

Wednesday Bible Study

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Pneumatology: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

Section 7

Spiritual Power Today

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[Editor's Note: This series of articles is now available in book form: *The Holy Spirit at Work Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1973). \$1.25.]

One of the greatest needs in the church today is the power of the Holy Spirit. Man in his natural ability is not able to serve God acceptably; and even if he has been renewed through salvation by the Spirit, this in itself does not assure him spiritual power in his life. Apart from the work of the Holy Spirit a believer is not able to use effectively the gift of teaching, is not able to interpret God's guidance to him, or in other ways to make effective the grace of God. It is for this reason the believer is commanded to "walk by the Spirit" ([Gal 5:16](#)).

Learning to Walk by the Spirit

In exhorting the believer to walk by the Spirit, the concept is advanced that the Christian life can be accomplished only by the power of the Holy Spirit. Walking implies progress and direction. Each step is an incipient fall, as the body is supported by one limb and then the other. The verb "walk" in [Galatians 5:16](#) is in the present tense and has the thought of "keep on walking" or continuously walking by the Holy Spirit. The Greek for "by the Spirit" is the dative, *pneumati*, best translated as "by the Spirit" instead of "in the Spirit," as in the Authorized Version. While it is true that the believer is walking in the sphere of the Spirit, the thought is rather that it is by the Spirit's enablement that the believer is able to accomplish the high standard of the Christian walk. As the life of a Christian unfolds step by step, each foot of progress must be marked by the sustaining power and ministry of the Holy Spirit. Learning to walk by the Spirit is realized when one walks in dependence on and is supported by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Why Walk by the Spirit

In the light of the New Testament standards for the Christian life which are far beyond anything which the natural man could attain, it is obvious that only by the grace of God and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit can a measure of attainment be achieved in keeping with the will of God for the believer. Accordingly, the believer is exhorted to be as holy as God is holy ([1 Peter 1:16](#)), and to love as Christ loved ([John 13:34](#)). As both experience and Scripture demonstrate, man beset by constant temptation and opposition to the holy life could never even partially attain this high standard of conduct apart from the grace and power of the Holy Spirit.

The obstacles confronted by the Christian in the Christian walk are massive and frontal. A Christian is living in a world system which is utterly contrary to the things of God. He is under constant influence to love the world, to compromise with the world and to conform to the world. In himself a Christian does not have the resources to confront such a formidable foe and needs the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

In addition to the world itself, the Christian also encounters Satan as his arch enemy. The warfare with Satan is very real for anyone who attempts to lead a Christian life, and Paul bears witness to wrestling not with flesh and blood but with satanic powers in [Ephesians 6:11-18](#). Satan not only blinds the minds of unbelievers ([2 Cor 4:4](#)), but like a roaring lion is seeking whom he may devour ([1 Peter 5:8](#)). He is deceptive, often appearing as an angel of light ([2 Cor 11:14](#)), and according to Christ is both a liar and a murderer ([John 8:44](#)). Against such an enemy whose wisdom and power far exceed the resources of an individual Christian, there could be no victory apart from the power and grace of God.

In addition to the confrontation of both the world and Satan, a Christian is faced with his own inner weakness. Although a Christian has a new nature and a new life in Christ, the old nature is still there trying to reassert itself and gain control. As Paul makes clear in [Romans 6](#) and 7, in his own resources he was helpless to contend against such an inner betrayer and needed the power of the Spirit to gain victory. It is a marvelous testimony to the grace of God that believers with all these problems can nevertheless have a life that is glorifying to God if they are empowered by the Spirit.

Pitfalls to Holy Living

In seeking to realize the holy life in Christ and to translate the power of the Holy Spirit into living experience, it is all too easy to go to excesses in one direction or another. One of the pitfalls to the holy life is the concept that it is possible to attain sinless perfection in this life.

At the outset it is clear that the standard for the Christian life is the perfect holiness of God. There can be no compromise on the ideal and no lowering of the standard. However, taking into consideration what man is in his total context, it is obviously impossible for man to fulfill continuously such a high standard. Hence perfectionism defined as the doctrine that a state of complete freedom from sin is obtainable in earthly life, is an ideal which is never attained by man except in a relative sense. It is possible for

man to avoid willful sin, at least for a time, or to be free from known sin; but the sin nature itself cannot be eradicated, and it is inevitable that attainment of the standard will be marred by imperfection.

A study of the words containing the concept of “perfect” in both the Old and New Testaments makes plain that perfection is not considered to be sinless perfection. In general the thought of perfection in the Bible is that of being complete or properly adjusted. A second thought often presented is that of perfection in the sense of reaching a goal and hence has the concept of attainment. As both completeness and attainment are relative terms, so is also the concept of perfection.

The concept of perfection in the Bible is further considered under three aspects. Sometimes perfection is considered as positional, as in [Hebrews 10:14](#) where it is stated, “For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.” This indicates that we have a perfect position in Christ.

A second aspect of perfection relates to spiritual maturity which is relative. In [Philippians 3:15](#) the Philippians were exhorted, “Let us, therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded.” He is referring to spiritual maturity and not sinless perfection, because in verse 12 in the same passage he plainly states that he has not reached ultimate perfection. Spiritual maturity like physical maturity indicates the person has reached full spiritual vigor, but not necessarily infinite in its proportions. In Scripture, maturity is viewed in respect to various aspects of the will of God, such as knowing the will of God ([Col 4:12](#)), love ([1 John 4:17-18](#)), personal holiness ([2 Cor 7:1](#)), patience ([James 1:4](#)), and various good works ([Heb 13:21](#)). Spiritual maturity can also be viewed as progressive as in [2 Corinthians 7:1](#) where perfection is viewed as a process with the gifts bestowed upon the laborers being used for the perfecting of the saints ([Eph 4:12](#)). The concept of ultimate perfection is, of course, found in passages like [Philippians 3:11-12](#), contemplating the results of resurrection from the dead and presentation in heaven. While the concept of ultimate perfection is therefore recognized, it is also plainly indicated that it is not obtainable prior to achieving the resurrection body.

The recognition that absolute perfection is impossible in this life should not deter the believer from doing all he can to measure up to the highest divine standard, and it is for this purpose that the enablement of the Holy Spirit is provided that the believer may be empowered to serve God and attain personal holiness.

Another approach to the concept of the holy life is afforded in the word “sanctification” itself. In sanctification there are three main ideas presented in the Bible—that of consecration or being set apart for holy use; separation, that is, distinction from that which is unholy; and purification, or the result of the cleansing process. Like the doctrine of perfection, sanctification is found in three tenses relating to that which is positional, that which is already perfect, the experiential or progressive type of sanctification in which a believer grows in holiness, and the ultimate sanctification when he stands complete in the presence of God.

Positional holiness by far has the most references in the New Testament and is the thought in the use of the word “saint” which appears some sixty-five times. The emphasis in sanctification is that we already have a perfect standing or position, and it is on this basis that we are called to bring our experience as far as possible up to the standard.

A few Scriptures refer to progressive sanctification as in [John 17:17](#) where Christ prayed, “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.” The same thought is found in [Ephesians 5:26](#) where the present ministry of Christ is revealed to be that of sanctifying His church by cleansing it by the washing of water by the Word of God (cf. also [1 Thess 5:23](#)). The concept of ultimate sanctification as a state is not expressly brought out in Scripture, but it is clear that when we are in heaven we will be completely set apart for holy use and will be like Christ ([1 John 3:2](#)). Similar passages are found in [Ephesians 5:27](#) and [Romans 8:29](#).

It may be concluded that while sanctification is, therefore, perfect in position, its experiential attainment is relative; and complete sanctification will be realized when we are in heaven where we will be completely set apart for holy use and will be like Christ ([1 John 3:2](#)).

It is most important to note from Scripture that for a believer to declare himself sinless, either in nature or in life, is to contradict both the Scriptures and experience as [1 John 1:8](#) makes plain, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” The exhortations of the New Testament teach that the path to victory over sin is not to arrive at a plateau where sin is impossible, but rather through moment-by-moment dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit to provide deliverance. Those who claim sinless perfection are self-deceived, and because of their supposed complete victory over sin tend to neglect the means of power provided by the Holy Spirit. As [1 John 1:8](#) indicates, while they may deceive themselves they do not deceive anyone else, as sinless perfection is a crown which is unattainable in this life. To understand the doctrine of sanctification properly is to open the door for the power of the Holy Spirit to provide for the believer moment-by-moment victory over sin.

Probably the most extreme of all the holiness doctrines is the thought that the sin nature can be eradicated. In this concept a Christian is not only declared not to sin, but it is claimed that it is impossible for him to sin. Nothing should be more clear in the New Testament than the fact that the spiritual life is one of ceaseless warfare. Nowhere is the believer exhorted to attempt by any means whatever to eradicate the sin nature. Instead, the exhortations of Scripture constantly take into consideration that this is impossible and that victory over sin requires yieldedness to God and walking by the Spirit.

One of the contemporary erroneous concepts of holiness is the theory that it is possible for a Christian to die completely to self. Exhortations are sometimes made to the Christian to crucify himself. The figure is not only unscriptural, but physically impossible as crucifixion must always be administered by another. The error has arisen through an incorrect understanding of the tense of the verb in passages such as [Romans 6:6](#). The verb is not in the present tense but correctly translated the passage reads, “Knowing this, that

our old man was crucified with him.” The same is true with [Galatians 2:20](#) where the perfect tense is used, signifying that we not only are crucified with Christ already, but also that we have been crucified with Him ever since Christ died upon the cross. The exhortation is to the point of recognizing this fact. It is impossible for a Christian by act of his will to die to self, but he can by the grace of God reckon himself dead to the sin nature which is still very much alive. By this he is disclaiming the right of the sin nature to rule over him in view of the power of God released through the death of Christ upon the cross. Christians who have foolishly concluded that they have actually died to self are soon disillusioned as they find that the old nature is still very much alive, and apart from the power and grace of God would again assert itself. The Christian life as a whole is so constituted that not only our salvation is completely dependent upon God and His grace, but also our daily victory is moment-by-moment possible only as the reservoirs of divine power are released in the life of the Christian. This is what is meant by walking by the Spirit, letting the Spirit empower and direct and control.

Walking by the Power of the Spirit

In contrast to the other exhortations to “quench not the Spirit” or to “grieve not the Spirit,” walking by the power of the Holy Spirit is a positive command and is one of appropriation of what God has proved. It is the walk by the Spirit that produces contagious Christian experience, holiness of life, and a glorifying of God. It is only thus that holiness can be achieved and the fruit of the Spirit realized.

Walking by the Spirit is only possible as the Christian is first of all yielded to the Spirit of God and second is walking in unhindered fellowship with the Spirit through confession of sin. Walking by the Spirit, however, is a positive moment-by-moment dependence upon the Spirit of God and what the Spirit of God can empower the Christian to do. The walk by the Spirit includes dependence upon the Word of God as providing the necessary standards of life and instruction in holy living. As one walks by the Spirit, he must be guided by the Spirit of God. Many moral issues are not dealt with explicitly in the Scriptures, and the personal direction of an individual life into a proper sphere of service is possible only as the Spirit guides. Walking by the Spirit also implies dependence upon prayer, and spiritual power often is directly related to the prayer life of the believer. Walking by the Spirit is also aided by fellowship with other believers who also are seeking the work of the Spirit in their lives. While the Spirit of God directly empowers, He also uses means in effecting in the individual life a perfect will of God.

Summary

In the great program of God for the redemption of the lost human race, the Scriptures make clear that Christ’s death on the cross is God’s provision for fallen humanity. Apart from this sacrifice there could be no permanent forgiveness, no release of the grace of God, and no relief from condemnation from sin. In the purpose of God it is also clear that salvation thus purchased by Christ is made effective by the Holy Spirit. It is only by the

power of the Spirit that a lost soul can see and understand the gospel and believe. It is the power of the Holy Spirit revealed in salvation which delivers a person from his lost estate and makes him a new creature in Christ, possessing eternal life, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and made one with the saints. Just as the deliverance from sin and condemnation and our new position in Christ is made possible by the Holy Spirit, so the daily walk of the believer who experiences deliverance from sin and achieves a quality of life which brings glory to God is possible only as the Holy Spirit fills and empowers. God has made rich provision both for the salvation and the sanctification of those who come to Him through Christ. Those who have put their trust in Christ have the privilege and responsibility of availing themselves of this wonderful provision for joy and victory in Christ now, anticipating that perfect experience which will be theirs in heaven.
