

The Reign of Grace

Chapter 9

By Abraham Booth

HAVING considered the nature of sanctification, the character and state of those happy souls who enjoy the blessing, the way in which they come to possess it, and the many cogent motives to engage believers in the pursuit of holiness, and in the practice of true virtue, I shall now proceed to show the necessity of holiness, and the various important purposes which are answered by the performance of good works.

Love to God, being by regeneration implanted in the heart of a sinner, he is fitted for spiritual communion with the great object of all religious worship, in his ordinances and with his people in the church below; and for a more perfect communion with Him in the world of glory. In this fellowship with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ, with which believers are indulged in the present state; and in that more intimate fellowship with God, enjoyed by the spirits of the just made perfect above, true happiness, both in time and in eternity, consists. But the unsanctified soul is absolutely incapable of such refined pleasures. There must be a spiritual discernment, and a heavenly taste, before things of this kind can be either enjoyed or desired. For while a man continues in his natural state, at enmity with God and in love with sin; he neither has, nor can have any real pleasure in approaching his Maker. *Two cannot walk together except they be agreed.* Hence it is that our Lord says, *Except a man be born again, he CANNOT see the kingdom of God.* With whom the apostle agrees, when he asserts, *Without holiness no man shall see the Lord.*

That holiness which the Scripture so expressly requires in order to the enjoyment of God, is possessed by every one that is born from above, and in a justified state. For every subject of regenerating grace loves God. Love to God being the grand principle of holiness, and the source of all acceptable obedience, none can enjoy it, and not be possessed, in some degree, of real holiness. Nay, we may venture to assert, that whoever loves the infinitely Amiable, is possessed of all that holiness, in the principle, that shall at any time flourish and adorn his future conversation, or that shall shine in him to all eternity. Such a one, therefore, must not only have a title to heaven, but also be in a state of preparation for it.

Some professors, who espouse the notion of sinless perfection, and look upon themselves as uncommon friends to the interests of holiness, talk, indeed, of persons being in a regenerate and justified state, while they are yet un-sanctified.

Consequently, quite incapable of having com-reunion with God, in his ordinances here; entirely unfit for the sublime enjoyments of the heavenly world hereafter; and, therefore, if they leave the present state in such a situation, everlasting misery must be their portion. But as the doctrine of sinless perfection in this life, is a bold opposition to the testimony of God, and contrary to all Christian experience; so this imagination is equally false and uncomfortable. For, either they mean the same things by the terms, *regenerate* and *justified*, which the Scripture does, or they do not. If not, what they say is nothing at all to the purpose; and therefore unworthy of a moment's regard, whatever may be their meaning. But if, by these expressions, they intend the same things which the Holy Spirit does, in the volume of infallibility; then it is evident, from the tenor of Divine revelation, that they labour under a great mistake. For what is intended by the *justification* of a sinner, but that the eternal Judge pronounces him righteous according to law, and freed from every charge! What is implied in the *regeneration* of a sinner, but a communication of spiritual life, and the restoration of the image of God in man? Now, is it possible that a person should be regenerated and justified; that he should stand clear in the eye of the law, and be viewed by Omniscience as possessed of spiritual life, and as bearing his Maker's image, while he is yet unsanctified, and quite unfit for glory! There is no such law in the blessing of justification, nor any such imperfection in the state of a regenerate person, as to leave him at such a distance from the eternal inheritance. We are not, in order of time, first renewed by the Spirit of truth, and justified by an imputed righteousness, in virtue of which we are entitled to glory; while yet we remain entirely destitute of holiness, or a capacity of enjoying eternal bliss, for which we must labour and strive in hope to attain it at some future period. For, being freed from the curse, and entitled to blessedness, we are the members of Christ; in a new state, and live a new life. Possessed both of a right to glory, and of a preparation for it; at the same time, though not by the same means.

As holiness of heart is absolutely necessary to communion with God, and to the enjoyment of him; so holiness of conduct, or an external conformity to the Divine revealed will, is highly useful, and answers various important purposes in the Christian life; the principal of which I would now consider. By obedience to the commands of God, we evidence the sincerity of our holy profession. By this our faith is declared genuine before men; who have no other way to conclude that it is unfeigned, but by our works. Whosoever pretends to believe in Jesus, and is not habitually careful to perform good works; his faith is worthless, barren, dead. By a good conversation, in which our light shines before men, we edify our brethren, silence opposers, and preserve the gospel from those reproaches which would otherwise be cast upon it, as if it were a licentious doctrine. An exemplary conduct in Christian professors has often been owned of God and made happily useful, by convincing the ignorant, and by removing their prejudices against the truth; so as to make them impartial inquirers after it, and frequently of winning them over to an approbation of it. By walking in the paths of duty, we express our gratitude to God for his benefits, and also glorify his holy

name; which is the great end of all obedience.

The works of faith and labours of love which believers perform, will be remembered by Jesus die Judge, at the last and great day of accounts: those especially that are done to the poor, despised members of Christ, and for his sake. These will be mentioned, at that awful time, as fruits and evidences of their union with Christ, and of their love to him. They will distinguish real Christians from open profligates and mere formalists; from all that were punctual in the performance of a round of duties, that cost them nothing; which raised their character among men, and exposed them to no shame nor suffering; but exceedingly backward to part with their unrighteous Mammon for the support of the cause of God, or to assist the poor and the persecuted members of Christ. These are the principal of those *necessary uses*, for which good works are to be maintained.

It is, notwithstanding, carefully to be observed, that neither our external obedience, nor inherent holiness, constitutes any part of that righteousness by which we are justified. Neither the one nor the other is either the cause, or the condition, of our acceptance with God. For, as before observed, that righteousness by which we are justified, must be absolutely perfect. But our personal obedience is greatly defective, even in the best of men and in their most advanced state, while in the present life. So that if God were to enter into judgment with us, on the ground of our own holiness or duties, none of us could stand in the awful trial. Our holiest dispositions would be found far short of that perfection which the law requires; and our best duties could not answer for themselves, much less atone for our transgressions. *All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags*; and we have need of a High Priest *to bear the iniquity of our holy things*. For who among mortals dare say to the omniscient God, "Search and try this, or the other duty, performed by me; thou shalt not, on the strictest examination, find any defilement cleaving to it, nor any sinful defect attending it!" Who dare add, "I am willing to risk my soul's eternal salvation on its absolute perfection, after such an exact scrutiny made!" The boldest heart must very much tremble at such a thought; nor dare the most upright make the solemn appeal, or venture his immortal all on such a foundation.

Hence the great teacher of the Gentiles, who was a most eminent saint, notwithstanding all-his extraordinary gifts, his beneficent labours, exemplary conduct, and painful sufferings, for the cause of truth and the honour of his Divine Master, utterly disclaimed all pretensions to personal worthiness. For, when taking a prospect of the awful tribunal, he earnestly desired to *be found in Christ; not having his own righteousness, which was of the law*, consisting in his own holiness and righteous deeds; *but that which is through the faith of Christ, even the righteousness which is of God by faith*. This obedience, and this only, can support our hope, and comfort our hearts, when we think of standing before Him who *is a consuming fire*. That righteousness which was wrought out before we had a being, is the only ground of a full discharge before our final Judge; and,

being so, it is the source of all our comfort and of all our joy, as to that grand affair. If any person, therefore, solicitously inquire, How shall I appear before my Maker! the answer is, in the obedience of Christ, which is perfect in itself, and entirely free for the guilty. But if the inquiry be, How shall I express my thankfulness to God for his benefits and glorify his name? then the answer evidently is, by living in conformity to his revealed will; and by devoting yourself, all that you are, and all that you have, to his honour and service. Thus provision is made, in the covenant of grace, for the believer's peace and joy, by a direct view of the finished work of Christ; and for the exercise of every virtue, the performance of every duty, whether it be religious or moral; and all for the noblest end, even the glory of God.

Hence it is manifest that though our good works are of no consideration at all, in the article of Justification, or in obtaining a title to life; yet, on many other accounts, they are highly necessary: and it is an affair of the last importance, to be rightly acquainted with the proper uses of good works. Otherwise, we shall inevitably run into one of those opposite and fatal extremes, Arminian legality, or Antinomian licentiousness. The former will wound our peace, infringe on the honours of grace, and exalt self. The latter will turn the grace of God into wantonness, harden the conscience, and render us worse than infidels avowed. We should therefore be exceedingly careful rightly to distinguish between the foundation of our acceptance with God, and that superstructure of practical godliness which must be raised upon it.

Let us once more hear the judicious Dr. Owen. Speaking to this point he says: "Our foundation in dealing with God, is Christ alone; mere grace and pardon in him. Our building is in and by holiness and obedience, as the fruits of that faith by which we have received the atonement. And great mistakes there are in this matter, which bring great entanglements on the souls of men. Some are all their days laying of the foundation, and are never able to build upon it to any comfort to themselves, or usefulness to others. And the reason is, because they will be mixing with the foundation, stones that are fit only for the following building. They will be bringing their obedience, duties, mortification of sin, and the like, unto the foundation. These are precious stones to build with, but unmeet to be first laid to bear upon them the whole weight of the building. The foundation is to be laid, as was said, in mere grace, mercy, pardon in the blood of Christ. This the soul is to accept of, and to rest in, merely as it is *grace*; without the consideration of any thing in itself, but that it is sinful and obnoxious unto ruin. This it finds a difficulty in, and would gladly have something of its own to mix with it: it cannot tell how to fix these foundation-stones, without some cement of its own endeavours and duty. And because these things will not mix, they spend a fruitless labour about it all their days. But if the foundation be of grace, it is not at all of works; for otherwise *grace is no more grace*. If any thing of our own be mixed with grace in this matter, it utterly destroys the nature of grace, which if it be not alone, it is not at all.

"But doth not this tend to licentiousness? Doth not this render obedience, holiness, duties, mortification of sin, and good works needless? God forbid! Yea, this is the only way to order them aright unto the glory of God. Have we nothing to do but to lay the foundation? Yes, all our days we are to build upon it, when it is surely and firmly laid. And these are the means and ways of our edification. This then is the soul to do, who would come to peace and settlement. Let it let go all former endeavours, if it had been engaged in any of that kind. And let it alone receive, admit of, and adhere to mere grace, mercy, and pardon, with a full sense that in itself it hath nothing for which it should have an interest in them; but that all is of mere grace through Jesus Christ. *Other foundation can no man lay.* Depart not hence until this work be well over. Surcease not an earnest endeavour with your own hearts, to acquiesce in this righteousness of God, and to bring your souls into a comfortable persuasion that God, for Christ's sake, hath freely forgiven you all your sins. Stir not hence until this be effected. If you have been engaged in any other way; that is, to seek for the pardon of sin by some endeavours of your own: it is not unlikely but that you are filled with the fruit of your own doings: that is, that you go on with all kinds of uncertainties, and without any kind of constant peace. Return then again hither. Bring this foundation work to a blessed issue in the blood of Christ; and when that is done, up and be doing." (Psalm 130)

It is greatly to be feared, that the distinction so judiciously pointed out in the preceding quotation, is but little known or considered, even by many who are earnestly concerned in a religious profession. And it is undeniably plain, that there are great numbers denominated Christians, who, as they know nothing in reality concerning Christ; no, in their conduct, they are more like incarnate devils than real saints.--Nor are there a few that perform a round of duties very exactly, and have a high opinion of their own religious profession; who, notwithstanding, are far from possessing that holiness, and from performing those good works, which are essential to the Christian character. View them in their places of public worship, and in the performance of devotional duties; they assume a serious air, as though they were greatly concerned about their everlasting welfare. See them in their families and in the common concerns of life, there they are full of levity, unsavoury and loose in their conversation. Some of these pretenders to Christianity will also attend that seminary of vice and profaneness, the playhouse, and other amusements of this licentious age, as far as their circus stances will permit. You may see them vain and extravagant in dress and show, while their pious neighbours of the same religious community, with all their industry, are hardly able to acquire decent clothing: yet these children of carnal pleasure, either do not at all regard their distress, or content themselves with saying, *Be ye warmed.* They will be lavish at their own tables, while the poor among the people of God are almost starving by their side: yet such is their love to Christ and his members, that they will think it an instance of great condescension if they vouchsafe to visit them and say, *Be ye filled.*

If these pretenders to piety be naturally of a more grave and serious disposition,

view them in their trade and business; there you will find them covetous, griping, and oppressive; making it their chief design to lay up fortunes for their dependents, and to raise their families in the world. These, like their forefathers, *for a pretence make long prayers*; even when, by usury, extortion, and oppression, they *devour widows' houses, and grind the faces of the poor*. They lay up that in their coffers, which of right belongs to the needy who labour under them; the rust of which shall be a swift witness against them another day, and *shall eat their flesh as it were fire*. Is not the church defiled, and is not the gospel dishonoured, by such sanctimonious wretches as these? Such persons, whether more light in their disposition and conduct, or more grave in their temper and behaviour, are alike the children of the devil and the slaves of sin; are on a level, in the sight of God, with the most profane. As to the covetous, those votaries of Mammon, whatever dislike they may have to their associates, they stand ranked in the book of God with extortioners and thieves, with drunkards and adulterers. Nay, they are branded with the most detestable character of *idolaters*.

The sin of covetousness is, I fear, greatly misunderstood, and much overlooked by many professors. Were it not, the remark would not be so often made; "Such a person is a good Christian, but a covetous man." Whereas it might with as much propriety be said; "Such a woman is a virtuous lady, but an infamous prostitute." For the latter is not more contrary to sound sense, than the former is to the positive declarations of God, recorded in Scripture. When we hear people, in common, talk about covetousness, we are tempted to look upon it as a merely trifling fault. But, when we open the volume of heaven, we find it pronounced idolatry, and considered as a capital crime; while Jehovah denounces damnation against the wretch that is guilty of it? (I Cor. 6: 9, 10 Eph. 5: 5. Col. 3: 5. Ps. 10:3)

In what then does this aggravated sin consist? I answer, *Covetousness*, in the language of inspiration, *is the desire of having more*; the desire of obtaining or of increasing in wealth. Whoever, therefore, is habitually desirous of riches, is, in the estimate of Heaven, a covetous man, whatever his station in life, or profession of religion may be. The language of the covetous heart is that of the horseleech's daughters, *Give, give*. The covetous man is always desirous of *more*, whether he have little or much: and, if a professor, he will always find some pretence to hide the iniquity of his idolatrous heart. But however such a professor may cover his crime under plausible pretences of any kind; or however safe he may imagine himself, as being a member of some visible church, and free from her censure; the time is coming when the mask shall be stripped off, and then it shall be fully known where his affections have been, and what God lie hath served. Then it shall plainly appear, whether JEHOVAH, or Mammon, swayed his affections and ruled in his heart. Perhaps there are few sins for the practice of which so many excuses are made and plausible pretences urged, as that of covetousness, or a love of the world: consequently, there are few sins against which professors have greater occasion to watch. It was not, therefore, without the greatest lesson, that our Lord gave that solemn caution to all his followers; *Take heed, and beware of COVETOUSNESS*.*

* Luke xii. 15. None will suppose, from what is here asserted, that I mean to encourage idleness or extravagance. No; far be it! Those who, through indolence, pride, or prodigality, waste their substance and fail in the world, can hardly be too severely censured. They not only impoverish themselves, but injure their neighbours; are the pests of society, and public robbers.

The reader, I presume, will not be displeased, if I present him with a quotation on this subject, from my worthy and honoured friend, Mr. HENRY VENN. "It is remarkable," says he, "that the covetousness against which we are so earnestly warned in God's word, is not of the scandalous kind; but such as may govern the heart of a man, who is esteemed very virtuous and excellent by the world. In the tenth Psalm, *the covetous*, whom the Lord is there said to *abhor*, are the very persons of whom the wicked *speak well*; which could never be the case, did their love of money make them either villanous in their practice, or miserably penurious in their temper; for men of this stamp none commend. The same thing is observable in that solemn caution given by our Redeemer; *Take heed, and beware of covetousness*. By which it is evident, he meant no more than a rooted persuasion that the comfort of life consists in abundance, and desiring, from such a persuasion, to be rich; this was the covetousness our Lord condemns. And, that this admonition might sink the deeper, he represents the workings of that avarice which he condemns, in a case which passes every day before our eyes. It is this: A man grows rich in his business, not through fraud and extortion, but by the blessing of God upon his labour and skill. As is usual, he is highly delighted with his success; he exults in the prospect of being master, in a few years, of an independent fortune. In the mean time, he is determined to be frugal and diligent, till he takes his final leave of business, to enjoy all the sweets of ease and splendour. Luke xii. 19. Now, where are the people governed by the common maxims and principles of human nature, who see any thing the least to blame in this man's sentiment or conduct? Who do not applaud and imitate it themselves? Yet this very man our Lord sets before our eyes, as the picture of one engrossed by a covetous desire of the things of this world. This very man he represents as summoned, in the midst of all his golden hopes, to appear a most guilty criminal at the bar of his despised Maker. Lo! this is the man whom our Lord exposes, as a miserable wretch for all others to take warning by and resist covetousness. So, such a fool and such a sinner as this *is he that layeth up treasure for himself*; that is, every earthly minded man, who seeks after wealth, as if it was the foundation of happiness; *and is not rich towards God*; rich in faith, hope and holiness. Luke xii. 21.

"Paul, in perfect harmony with his Lord, forbids the desire of wealth as a criminal effect of avarice. *Let your conversation be without covetousness, and be content with such things as ye have: for He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee*. Heb. xiii. 5. And where, instead of this self-denied temper, a desire of increasing in wealth is cherished, there snares, defilement, and ruin are declared to be the certain consequences. For 'they that will (the original signifies the simple desire) be rich, fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and

hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some have coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.' 1 Tim. vi, 9, 10. if it should be said, Do you mean then to affirm, that it is wrong for any man to arise to a state of great wealth! The Scripture, I answer, condemns only the *desire* of riches and the passion for them, as defiling and sinful. Therefore, if whilst your whole heart is given to God, he is pleased to prosper whatever you take in hand, and give you an abundant increase; then your wealth is evidently as much the gift of God, as if it came to you by legacy or inheritance. It is God's own act and deed to call you up, who was content to sit down in a low place, to a higher point of view, and to intrust you with more talents, to improve them for his glory. Now the difference between possessing wealth, thus put into your hands, and *desiring to grow rich*, is as great as that between a worthless, ambitious intruder into a place of honour, seeking nothing but his own base interest; and a man sought out for his worth and invested with the same office, for the public good. And those who can see no material, no necessary distinction in the two cases, are already blinded by the love of money." *Complete Duty of Man*, p. 389--392, second edition.

We may, therefore, conclude, that though the absolute freeness of Christ, as exhibited in the gospel to the worst of sinners, must be maintained with confidence; yet we are bound to affirm, with equal assurance, that he who pretends to faith in Jesus, and does not habitually live under the benign influence of love to God, and of love to his brother *for the truth's sake*; and that he who does not manifest his heavenly affection by a suitable conduct, has no claim to the Christian character.

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