

Sermon 44: Romans 6:12b: The Operation of the Spirit in Holiness

OUTLINE

Philippians 2:12-13

The natural ways of the supernatural

INTRODUCTION

How many of you have heard the phrase, 'Let go and let God'? This one liner has been used as a magic law that has been applied to every situation in life. If you worried about the salvation of your child, we are told to 'let go and let God.' If we are having financial troubles we are told, 'let go and let God.' Are you wondering about how to plan your future, 'let go and let God.' This little one liner is found on coffee cups and cards in Christian book shops, but it is a dangerous and wrong solution to these problems. Likewise the 'let go and let God' philosophy has also been applied to becoming holy. Do you want to be holy? Are you seeking to put addiction behind you? This strange and esoteric one liner finds itself in our counsels. The wrong assumption in this saying is that God is 100% active when we are 100% passive. That God only works when we are not working. The wrong thinking in this notion is that God does not use means to accomplish His will. And this is wrong thinking. If you are worried about your child's salvation don't do nothing, pray, seek opportunities to speak with them, encourage them to read their bibles, etc. There are many things that we can do that God has appointed to bring about a person's salvation. If you are having financial troubles then do some practical things like draw up a budget, seek financial advice, consolidate your debts, get a job, etc. Don't do nothing do something. Do those things that are your responsibility and leave the consequences to God.

Today we are continuing in our discussion of Romans 6:12 about letting sin not reign in us. Today I have the task of uprooting some weeds, some wrong ways of thinking that are floating about popular Christian thinking that are in error and are no help in calling to be holy. Today I want to show us how the path to holiness is not a passive 'let go and let God' path, but rather that the Holy Spirit uses and works in our efforts to bring about holiness. I want to destroy some of those wrong notions of how we become holy by helping us understand how the Spirit works in our lives, and with our own efforts and cooperation. I want to take our time to establish two things today. First, we are going to look at a key text that shows us that holiness comes by the Spirit and us both working 100%. Second, I want to show that the way of growing the supernatural fruits of the Spirit is by normal and natural means.

Philippians 2:12-13

'Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.'

Our key verse in the first part is Philippians 2:12-13. These are well known verses and give us the biblical answer to the question, 'who does what in our holiness?' Paul is writing to the Philippian church from prison. They are a little concerned and discouraged. In part because they are suffering from some false teachers and divisions, but also because of Paul's imprisonment. In these verses he is urging them on to live the holy Christian life despite their discouragements. We see that they have been walking a road of obedience until now and he does not want them to come to a halt but to go on in holiness. Even though he cannot be there to help them, they have something better: they have God helping them working in them to both will and do. We see Paul calling upon them to 'work out their salvation with fear and trembling.' Some have mistook these words to mean that Paul is calling on the Philippians to earn their salvation by works, but a closer analysis will show that they are already saved, and must now continue on in their salvation. In other words, they have been justified by being made righteous in God's sight by the imputation of Christ's righteousness, but now they must cooperate with the Spirit's sanctifying efforts into conforming us into Christ's image. This is the aspect of our salvation that Paul is referring to. But notice the word work. I need to stress this as my goal for this message is to vanquish all notions of passivity in holiness. He tells us about the attitude with which we are to work, 'fear and trembling.' Now this is another phrase that has been misunderstood, when one first reads it you get the impression that you are supposed to work as if heaven depends on your efforts and you should tremble and shake in fear of hell if you don't work hard enough. The truth is that the phrase 'fear and trembling' was common coinage to talk about humility. We see this in Eph 6:5, 'Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ.' Fear and trembling means with respect and humility.

V13 is the verse that we are most concerned to look at, as it gives the motivation why the Philippians should continue to obey and work at their holiness. 'For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.' Here is how holiness happens: it is a case of God by His Spirit working in us 100%. He does the regenerating work so that we are new creatures in Christ with a new set of desires. And He is constantly at work in us to bring about the image of Christ in us. He is tireless and more earnest than we are in this pursuit. He prompts our minds, He shapes our characters, He illuminates our understanding, He tends our wills, He convicts of sin, He enthuses us with joy inexpressible. In many different ways the Spirit is working in our hearts both a hunger for holiness and the strength to do it. He is the catalyst, the one who starts the reaction, it is for this reason that the Christian credits God with every good deed and thought, all holiness has its root in His working in our lives.

As some have seen this truth they have become imbalanced and thought to themselves, 'Well, if God is doing it then I don't have to.' In fact there is a brand of holiness teaching called Keswick teaching that taught that we receive sanctification in the same way in which we receive justification, by faith, all you have to do in sanctification is receive it. But this is fundamentally flawed. This resulted in a pattern of waiting for Jesus to nail certain sins to the cross and not working at sanctification. Justification and sanctification are both by grace, but where we receive the free gift of unearned righteousness by faith in justification;

in sanctification we are to cooperate with the prevenient grace of God to see results. Sanctification and justification are both by grace, and both do it in dependence upon God by faith, but sanctification includes our efforts to bring about the results. For this reason Paul states that there is a working and willing in us that is affected by the Spirit. We don't not will, or not work, we do both but only because He has first worked them in us.

This verse has been confusing to many because we tend to think of these willing issues in terms of the laws of matter, matter replaces matter and you can't have two objects inhabiting the same space. SO likewise people think that either it is God willing and working, or me, but it can't be both. But this is exactly what Paul is saying, it is a case of both and, not either or. Here is a quote from John Murray:

"And no text sets forth more succinctly and clearly the relation of God's working to our working. God's working in us is not suspended because we work, nor our working suspended because God works. Neither is the relation strictly one of co-operation as if God did His part and we did ours so that the conjunction or coordination of both produced the required results. God works in us and we also work. All working out of salvation on our part is the effect of God's working in us, not the willing to the exclusion of the doing and not the doing to the exclusion of the willing, but both the willing and the doing. And this working of God is directed to the end of enabling us to will and to do that which is well pleasing to Him. We have here not only the explanation of all acceptable activity on our part but we also have the incentive to our willing and working. What the apostle is urging is the working out of our own salvation, and the encouragement he supplies is the assurance that it is God Himself who works in us. The more persistently active we are in working, the more persuaded we may be that all the energizing grace and power is of God."¹

Paul reflects this perspective in 1 Cor 15:10, "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me." This would be a vain brag but for the fact we know who he really thinks is the source of his good works.

Various errors have been made as Christians have considered God's working. When God's actions in electing and saving souls has received one sided attention hyper-Calvinism has emerged and we want to cast off responsibility in evangelism. When too much attention has been given to God's working in this world by providence we see no place for prayer and cease to be active. When we focus on the side that God does in our holiness to the neglect of our responsibility we will also run into error and the passive notion of 'let go and let God.' Let me say that you will not fully be able to comprehend the full mechanics of the situation in how God is at work within us as the catalyst and yet includes us in our activities to fully bring about our holiness. These truths have been revealed not so much that you can penetrate to the depth all the workings of God's Spirit, but rather for your encouragement.

¹ Redemption Accomplished and Applied 148-9.

These verses are intended to encourage you in the face of external discouragements, to show you that you can move forward as God works by His power within you.

The natural ways of the supernatural

If I were to give you a multiple choice question about how are we made holy with these following options which would you choose?

We grow in holiness in our sleep? We grow in holiness when we have hands laid on us in front of the church? We grow in holiness through a crisis experience of offering our whole selves in total consecration? We grow in holiness by receiving it by faith? We grow in holiness when we let go and let God? We grow in holiness through the habitual use of the means of grace? We grow in holiness when we have our own personal Pentecosts and are Baptised in the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues?

We do not grow in our sleep like our physical bodies do, this would support the passive approach to holiness. We are not dependant on altar calls or the laying on of hands, or the occasional ministry of someone to us in a church for holiness because the Holy Spirit lives in us. The ordinary mode of growing in holiness is not in a crisis experience of total consecration that will make all of our efforts in holiness simple. Holiness is not had by an act of faith in asking Jesus to crucify us, or simply letting go and letting God. Nor is the Pentecostal/Charismatic experience of baptism in the Spirit the ordinary way of growth. No in fact the real way in which the Spirit works is much more boring than all of those interesting notions. Growth in holiness comes from the long habitual use of the ordinary means of God's grace. The two extremes that need to be avoided in our view of holiness is the passive view of doing nothing, and the quick fix view of seeing a sudden miraculous silver bullet in some technique.

Firstly, lets talk about the ordinary means that God uses to cause us to grow. God uses the mind to grow us in holiness, that as we grow in our understanding, the Spirit uses those truths to shape and mould us into Christ's image. Col 3:9-10, 'Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.' Jesus washes His church with the ministry of the Word, and by the preaching of the Word, as well as the pictorial word in the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and even as we sing to one another in psalms hymns and spiritual songs. As we fill up on the word, we are giving ammunition to the Spirit to reveal God's will to us, to convict our consciences, to overthrow wrong philosophies that have taken us captive to bad behaviours, to fill us with a gratitude that results in willing obedience because of God's great grace towards us. However, it is not only the Bible but our interaction with God in prayer that transforms us as well, 2 Cor 3:17-18, 'Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.' Transformation into Christ's image is holiness, and this happens when we pray. It was for this reason that Jesus told His disciples to watch and pray in the garden of

Gethsemane, for the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak, and it is in prayer that we experience the power to change.

These ordinary things like going to church, listening to preaching, praying, reading through your bible, these are despised these days. Now we see promotions of retreats, spiritual counsellors, deliverance sessions, Christian psychologists, seminars and how to books, but really we don't need these things if we have the basics.

The next thing we need to emphasize is that the Spirit causes us to grow in holiness, not overnight but over a long period of time as we habitually employ the means of grace. This is something that shouldn't surprise us. If we think about any area where a person progresses whether it is playing a musical instrument, mastering a language, dancing, painting. All of these skills were developed over a period of time, it is the same with our holiness. When you plant a fruit tree, if it is a mango tree it will take 7 years before it bears fruit, an apple tree about 4 years. The fruit does not come overnight.

Regeneration/new birth has been described as a new principle entering our lives to influence us for good and bear the fruit of holiness. It has been compared with a tree that has had a branch from another fruit tree grafted onto it. So if you had a wild pear tree, and now you have grafted on a new pear tree that will yield delicious fruit, this is very much like the Christian life of bearing fruit in holiness. Since we are the gardener of the tree it is our job to tend it. So we make sure that it is watered, that is getting sufficient sunshine, that we have sprayed for pests, that we have fertilized the soil, that we have removed any encroaching weeds, and we have pruned off the branches of the original tree so that the sap of the tree will feed the new branch and bear fruit. We all start well, but the trick is to keep up the discipline of tending the tree, of not growing negligent or impatient. The means of grace in the Word, prayer, church, etc are the various things we use to tend the tree, the pruning is the removing of the old habits and ways of doing things, they will continue to bud and seek to put out new branches but we will always as long as the tree is alive trim off the native buds and force the sap of the tree to nurture the new branch that has been grafted in. Our part in holiness consists in constantly pruning off the old tree, and nurturing the life of the tree with the right foods. God will then cause the growth and we will see marvellous fruits result.

The thing that I am arguing for is not revolutionary at all. I am seeking to remove any mystique from holiness and show you that it boils down, at least on your part to constant hard work. And you can be encouraged from what we have been seeking to establish over these past weeks that the power to bear the fruit is resident within us due to our being united with Christ, that progress can be made due to the fact that the Old man has been crucified, and if we will work applying ourselves to those means that God has provided, with patience and perseverance we will see long term results in fruit. There are no short cuts, no quick fixes and no silver bullets.

How does this look in real life?

Let me begin by addressing the kids in school. If you are a Christian who has come to faith in Christ you are this young and tender branch. As you go into school each day you are coming into contact with various poisons—encouragements to sin from the media, diseases—sinful lifestyles that have taken root in the lives of others you encounter, and large weeds—unsaved people who are quick growing in sin that threaten to choke out the light and drain your soil of its nutrients. As you seek to grow in holiness as a child in a school setting what do you have to do? How will you employ habit and the means of grace to accomplish Spirit wrought growth?

Well, you need the water and the sunshine of the Word and prayer. You need to read your Bible and come before God in prayer because the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. You need to make sure that as you go to school that you do not make your closest friends those who do not share your faith otherwise you are inviting a weed to root itself right next to you and it has the position in your life to choke out the light. Now since you are a sinner who has been born again you still have the old nature, and you are constantly wanting to bring forth new branches that will bear forth sinful fruit. As you encounter many new situations where you are constantly tempted you will be seeing wrong patterns of behaviour developing, you need to nip those things in the bud, cut them off while they are young and don't allow them to become full grown and bear fruit. So you will have to read the Bible and pray before school and when you have family devotions where you are sitting around the dinner table reading the Bible and praying, don't roll your eyes wondering why your dull parents have dreamt up this most terrible form of torture, rather relish the time as an opportunity to be fed by God's Spirit just as you have been fed by the food you have just eaten. Reading the Bible once and praying once will not be sufficient just like one day's worth of water and sunshine will not suffice.

Paul uses three pictures of lifelong discipline to show Timothy how to cooperate with the grace at work within him, he speaks of the soldier, the athlete and the farmer. 2 Timothy 2:1-7, 'You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, 2 and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. 3 Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. 4 No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. 5 An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. 6 It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops. 7 Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.' No doubt these pictures are given to Timothy with their impact on the ministry in view, but the lifestyle of each is for every Christian. We are all to have a soldier's discipline in weathering bad working conditions and maintaining a professional attitude towards getting caught up in things that are not part of a soldier's discipline. We too are to train and compete as an athlete, and we too are to be the hard working farmer who must toil to see a harvest from his labours, but who is ultimately dependant on God for the results.

So what do we conclude? Holiness comes by effort, the blood, sweat and tears of a soldier, athlete and farmer. It incorporates all of our efforts in a pursuit of life long habits. Sow an action reap a habit, sow a habit reap a Christlike character. However, as we go about this

effort we are doing so with the confidence that the strength that is compelling us is Christ, the strength that sustains us is Christ, the one who adds the increase is Christ. It is because we are united with Christ that we will see these things develop a life of holiness in us. Throw out all passive notions of holiness and get disciplined applying yourself to those things that God uses to grow you. And throw out all superspiritual notions that reject God using the ordinary habits of our lives.