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The Constant Miracle of Christian Living

TREASURE IN EARTHEN VESSELS

We have seen how Paul outlines the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our (as yet unredeemed) bodies. This indwelling is also what he refers to in Ephesians 1:13–14 when he describes us as ‘marked... with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession...’. The Holy Spirit, whom Jesus promised would be sent from the Father, is the guarantee, or down-payment, of all that is ours in Christ.

The same theme is developed in 2 Corinthians 5:1–10, which emphasizes the ‘earthly tent’ we live in. While on earth ‘we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling’ so that ‘what is mortal may be swallowed up by life’ (vv 2, 4). God has prepared us for this—and has given us the Spirit as His guarantee that it will happen (v 5). Paul describes being ‘at home in the body’ as being ‘away from the Lord’ (v 6) and says, ‘we... would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord’ (v 8). But either way, he says, we aim to please Him (v 9). The life we live now, in the waiting time before the Lord returns, is life ‘in the body’ (v 10).

This reality of having the 'treasure' of the Holy Spirit in an 'earthen vessel' (2 Cor 4:7) has important effects. It means that when a Christian lives faithfully in the tension of Point 5, he brings glory to God, not to himself. This is so because any spiritual life lived 'in the body' must be a miracle of the Holy Spirit enlivening that dead body (Rom 8:10–11). Thus all Christian living is miraculous—and being miraculous, it is a constant encouragement to ourselves and our brethren of God's work in us.

The Holy Spirit's residence in our body also shows that the Christian life is not some 'ethic' or 'lifestyle' which can be carried out independent of God's power.

This leads us to realize that the lovely things of the Christian life are God's work in us. They are not our own doing. The fruit of the Spirit which grow in the man of God are the fruit of *the Spirit*—not of the man (Gal 5:22–23). It is important to remember here the gift-task relationship we observed in Jesus' teaching (Chapter 10). If we try by our own 'bodily' effort to love, to have joy, to experience peace, or to be patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle and self-controlled, we cannot. These are the work of the Spirit; as He transforms our lives, they come as automatically as fruit grows on a tree, or as light shines, or as salt is salty. There is a right sense in which we are to relax and let God bring forth His fruit in us, for we cannot make it happen. It is a gift issuing from the Holy Spirit. This is the 'positive' of the Christian life: to decide to let God work. It is the equivalent of Paul's teaching to 'consider' ourselves dead to sin and alive to God through Christ (Rom 6:11, RSV).

Yet there is another side to the coin, one which requires us to recognize the age in which we live. We have an actively hostile enemy who uses our fallen environment to his full advantage. So we do not *just* relax and let God work; we also live energetically and decisively. There are proper things for us to do. Our 'doing' consists in letting our light shine; but, consistent with the command of Jesus, that doing must not

hinder the Spirit. 'Do not quench the Spirit,' Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 5:19 (RSV). This is the proper 'negative' of the Christian life: to decide against the flesh (or to believe against the world) and to refuse to hinder the Spirit's work.

When it comes to refusing to hinder the Spirit, we are very active; we decide against the flesh. When it comes to allowing the Spirit to work in us, we exercise faith that the automatic fruit will come out in our lives by His energizing power. This is very practical. It helps us understand where to expend our own efforts and where to hold back so we do not usurp God's work in us. It also preserves us from unreal expectations arising from a false understanding of where we stand in God's sight and in the world.

It is very liberating to discover what God has done; it is also practically useful because it clarifies where we are to be active and where we are to be passive. This in turn informs our prayers for ourselves and others.

ACTION

1 The history of the Messiah's church shows that repeatedly there is an unbalanced swinging between these truths. Either the active side of deciding against the flesh is emphasized, in which case Christians get into a negative life of striving against sin, forgetting to trust for the Holy Spirit's power. Or they just 'relax, let go and let God' to such an extent that they become passive in their stand against sin and don't actively decide against the flesh. If you have swung in this way, change your mind and ask the Father to forgive you for this imbalance. Ask Him to balance you.

2 Remember: the decision against the flesh is yours; the power for putting to death the deeds of the flesh is His. Do your part and then trust Him to do His part. It is always a miracle of Christian living when we don't sin!

'JUSTIFIED' AND A 'SINNER'—BOTH AT ONCE

To live at the junction of the old and new ages is to constantly experience the dual reality of being justified and a sinner, both at once.

Being 'justified'—that is, being declared righteous in God's sight because of the sin-bearing work of Jesus—means that we have, in Christ, a right standing before God. Our entry into fellowship with Him is based solely on Christ's finished task. We have been transferred from the position of rebels, outside God's family, into the place of adopted children. Jesus has taken us into relationship with the Father.

Being a 'sinner' is something that concerns our nature, which is fallen. We know God did not make us this way, but we also realize that, because of the natural rebellion which is our basic stance since birth, we are unable to create spiritual life in ourselves by our own efforts. We constantly have to decide against our natural egocentric inclinations.

This tension of being simultaneously justified and a sinner has important implications. It leads us to distinguish between what we are to expect in our Christian lives now and what is not promised to us before the Lord returns.

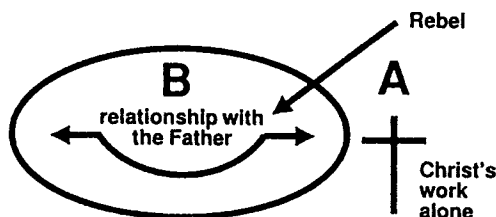
The fact that we are sinners by nature teaches us that 'sinless perfectionism'—the idea we can achieve a sinless life now—is not something the Bible promises in the tension of Point 5. While we live in this mortal body, we will always have to say, 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.' We live on the basis of being forgiven.

ACTION

1 If you believe you can be perfect in this life, you are deceived and need to acknowledge your error and claim God's forgiveness. Firmly renounce such deception; you will have no victory over sin until you do. Read Philippians 3: 7–14.

2 However, do not give up hope of winning moment-by-

moment victory against the Enemy, the flesh and the world. That is quite a different matter; to explore it, read on.



In our practical living we must be careful to understand that the *basis* of our position in God's family—Christ's finished work on the cross (A in the diagram)—is quite distinct from the *practice* of living as God's child (B). We cannot be a Christian by doing 'Christian' things. The members of a family may hold their knives and forks a certain way; but you cannot enter the family merely by holding your knife and fork their way. Entry to the family is on a different basis altogether—it is by birth or adoption. Here again is the principle we are now familiar with: being is the basis for, and leads to, doing.

So there is no 'Christian' ethic which can be performed apart from that which is based on first 'being' Christian. Indeed, Christ's demands are so high that He would be the cruelest man on earth to require them—if He did not also grant the gift which enables us to perform the task.

We explored this truth in the last chapter. We also noted there that the enemy, whenever he observes Christians failing and falling into sin, delights to harass and accuse them with the thought: 'You see, you can't do it! You aren't a Christian at all!' We constantly live under this assault.

The great secret for dealing with it is to remember that the basis for entering and being in the kingdom is never your works and performance. It is always the free gift of God in

Christ. The Enemy's attack is based on the presupposition that your performance as God's child affects whether you are God's child. This is utterly false.

ACTION

If you have been caught by this, understand it is a confusion and do not believe it. What you do does matter, of course, because you are aiming to please God; but God's pleasure in your life is quite a different matter from your acceptance by Him. The basis for being accepted is Christ's finished work alone. Indeed, you cannot attempt to please God until you have been accepted on that basis.

If, as an accepted child, you sin, your sin does not throw your acceptance into doubt. That is the enemy's lie. Rather, what happens is that you fail to please God. This is what sin is for a child of God: failure to please Father. Confess it, claim forgiveness and get up and go on.

Sometimes the enemy disturbs us with a refinement of this accusation. He allows us to think we *gain entry* to God's family through Christ, but then tells us we *remain* there because of our performance. The effect of this lie is the same as the first: it causes us to not trust in Christ's work alone but to feel secure on the basis of our works.

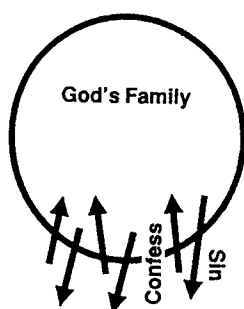
ACTION

1 This, too, is a deception; do not believe it. God has predestined you, called you, justified you and He will see you through to glorification. He will complete His task—do not doubt this. Meditate on Romans 8:29–39 and Philipians 1:6.

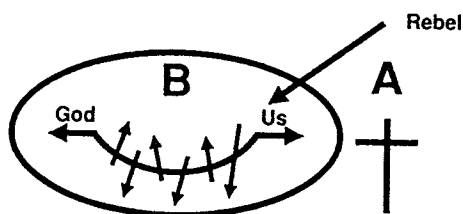
2 Renounce any idea that you should live righteously in order to gain or keep God's acceptance. Your acceptance is complete already. You live now to please Him, as an accepted and loved child pleasing its Father.

There are numerous other ways Satan sells this lie to us. Some

Christians are told that if they sin they are 'outside the faith' or 'not in a state of grace' (neither is true). Or they are told they must make amends and do some act of penance before they can return to being part of God's family. Once again, the basis of acceptance is confused with performance.



All these deceptions have a tragic consequence: they pull people into a neurotic cycle. Sin—out; confess—back in; sin—out; confess—back in. This ends in despair.



The truth for justified sinners is that the dynamics of confession and forgiveness take place at B, deep inside the circle which represents God's acceptance of us and our established relationship with Him. Our basic relation with God as His child is established on Christ's finished work (A). Within that relation, the quality of our relating goes up and down with our sin, but that sin is dealt with *in the family*. And God's promise to us in the family is that 'if we confess our sins, he is

faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness' (1 Jn 1:9).

God deals with us as we are in the fallen world. He does not smile or wink at our sin, yet we always live under the promise of His forgiveness. It is the only way we can go on, for the struggle of the tension at Point 5 will continue until Jesus returns or until we die (which is simply to sleep in Christ until Point 6), whichever happens first.

From this brief chapter, we see it is vital to understand this tension because it prevents us being unrealistic about what to expect in a fallen world. It also provides a background against which to read the exhortations of the New Testament, particularly those of Paul: we understand we are exhorted to 'please' God only after we have received acceptance by Him as a gift. This is what it means to live by grace.

Before the next chapter: Read Romans 7 and 13:1–7.