

Every Man Purifieth Himself

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves"—John 1:8.

No one, it would seem, would make that bare statement. We all are only too fully aware that we are far from sinless. But there is a kindred frame of mind that is perhaps more common and more deceptive. It is a form of self-satisfaction. It says, "We are doing as well as can be expected of us." In Bible words—

"We are rich, increased in goods, and have need of nothing."

This attitude can too easily indicate a total lack of comprehension of the whole purpose of life and condition of natural man. It isn't a case of just getting through life, like a routine to be done. Life must be regarded rather as an opportunity—not merely a duty. The span of our life is the period given us to accomplish certain definite results. These things, if our life is to be regarded as a success, must be done, and this is the only time in which they can be done.

We are born in a certain condition—with certain propensities, certain characteristics. In the aggregate these are known as the "flesh." There is nothing good or wholesome about them. They are unpleasing, unholy and unlovely—crude, selfish, earthy. That is our nature. It can be pleasant, but its pleasantness is of the thin and self-centered kind that vanishes when it is annoyed. It can love, but its love is rooted in self-gratification. Broadly speaking, where its own interests and pleasures and emotions are not concerned, it is thoughtless and heartless.

The world in general would not concur in this analysis. We ourselves would hesitate to express it if solely based upon our own observation. If we permit ourselves to be influenced by common opinion of the world's general self-approbation, we shall regard this view as hard and extreme, but if we fully accept the authority of God's Word, we must accept His appraisal of human nature.

This then is the foundation with which we start. This is the rough material with which we must work. But we are called from it to holiness, perfection and purity. A complete transformation from the ugly, repulsive, selfish thing we first discover ourselves to be, to a lovely, glorious likeness to the character of God. Not as a present achievement, but as the unceasing incentive of an ultimate goal.

And it is the apostle John whose name is most closely linked with the powerful agent that is to accomplish this transformation. That agent, of which John speaks so fully, is love. The greatest danger, it would seem, in regard to this subject, is misunderstanding, or not fully comprehending, what is scripturally meant by love.

It is not an emotion. It is a far bigger, better thing than that. It is a principle of life. It is the adoption, as the determining influence of every action, of the revealed divine viewpoint. God is love. Love is God. No definition of love is true which limits this conception. Love is godliness of character and action. Love is the enlightened expression of the mind of God. It is divinity. It is the antithesis of everything human, carnal and earthy.

Love is an expanding, uplifting influence, wholly pleasing and wholly satisfying, based on broad and eternal principles, with all the smallness and pettiness of human nature put away.

How does love transform us? We know that every thought leaves within us a permanent effect for good or evil. As individuals, we are merely the sum totals of all our thoughts. We cannot separate ourselves from them, because we are them—

"As he thinketh in his heart, so is he." (Prov. 23: 7).

Every thought leaves its actual, physical effect upon our constitution. Thoughts are the small units of construction of which our characters consists. Every good thought is beneficial and works toward the final desired result; every distracting thought is a useless impediment; every evil thought is a ruthless breaking down of what faith is laboring to build. Therefore we are told—

"Bring into captivity every thought" (2 Cor. 10:5).

Our thoughts, and consequently our speech and actions, are influenced by many things—our nature, people, and circumstances, among others. Slowly we are molded by these influences, and upon them our character depends. Of all the influences which bear upon us and form our character, there is only one which can benefit and improve us to any extent and that is the influence of God.

We cannot create goodness or holiness within ourselves. We become what we are made. But we can, to a determining extent, choose the influences which are to make us. That is our responsibility. We cannot be free. In the

nature of things, we must serve some master. If we choose sin or the world, we become its servants, its slaves, and it gradually shapes us to its hideous pattern of death.

But this is where love can play its saving part, and if submitted to, can mold us to the beauty of everlasting life. Love cannot be separated from God. Love is divinity and godliness—wisdom, holiness, purity, kindness and patience combined.

Above all, patience. Paul begins his analysis of love by saying, "Love suffereth long and is kind." Patience holds the keys. As long as patience holds open the door, all other virtues may and will develop. As soon as impatience closes it, all hope of peace or advancement is destroyed. John says—

"Every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as He is pure" (1 John 3:3).

And he continues:

"Little children, let no man deceive you—he that doeth righteousness is righteous."

What is John driving at? Is he not trying to impress us with the fact that our effort must show some tangible results?—that good intentions are not enough. There must be visible improvement—a steady growth of godly attributes and weakening of earthly ones.

"Unto him that overcometh" are promised many things but nothing for him that meant to overcome. We must overcome—we must advance. What was acceptable yesterday is not good enough today. Yesterday's goal must be today's starting point. "Therefore," says Paul (Heb. 6:1)—

"Leaving the first principles . . . let us GO ON to perfection."

It is a long way to perfection for the natural man. We have far to go and much to do. We must increase the talents entrusted to us. There was nothing but bitter condemnation for the servant who buried his lord's money in the earth. True, he kept it safely—but that is NOT ENOUGH. He didn't increase it. The warning is clear. There must be tangible RESULTS.

There is no excuse. We know the formula. We have only to make the effort to apply it. It is inevitable that we shall be molded and shaped by the influences with which we come in contact. It is a universal law. It is up to us to choose the influences wisely. WE CANNOT REMAIN UNCHANGED. Every experience and action has its effect, whether of death unto death or life unto life.

If we subject ourselves to the influence and thinking of the world, we shall bring forth fruit unto the world. It is a natural law of our constitution. If we subject ourselves to the influence of the Word of God with a consistency and intimacy that permits it to have its perfect work, we shall gradually acquire a godlike character. It cannot fail. AND IT MUST BE DONE.

"We all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory" (2 Cor. 3:18).

Pretty words indeed—BUT—do they really mean anything specific to us?—can we give any EVIDENCE of their operation IN OURSELVES? Can we point to spiritual fruit?—gentleness, patience, purity and truth? This is the most important question that can ever be asked us. It will be asked us soon. The world is rapidly approaching chaos. What have we to show at the final reckoning?

Talk is cheap—very, very cheap. Fine phrases are sweet, and profession is easy in these tolerant, friendly days. But the real battle is just as hard, and just as important as ever.

"If ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live" (Rom. 8:13).

AND NOT OTHERWISE. Do we even know what it means? We shall find out some day if we don't. Some day it will be burned into our minds to the exclusion of every thought. Thousands are already standing silently at the Bar, waiting for the number to be made complete. Many of them we have known intimately. Soon we shall join them. Let us ponder it well.

Having a smattering of the "First Principles" and being, as the phrase is, "in the Truth," is no stopping point or guarantee. Can any be so self-deceived? Do any feel that in doing this we have done all that is necessary and can wait in assurance for the final divine approval, in the meantime busying ourselves with such transient things as attract our attention? Is it that easy?

We have set our hand to a lifelong work, and have promised to put it foremost. The baptismal examination is just to see if we understand the promise we are making and the responsibility that we are solemnly taking upon ourselves.

The transformation from the course of death to the course of life is a long and painful process, requiring constant fortification. We promise, at baptism, to adopt an entirely new course of life, based on revolutionary principles. We promise to put away forever the motive of pleasing ourselves and adopt the motive of pleasing God alone. We promise to apply this to every action, knowing that the only way to become godlike, and finally immortal, is to minutely and consistently follow a God-directed course of action which gradually puts the flesh to death.

This applies to every action and decision, particularly the everyday ones, for it is the small, hard-to-control reactions and emotions that hold the balance of power, for good or ill. The smaller an action is, the more fundamental it is and the more it reveals character. It is much easier to key ourselves up for the big things than to be consistently true in the little ones.

This requires a continuous absorption of incentive and direction and power from the Spirit of God, through His recorded Word. This is the whole secret. Success or failure depends directly upon it. If we put ourselves, by constant study and reflection, in permanent contact with godliness, we shall be gradually transformed by it. If we don't, then it won't happen. Everything is the result of cause and effect—

"As a man soweth, so shall he reap."

"Think on these things," says Paul, "Meditate on them—give thyself wholly to them." GIVE THYSELF WHOLLY TO THEM. That leaves room for nothing else. Such other activities as are necessary for the sustenance of life and the fulfillment of legitimate obligations, instead of being interruptions or violations of these principles, should be made opportunities of practicing them and putting them into actual service.

How can holiness and godliness and purity and faith be applied to office work and factory work and housework? Does it seem incongruous? If it does, there is something wrong—there is something warped and clouded about OUR VIEWPOINT. The command is—

"Whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, AS UNTO THE LORD, and not to men, knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward" (Col 3:23).

We may get part of the reward now, a small meaningless part of it—enough to keep our bodies functioning—but the real reward is later. The less we get now, the more we have in store—THE MORE WE GET NOW, THE LESS WE HAVE IN STORE. Of some it is said, "Verily, they HAVE their reward."

This is a vitally important point. It lifts our daily work out of the dull mundane sphere of carnal things and brightens it with the opportunity of serving God in the Spirit while attending to necessary temporal burdens. John says (1 John 2:15-17)—

"Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world."

This is not an arbitrary prohibition. It is the guidance of wisdom. We are not taught arithmetic at school just to rob us of the pleasure of figuring incorrectly. That would be a childish, petulant way to view helpfully-intended instruction.

So with God's instruction. None of it is harsh or unnecessary. It is meant to help us—to put us on the right road to life and happiness and well-being in a real, permanent, substantial sense. John does not stop with the bare command; he gives the reason:

"All that is in the world is not of the Father"—it is alien and out of harmony—"The world passeth away, but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever."

The world passeth away and takes all its friends and participators with it. Its fellowship is the sinister fellowship of death.

Many worldly things are not in themselves wrong. Many worldly acquaintances are not specifically wicked, but they all belong to a state of things that is ready to vanish away. To take part in their interests warps and cramps and beclouds our perception. We cannot hope to ever be part of a large and eternal heavenly order if we think small petty worldly thoughts.

The Old Testament chapter in the same daily readings (Isa. 40) brings this even more vividly into focus. The prophet urges upon us a conception of God and the purpose of life that is overwhelming in its immensity. If we can, by a supreme effort, get in tune with His viewpoint, present things shrink into their true insignificance.

"Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure?" (v 12).

"Behold the nations are as the small dust of the balance."

"Hast thou not known? Hast thou not heard that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? There is no searching of His understanding" (v 28).

"Lift up your eyes on high and behold who hath created these things . . . by the greatness of His might, for that He is strong in power" (v 26).

This is the scale of conception that it is wholesome to dwell upon, and get away from the pettiness of our present surroundings. It is strengthening. It is uplifting. It engenders a sober, godly frame of mind.

This is the true state of affairs. The world but a handful of dust—its troubled history an insignificant fraction of eternity—the seemingly real and actual present but a brief interlude that will pass like shadows before the rising sun.

This is the sphere of thought that is comforting and worthwhile. Keeping our minds in this channel will result in a course of action in harmony with these things and which will fit us for a place in them.

We are told by well-meaning but worldly-minded counselors that if we want a better position we must fit ourselves for it. We must fill our thoughts with its responsibilities and requirements. We must, as it were, mentally live in that sphere and accustom ourselves to it.

Now of course this is entirely out of the question for those whose minds, in obedience to the counsel of the Apostle, are wholly given to better things—they just haven't the time for it—but it illustrates the effort we must make on a higher and more satisfying scale. Often, sadly enough, the children of this world show more wisdom and initiative and energy in their aspirations than the children of light do in things eternal.

The human mind is not bound to its immediate surroundings. If it were so, life would often become unbearable. But consciousness is largely made up of memory and hope, beside that which is present to the senses.

Many people choose their solace by living in the past, comforting themselves with reminiscence and recollection, escaping monotonous or unpleasant reality by absorption in what is gone.

Most are wrapped up in the immediate present and the very limited future which comes within the scope of present undertakings. But such a course does not satisfy the contemplative mind. "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die" is the universal doctrine, but only the shallowest, dullest minds can find merriment satisfying under such circumstances. Such an attitude requires the cruelest, bitterest form of self-deception and willful blindness.

But, in the mercy of God, there is a third alternative for those who feel the need. How is one brought to feel the need? By a recognition of the sadness and perversions of the present dispensation, due to the incapability and inhumanity and physical frailty of man. Is this brought home to us easily or quickly? Usually not. At first the world is a place of bright promise, of comradeship and love, of gay and thoughtless adventure. This is the impression of inexperience's innocence and buoyancy.

How do we learn differently? What prompts us to turn for comfort and satisfaction elsewhere? Usually it requires the rough hand of misfortune and disillusionment to make us fully appreciative of the vanity of present things. We are aware, it is true, of the vast preponderance of sorrow over joy in the world, but we feel nobody's troubles as keenly as we do our own. This is in the very nature of things. Our minds can only work on what is being continually presented to them in some form or another. Unless constantly reminded either by circumstances or direct efforts of our own will, we soon forget, and our attention is taken by other things.

This, too, demonstrates why we must constantly supply our minds with material for thought from the Word of God. If we don't, our minds will feed on other and unwholesome things that so easily present themselves to them.

What is the course of mental satisfaction that is offered, to counteract the depressing effect of present considerations?

"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished and her iniquity is pardoned" (Isa. 40:1).

Such are the opening words of the reading from Isaiah. "Her warfare is accomplished and her iniquity is pardoned." These things have been recorded for over 26 hundred years—and the end is not yet. Some may be reminded, perhaps a little bitterly, of the statement by Paul to the Romans (4:17) that:

"God calleth things which be not as though they were already."

Clearly there could be no more striking example. To speak assuringly of warfare being over when it still had a cruel course of over two thousand years to run may seem poor and misleading comfort—but is this the truth of the matter? Thoughtful consideration shows this but a narrow, unreasonable viewpoint.

Comfort depends upon the state of the mind. The comfort offered by the Scriptures is not dependent upon immediate fulfillment. It is the assurance of an ultimate reign of peace and good, that is separated from no individual by more than the brief span of a human life-time. Its comfort is not that distress is finished, but that distress is a controlled and necessary ingredient of the final result.

This is the viewpoint that prophet and apostle exhort us to maintain. We must live in patience and godliness, buoyed up by hope. We must center our minds resolutely upon that which is to come and face all present troubles in the confidence of this expectation. "Sorrow endureth for the night," says the Psalmist—and the night may be long—"but joy cometh in the morning." The course of wisdom is not to ignore or belittle the sorrow, but to balance the whole picture. We shall not be overwhelmed by the one if the other is kept brightly in mind.

Then we can enter into the spirit of these words of Isaiah and reap the comfort intended. We are not to regard the delay with skeptical impatience or lagging faith, but we are to build our lives and hopes upon these things in the quiet and calm confidence that they represent the realities and that in God's good time all will be accomplished.

V. 6 – "The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry?"—What good tidings is there?—"All flesh is grass. The grass withereth . . . surely the people is grass."—Where is hope?

This is the thoughtful, but purely natural, view. It sees things only as they appear and leaves out the most important feature. V. 8 answers: Truly "the grass withereth"—truly present things are a shadow—

"BUT the Word of our God shall stand forever . . . Lift up thy voice with strength; Lift it up, be not afraid. Say, Behold your God! Behold He will come and His reward is with Him."

Then the chapter breaks into the long, exalted eulogy to the power and greatness and unchangeableness of God, of which we have spoken. What is its purpose? To raise and broaden the mortal conception of the meaning and purpose of life. To train the mind into channels that give a proportioned outlook.

The human mind can be engrossed in the meanest and most trivial matters, or it can be devoted to the highest and loftiest considerations of divinity and holiness. The natural tendency of gravity pulls it downward, but the magnetism of the Spirit draws it upward.

As the mind thinks, so it becomes. A man is but the aggregation of his own thoughts. Therefore sons of Adam may be transformed into sons of God by a gradual displacement of the natural by the spiritual.

Every spiritual thought is an ingredient of the new creature—a strengthening of the spirit—a step towards life.

Therefore, says Paul (Phil. 4:8): "Whatsoever things are true, lovely, gracious and just, THINK on these things."

—and thereby gradually become like them. John continues—

"Every man that hath this hope purifieth himself, even as He is pure" (1 John 3:3).

"Be ye holy," we are commanded (1 Pet. 1:16): "for He is holy." Cleanliness, holiness, purity—these are attributes of entirety. A man is not clean if he is partly dirty. Half pure means impure. Perfection is demanded. Jesus said—

"Be ye therefore PERFECT, even as your Father in heaven is perfect."

"BE YE PERFECT." How can we be PERFECT?

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."

But it is not a perfect obedience that is expected. Our perfection is a gift, not a personal accomplishment, for John goes on to explain (1:9)—

"If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and CLEANSE us from all unrighteousness."

"If we walk in light . . . the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin."

This is the secret of perfection. We cannot approach Him acceptably unless we are clean and pure in His sight. The Law of Moses teaches us this. Therefore we must at all times maintain our purity from worldly thought and contact by the merciful cleansing of humble repentance and forgiveness

And so we meet together clean and pure and perfect and acceptable before him—not sinless, but repeatedly washed from sin. How merciful a provision—but let us never abuse it. Should we regard sin with less fear, because

God cleanses us so freely? "God forbid!" says the Apostle Paul (Rom. 6:2). Rather should His mercy be an incentive to greater effort.

It is a grave and solemn calling—the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Tremendous privileges—tremendous responsibilities. Of him who treats it lightly, it will at the last be said: "Better were it for that man if he had never been born."

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