glorify humankind. Spirituality no longer is true or good because it meets absolute standards of truth or goodness, but because it helps me get along. I am the judge of its worth. If it helps me find a vacant parking space, I know my spirituality is on the right track. If it leads me into the wilderness, calling me to face dangers I would rather not deal with at all, then it is a form of spirituality I am unlikely to choose."[6] In other words, "the triumph of the therapeutic" has triumphed not only in the culture at large, but also within the professing Christian Church as well. Evangelicals gladly exchanged the language of the Bible and theology for the language of contemporary psychology. What has this to do with sanctification? Cornelius Plantinga shows us the link. "Why retrieve the awareness of sin? Why restate the Christian doctrine of sin? The reason is that although traditional Christianity is true, its truth saws against the grain of much in contemporary culture and therefore needs constant sharpening. Christianity's major doctrines need regular restatement so that people may believe them, or believe them anew. Its classic awarenesses need to be evoked so that people may have them, or have them again. Recalling and confessing our sin is like taking out the garbage: once is not enough. But anyone who tries to recover the knowledge of sin these days must overcome long odds. To put it mildly, modern consciousness does not encourage moral reproach; in particular, it does not encourage self-reproach. Preachers mumble about sin. The other traditional custodians of moral awareness often ignore, trivialize, or evade it. Some of the evasions take time and training. As sociologist James Davison Hunter has observed, schoolteachers no long say anything as pointed as, "Stop it, please! You're disturbing the class!" For these are judgmental words. Instead, to a strong-armed

youth who is rattling classroom windows with his tennis ball, educationally-correct teachers put a sequence of caring questions: "What are you doing? Why are you doing it? How does this make you feel?" The word *sin,* Hunter adds, now finds its home mostly on dessert menus. "Peanut Butter Binge" and "Chocolate Challenge" are sinful; lying is not. The new measure for sin is caloric."[7] As Christians, we desperately need to recover the language of Scripture and the biblical meaning of such terms as *sin, justification,* and *sanctification.* God commands us to "be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy" (Lev. 19:2). This is not just an Old Testament exhortation. We find the same language in the New Testament. "Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: *Be holy, because I am holy*" (1 Pet. 1:15-16). This series aims to be more than just a theological analysis. The power of indwelling sin presents each of us with practical problems that directly affect how we live. At the same time, however, we need more than just good advice that is rooted in how we feel about ourselves. Frank Allred writes, "Without a keen awareness of our sinful condition and our natural helplessness to do anything that is pleasing to God, a life of holiness is impossible. The reason for this is twofold. *First,* as we have just seen, the motivation for holy living springs from a love for God – love that is bourne out of a deep sense of our indebtedness to his grace and mercy. *Second,* our ability to please him depends on our recognition that we can do nothing without daily supplies of his grace. As long as we have confidence in ourselves and in our own ability to do what God requires, we shall make no progress in holiness. The prevailing tendency to go soft on sin therefore is a serious hindrance to our understanding of holiness. The idea seems to be these days that to be thoroughly biblical about the depravity of human nature does not commend the gospel nor encourage believers in the Christian life. Once again, the truth is the exact opposite. Only when unbelievers realize their desperate condition will they seek the Lord, and only when believers recognize that nothing good lives in their sinful nature (Romans 7:18) will they seek God's grace to live holy lives. Self-confidence is the enemy of Christian holiness.[8]

I. ***WHAT IS SANCTIFICATION? SOME IMPORTANT OBSERVATIONS.*** Our English word *sanctify* comes from two Latin words (*sanctus,* holy; and *facere*, to make) – "to make holy." What does "holy" mean? The Old Testament word *qādosh* and the New Testament word *hagios* imply separation and consecration. The doctrine of sanctification is concerned with the *pollution* of sin.

NOTE: It is important to note that the *guilt* of sin (that state of deserving condemnation or of being liable to punishment because we have violated God's law) is dealt with in justification, though justification and sanctification must never be separated. These are, however, two distinct things. Anthony Hoekema makes these helpful remarks: "The following differences between justification and sanctification should be recognized:

(a) Justification removes the guilt of sin, whereas sanctification removes the pollution of sin and enables the believer to grow in his or her likeness to Christ.

(b) Justification takes place outside the believer and is a declaration made by God the Father about his or her judicial or legal status. Sanctification, however, takes place within the believer and progressively renews his or her nature.

(c) Justification takes place once and for all and is neither a process nor a repeated event. Sanctification, however, as it is usually understood, is a process that continues throughout life and is not completed until after this life is over. Why is it important to maintain these distinctions? First, to do full justice to biblical teaching on these soteriological blessings. Further, to maintain the truth that justification means the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to the believing sinner wholly apart from that believer's deeds – that, in other words, our justification is based solely on the suffering and obedience of Jesus Christ, and not one whit on our own good works.[9] Second, and equally important, to blur the two leads to numerous errors. James White explains, "Many errors about the work of God in salvation could be avoided if everyone would recognize one fact: Justification, while intimately connected to sanctification (both are actions of God's free grace), is a separate divine act, with a differing time frame of operation. That is, while it is completely true that everyone who is justified will also be sanctified (made experientially holy – conformed to the image of Christ, made more like Him through growth in grace and the knowledge in Christ) it is likewise just as true that justification must be distinguished from

sanctification. If it is not, tremendous errors result, for inevitably this wrong view results in a confusion of the experience of sanctification with the ground upon which all of the work of God rests, the perfect sacrificial work of Christ on Calvary."[10]

II. ***THE EXHORTATION TO WALK BY THE SPIRIT.*** The Apostle clearly assumes that the Christian will always be active in the formation of personal godly habits and in the desire to be more Christlike.

A. ***The Command (5:16).*** The word translated "walk" (NASB), or "live by" (NIV), is *peripateō* and is used in the imperative present tense and shows that Paul is not exhorting them to do what they have not done before; bur rather, as Guthrie notes, "he urges them to *keep on walking by the Spirit."*[11] Note the promise[12] that is given to those who walk by the Spirit, "You shall not gratify the desires of the flesh."

NOTE: Paul does *not* say that we will be free from any sinful inclination – only that the Spirit-led walk will keep us from *fulfilling* the desires of our sinful natures. This is *not* a promise of perfectionism. Listen to the words of B. B. Warfield: "The Apostle Paul says, *the flesh lusts against the Spirit, the Spirit, however, lusts against the flesh* (Gal. v. 17). The assertion applies to us, to Christians. We may be preserved now from many actual sins, if we let ourselves be led by the Spirit of God. But so long as we are involved in this body of death the old man does not cease to stir or to move. We have every reason to *walk in the Spirit,* he does not add the conclusion, *and then you will have nothing more to do with the lusts of the flesh,* but *and then you will not* ***fulfil*** *the lusts of the flesh.* There is no longer need to fall into the gross works of the flesh and there should be no falling into them. But the impulse and the provocation to do so remain in our sinful nature, and therefore the necessity of conflict and of watchfulness abides. And therefore there abides the petition: *Forgive us our trespasses."*[13]

B. ***The Cause (5:17).*** The struggle is a real one – and that is why we *need* to walk by the Spirit. Apart from the Sirit, the desires or strong urging of our sinful natures would go uncontested. Note here that Paul teaches that our inner spirit *apart from the indwelling Holy Spirit* is also part of our sinful nature. We do not naturally possess the power to resist sin (Romans 8:7). "The human spirit in itself and unaided does not stand in direct antagonism to the flesh."[14]

C. ***The Consequences (5:18***). Again, note Paul's assumption – *all* believers are led of the Spirit; it is their birthright (cf. Romans 8:9-17). Since they are led by the Spirit, they are *not* under the law. This is one of the contrasting themes of the book of Galatians. Paul has repeatedly sought to demonstrate that these are incompatible. To be under the law is to be under its curse (cf. 3:13), bondage (cf. 3:22, 25; 4:1-3), impotence and spiritual death (cf. 3:21). If man has only the law, he is defenseless against the sinful nature. Those who walk by the Spirit learn to obey God with a gladness of heart that is the produce of the Holy Spirit.

CONCLUSION: In Galatians 5:16-18 and in Romans 8:14, the Apostle Paul speaks of being *led* by the Spirit of God. In both passages this leading has to do, *not* with personal guidance (discerning God's will), but to resisting our own sinful inclinations. "*Leads* is rightly taken to mean *guides,* but the guidance in view here is not a revealing to the mind of divine directives hitherto unknown; it is, rather, an impelling of our wills to pursue and practice and hold fast that sanctity whose terms we know already. Thus to be led and guided, says Paul, is the mark of a Christian."[15] Sanctification is a subject that sadly many churches (and individual Christians) have little, if any, interest in. A profound shift has occurred, not only in our society but in our churches as well. This can be seen in a number of areas: Seeker churches (the user-friendly model) for instance, intentionally design new and contemporary forms of worship, not in order to be consciously biblical, but to mirror the musical and cultural preferences of the society at large. The innovations do not stop there. These churches do not claim to have rejected historic evangelical theology (they insist most emphatically that they are Bible-believing evangelicals), but they have repackaged it to fit the likes and dislikes of so-called seekers. One area where this is most apparent is in the area of felt-needs – one that especially centers on the self. The glorification of the self, or at least the preoccupation with the self, is

obviously appealing to the therapeutic mentality in modern America. As Phillip Rieff has observed, "[The] self, improved, is the ultimate concern of modern culture." Perhaps the best-known promoter of this is the late Robert Schuller (who was the most watched religious figure on TV). At the heart of Schuller's translation project is the concept of self-esteem. Schuller argues in *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* (Word, 1982) that Reformational theology – the foundation of Protestantism and the basis of evangelical faith – is "imperfect." Reformational theology has failed because it is "too heavy a theology." It has placed "theocentric communication above the meeting of the deeper emotional and spiritual needs of humanity." As evidence, Schuller argues that the traditional theological definition of sin as rebellion against God "is not incorrect as much as it is shallow and insulting to the human being." And I, rather than insulting the people, believe the church should build people's self-esteem because, "at the core of sin is lack of self-esteem." The theology of self-esteem is "based on a solid central core of religious truth – the dignity of man." The ultimate dignity for mankind is to receive salvation, which means "to be permanently lifted from sin (psychological self-abuse with all of its consequences) and shame to self-esteem and its God-glorifying, human need-meeting, constructive and creative consequences." In contrast, "a person is in hell when he lost his self-esteem." In the name of defending Christian theology, Schuller has managed to subjectivize it thoroughly, explicitly shifting its focus from God to the human craving for self-worth. In this schema, sin is not an objective condition of human nature that leads to separation from God, but is instead a type of psychological deficit. Schuller's preoccupation with the therapeutic is common within the evangelical world. James Hunter has documented the extent to which evangelicalism has embraced therapeutic understandings of the self, which are based on the assumption that "the attention the self is receiving is legitimate and that the self, as the repository of human emotions and subjectivity, has intrinsic and ultimate worth and significance." Additionally, this evangelical fixation with the self amounts to a "fundamental assault" on the inner-worldly asceticism of an earlier evangelical tradition. David Wells cites Schuller as the epitome of a minister "riding the stream of modernity." By banishing the word "sin" from the Crystal Cathedral, by insisting that we do not sufficiently esteem ourselves, by telling us, in effect, "don't worry, be happy," Schuller is "offering in easily digestible bites the therapeutic model of life through which the healing of the bruised self is found." The principle problem with the therapeutic model of the self, according to Wells, is that, even when draped in religious terminology, it is based on an assumption about "the perfectibility of human nature . . . [which] is anathema to the Christian gospel." Similarly, Rieff argues that the modern commitment to "the gospel of self-fulfillment" represents a profound break with, rather than reformulation of, historic faiths, specifically Judaism and Christianity. "All attempts at connecting the doctrines of psychotherapy with the old faiths," warns Rieff, "are patently misconceived." Thus, Schuller's insistence that developing people's self-esteem is the primary mission of the church is at odds with historic Protestant theology. By "riding the stream of modernity," Schuller demonstrates how Christian practices, if informed primarily by assumptions drawn from non-Christian sources like psychotherapy, can alter Christian theology.[16] Self-satisfaction or having a keen sense of self-worth or self-esteem is *not* what the Bible means by sanctification! Growing in grace does *not* mean learning to love and accept yourself! In order to understand (and experientially come to know) what the Scriptures mean by sanctification, we will have to replace these popular psychological and false notions with Biblical and theological ones. Once of my former professors, Sinclair Ferguson, has written, "One of our greatest needs is for the ability rightly to discern some of the directions in which evangelicalism is heading, or, perhaps more accurately, disintegrating. We desperately need the long-term perspective that the history of the church gives us. Even within the period of my own Christian life, the span between my teenage years in the 1960s and my forties in the 1990s, there has been a sea-change on evangelicalism. Many *positions* that once were standard evangelical teaching are now, after only three decades, regarded as either reactionary or even prehistoric."[17] May God grant to us discernment. May He enable us to be diligent in our study of sanctification, and may He cause us to grow in grace.

ENDNOTES

[1] The actress Shirley MacLaine, for example, sees no distinction between God and herself. Cf. *Going Within: A Guide for Inner Transformation* (Bantam Books, 1989), p. 100.
[2] This is very common in Pentecostal and Charismatic circles, cf. the comments of Pentecostal Russell P. Spittler, "The Pentecostal View" in *Christian Spirituality,* ed. D. L. Alexander (IVP, 1988), p. 141. Kenneth E. Hagin is representative of the Word of Faith cult that teaches a gnostic understanding of spirituality and has more in common with the New Age than with traditional Pentecostalism, cf. his *How You Can Be Led by the Spirit of God* (Faith Library, 1980).
[3] David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Eerdmans, 1994), p. 222.
[4] *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Galatians* (Moody, 1987), p. 152.
[5] J. I. Packer, *Keep In Step With the Spirit* (Revell, 1984), p. 96.
[6] R. Wuthnow, "Small Groups Forge New Notions of Community and The Sacred," *Christian Century* (Dec. 8, 1993), p. 1239.
[7] C. Plantinga, Jr. *Not The Way It's Supposed To Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Eerdmans, 1996), p. X.
[8] F. Allred, *The Eclipse of the Gospel* (Grace publications, 2001), p. 187.
[9] A. A. Hoekema, *Saved By Grace* (Eerdmans, 1989), p. 178.
[10] J. White, *The God Who Justifies* (Bethany House, 2001), p. 88.
[11] Donald Guthrie, *Galatians: The New Century Bible Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1974), p. 135.
[12] "The RSV," observes F. F. Bruce, "mistakenly translates the clause as a negative command: *do not ratify the desires of the flesh.* The words rather express a promise, which will be realized in those who walk by the Spirit." *New International Greek Testament Commentary on Galatians* (Eerdmans, 1982), p. 243.
[13] *The Works of B. B. Warfield* VIII (rpt. Baker, 1981), p. 230.
[14] J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (MacMillan, 1869), p. 206.
[15] Packer, op. cit., p. 118.
[16] These citations in this section are taken from K. H. Sargeant, *Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way* (Rutgers Univ. Press, 2000), p. 103.
[17] S. Ferguson, "Repentance, Recovery, and Confession" *Here We Stand: A Call From Confessing Evangelicals* (Baker, 1996), p. 136.