

Entire Sanctification: Cleansing and On-Going Obedience

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Scriptures:

Psalm 51:5-8, 10. “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.”

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24: Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.²⁴ Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.

Introduction

In evangelical circles, few if any question whether mankind is depraved in his fallen state or whether inherited depravity remains in the life of a believer. The questions that do engender debate are “Can inherited depravity be cleansed while a believer lives?” and, if it can, “What is the nature of this cleansing?” The answer to these questions hinges, in part, upon how one defines inherited depravity.

In what follows, I offer a definition of inherited depravity, sketch my understanding of key elements of the image of God in mankind in relation to inherited depravity, and explain my understanding of God’s plan to remedy our inherited depravity and restore His image in us.

I. A Definition of Inherited Depravity

Many definitions for inherited depravity have been suggested, including rebellion, greed, pride, selfish ambition, self-sovereignty and the like. The primary terms the Bible uses are “sin” (Rom. 7:8), the “law of sin” (Rom. 7:23), the “flesh” (Rom. 7:18; 8:1) and “fleshly minded” (Rom. 8:6).

While the metaphors and metaphorical language Scripture uses to describe inherited depravity may suggest substance models in which inherited depravity is viewed as a “thing,” that is, an addition to man, a second or additional “nature,” I believe such models are fatally flawed and should be rejected.

My best understanding of Scripture is that inherited depravity is the self-centeredness that resulted when Adam severed his relationship with God and forfeited the sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit through willful sin. As a result of Adam’s sin,

God ceased being the unifying center of his life. Self took the place of God, and Adam became totally depraved—a condition of complete self-centeredness.

I use the phrase “total depravity” in the sense that the Fall affected every part of our being (spirit, soul, and body). However, because of God’s restraining and enabling grace, no one is born incapable of learning how to do good. Romans 3:10-18 is the classic passage that describes how wicked our inner corruption would make us if it were not for God’s prevenient and restraining grace.

- ¹⁰ There is none righteous, not even one;
- ¹¹ There is none who understands, There is none who seeks for God;
- ¹² All have turned aside, together they have become useless; There is none who does good, There is not even one."
- ¹³ "Their throat is an open grave, With their tongues they keep deceiving," "The poison of asps is under their lips";
- ¹⁴ "Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness";
- ¹⁵ "Their feet are swift to shed blood,
- ¹⁶ Destruction and misery are in their paths,
- ¹⁷ And the path of peace have they not known."
- ¹⁸ "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

As a result of Adam’s sin, all his posterity inherited this depravity.

What was mankind like before the tragic Fall? Let’s think about it for a moment.

A. Mankind Before the Fall

Mankind was created in the image of the triune God (Gen.1:26-27).

The *Shema*’ of Deuteronomy 6:4 provides a clear starting point for understanding what it means to be in the image of God: “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one” (see also Isa. 44:6). God is one, and there is no other.

In the unity of His Being, the one God reveals himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The one God, who is holy, blessed, and an undivided Trinity, exists as three distinct Persons. Further, God reveals that within the Triune Godhead, each Divine Person is holy and relates to the other Divine Persons in love (1 John 4:8; Lev. 11:44). The early church spoke of the triune relationship as a “perichoretic unity,” a holy relationship of mutual indwelling, mutual self-giving, others oriented, love.

When God made mankind, He made male and female in His image. It is important to observe that it took two human persons, male and female, to reflect the image of God in humans.

How did the first man, Adam, and the first woman, Eve, relate to one another? Since they were made in the image of God, they most likely reflected the relationship that the three Persons of the Triune Godhead enjoyed: a holy, loving relationship. Adam and Eve, in imitation of their Creator, expressed their love for each other and for God in terms of self-giving that seeks the other person's highest good.

When God looked upon all He had created at the end of the creation week, He pronounced it "very good" (Gen. 1:31). We may infer from this that Adam and Eve had totally satisfying relationships—with God, with themselves (self-image), with each other, and with their environment.

Their relationship with God was one of joyous total submission: for their lives were totally yielded to his control. As they obeyed God their conduct was completely righteous. Their crowning privilege and supreme joy was intimate fellowship with Him. And because John 17:3 defines eternal life as knowing God, they had eternal life.

Their relationship with God brought with it an enlightened understanding of spiritual things, enkindled emotions of love and appreciation for God, and enabled wills that were wholly inclined to do His will. They intuitively and intellectually knew truth and perceived the inherent rightness of the arrangement.

Further, Adam and Eve enjoyed an integrated personality. They felt loved, accepted, and secure in God's love. Their world-view was God-centered, and they were emotionally balanced because they lived with no guilt.

All of this was enjoyed in a perfect and sinless environment with a perfect mind and a sinless body.

B. Mankind After the Fall

Because of the Fall, all mankind's relationships were severely damaged.

First, mankind's holy relationship with God was severed. God's sovereignty (lordship) had been rejected and self-sovereignty usurped His place. Disobedience to God resulted in ungodly character and unrighteous behavior (Rom. 1:18). Because of their broken relationship with God, the supreme source of joy and satisfaction was missing from their life. They had forfeited eternal life and were now spiritually dead in trespasses and sin (Eph. 2:1). The absence of God's sanctifying presence resulted in the darkening of their understanding, the deadening of their emotions and the degrading of their wills (Eph. 4:17-18). Mankind no longer intuitively and intellectually knew truth. Thinking themselves to be wise they became fools (Romans 1:21-22).

Second, they no longer enjoyed an integrated personality. Making self the supreme source of reference, Adam and Eve felt self-conscious, unaccepted and insecure. Their world-view was distorted. Guilt and fear caused them to hide from the presence of God and expressed itself in self-defensiveness (Gen. 3:8-10).

Third, their relationship with each other was warped. No longer reflecting the true image of God, Adam became a self-loving, self-defensive, self-protecting leader. Eve likewise became a self-loving companion who now desired to rule over her husband.¹

Fourth, Adam's sin brought death into the world (Romans 5:12) and the whole created order was adversely affected (Romans 8:20-22). Due to self-sovereignty expressing itself in self-centeredness, mankind now futilely tries to find meaning and satisfaction in the individual components of life as graphically described in the Book of Ecclesiastes—through personal achievement, self-gratification, fame, money, music, sex, power—not realizing that meaning and satisfaction can be found only in a personal relationship with the Creator (Eccl. 12:1).

II. The Transmission and Consequences of Inherited Depravity.

The Psalmist tells us that when children are conceived, they are conceived “in sin,” (Psa. 51:5), meaning they too inherit depravity. “Even from birth the wicked go astray; from the womb they are wayward and speak lies” (Psa. 58:3). Isaiah, the primary source for understanding inherited depravity in terms of self-centeredness, describes our problem in terms of wayward sheep. He said in Isaiah 53:6 “all of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.” Why do we all go astray—all of us follow after sinful pursuits? Isaiah answers, “We have turned every one to his own way” (Isa. 53:6). In our fallen condition, we come hard-wired, from the moment of concept, with a compulsive desire to have our own way. We not only want our own way, we are driven by the desire to have it.

As a result, we are born spiritually dead and are by nature children of wrath (Eph. 2:1-3). We have neither the saving presence of God in our lives, nor the knowledge of His ways. As a result of our self-centeredness, we reject the One whose face we are supposed to seek and in whose light we are supposed to live.

Martin Luther expressed the depraved condition of mankind in a very graphic way when he defined it as *cor incurvatus ad see* (the heart turned in upon itself). Instead of turning to God from whom we came, we turn to ourselves in an effort to find what we need. Turning away from the Source of all that is good, we turn inward and try to live life out of our own resources and for ourselves.²

¹ See the term “desire” in Genesis 3:16 and compare it to the same term in Genesis 4:7. I understand “desire” in these two contexts to mean “the desire to rule over” or to “exercise mastery over.”

² Dennis Kinlaw, *We Live as Christ* (Nappanee, Indiana: Francis Asbury Press, 2001), 32.

As a result all types of evil become possible. Jesus said that from such a self-centered heart proceeds “evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man” (Mark 7:21-23, NASB). All of the natural propensities, needs, and potentialities of mankind are twisted in an egocentric and sinful direction.

Paul frequently refers to this condition of self-centeredness as living “in the flesh.” In contrast, He speaks of the Christian as living “in the Spirit.” He writes, “The flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another” (Gal. 5:17). They are in opposition because the Holy Spirit, like Jesus, will not operate independently of our heavenly Father, whereas the chief characteristic of the “flesh” is self-centered independence from God.

Paul further says that the person who has his mind set on the flesh cannot please God, is hostile toward God, and will experience spiritual death (Rom. 8:6-8). Jeremiah, using a slightly different metaphor, says that the very center of man’s depraved being, the heart, is “more deceitful than all else” and “desperately sick” (Jer. 17:9). Apart from the grace of God, fallen humanity has no other choice than to find their identity in their self-centered existence and seek their purpose and meaning in life independent of God.

God’s remedy for inherited depravity is to restore in mankind the image of God that was so horribly warped and distorted by the Fall. (Col. 3:10). The first stages in this restoration occur at the new birth.

III. The New Birth: God’s Remedy for Inherited Depravity Begun.

When, by the grace of God, a repentant sinner exercises saving faith, God not only pardons his transgressions (justification) but actually makes him a new creature in Christ Jesus (sanctification - Gal. 6:15; 2 Cor. 5:17).³ Simultaneous with this event many things happen to the new Christian, including adoption into the family of God (John 1:12; Gal. 4:5), and union with Christ (John 15; Rom. 6). Because of our union with Christ we are declared to be dead to sin and freed from it (Rom. 6:2, 4, 7).

Notice the contrasts that Paul distinguishes between the saved man of Romans 6 and Romans 8 and the wretched man of Romans 7:14-25 in the chart below.

³ Sanctification is a broad term. It refers to the gracious working of God in us through the Holy Spirit whereby he transforms us into the likeness of Christ. The transforming work of sanctification begins at the moment of the new birth and culminates with glorification, at the Second Coming of Christ.

The Wretched Man of Romans 7:14-25	The Saved Man of Romans 6 and 8
He is carnal, sold under sin and therefore as a slave to sin is still being controlled by it (7:14).	He is no longer the slave of sin (6:6). He has died to sin and cannot live any longer in it (6:2). His union with Christ in His death to sin means that he is freed from sin (6:7).
He does what he hates and knows he is displeasing God (7:15, 19).	He walks in newness of life (6:4). He does not walk in the flesh, but in the Spirit and the Spirit dwells in him (8:9)
He is not able to do what he knows is right (7:15, 19).	He has been set free from sin, is the servant of God, and produces the fruit of holiness (6:22)
There is a desire to do right, but no accompanying power to do right (7:16, 18).	Sin no longer has dominion over him (6:14). He fulfills the righteous requirements of the law as he walks in the Spirit (8:4).
The law of sin is controlling him (7:20) and resisting the law of his mind (7:23).	He has been set free from the law of sin and death that used to control him (8:2). He is no longer to let sin reign in his body and is not to obey it (6:12).
He is a captive of the law of sin (7:23).	He is no longer the slave of sin (6:20). He used to be the slave of sin, but he has been delivered from the slavery of sin (6:17).
He is a wretched man who is miserably unhappy because of his sin (7:24).	He experiences no condemnation because He lives in Christ (8:1).
He is a divided person: His mind serves the law of God, but his flesh serves the law of sin (7:25).	He has been set free from sin and is now the servant of righteousness (6:18).

The person we were in our unregenerate state, a person controlled by the “flesh,” is now said to be crucified with Christ (Rom. 6:6; Gal. 2:20). As a result of his union with Christ, “the flesh with its affections and lusts” has been crucified (Gal. 5:24). The tyrannizing power of the “flesh,” as described in Romans 7:14-25, is broken.

At the moment of the new birth, we put off the “old man” and put on the “new man” which is “created in righteousness and true holiness,” and subsequently we are being “renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created” us (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10).

Concomitant with and central to the restoration of God’s image in us comes the call to love God with all our heart, soul, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves (Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18; Mat. 22:37-40). With the call comes God’s grace that enables us to begin to learn what is involved in a total love for God and a love for our neighbor as we love ourselves.

This aspect of the restoration of God’s image coincides with the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit—the work of transforming us into the likeness of Christ—that begins in the new birth. First Corinthians 1:2, and 6:11 call believers “sanctified” in this sense.⁴

Progressive sanctification follows (Heb. 2:11). We are being sanctified (further transformation into the likeness of Christ) as we continue our walk with Christ. As one walks in the light (1 John 1:7), the Holy Spirit will eventually bring to the Christian’s attention the need to be entirely sanctified (1 Thess. 5:23-24). The response of the Christian to this further information should be one of gratitude wherein they gladly present themselves as a living, holy, acceptable, sacrifice to God. This involves a deliberate and full consecration to God of his or her new life in Christ (Rom. 6:13; 12:1), with a complete transfer of control to God. As a result of their obedience and faith, God cleanses the believer’s heart of the remaining self-centeredness (Acts 15:9).

IV. Entire Sanctification: God’s Provision for Cleansing from Inherited Depravity Completed.

For some, the awareness of the need to be entirely sanctified will come through the reading or preaching of Scripture. For others, it will come through an awareness of inward desires and longings that are displeasing to God and hinder one from loving God totally. Dr. Dennis Kinlaw, describing his discovery of remaining self-centeredness in his life, wrote, “I was a believer; I knew Christ. But I kept a finger on a corner of my life and I wanted to do a little bargaining with God about what He did with me.” [See Dennis Kinlaw, *We Live As Christ*, (Nappanee, Indiana: Francis Asbury Press, 2001), 14]. It was through a growing awareness of not being totally surrendered to God in every respect, that Dr. Kinlaw came to see his need for a thorough cleansing from remaining self-centeredness in his life. He was motivated to make a full surrender to God and consequently experienced the fullness of the Spirit whereby his heart was thoroughly cleansed and he received power to be the witness God wanted him to be (Acts. 1:8).

Whether one recognizes the problem of self-centeredness (inherited depravity) or not, God’s command that believers be “filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18) is His solution to this problem. Being filled with the Spirit involves the cleansing of one’s inner attitude, disposition and motivation from the principle of self-centeredness through a full surrender to God (Rom. 12:1) and an empowerment to be the witness Jesus wants us to be (Acts 1:8). This is what I understand Paul to be talking about in 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 when he prays that God would entirely sanctify His children.

The term “entire” in front of “sanctification” often confuses people. Is Paul implying in 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 that after entire sanctification there will be no further progress in sanctification? Absolutely not. When he uses the adverb *entire*, he is speaking of a work of God’s sanctifying grace that encompasses *every part of man*:

⁴ See also Acts 20:32; 26:18; Hebrews 10:10

“spirit, soul, and body.” The word *spirit*, in this context, refers to the inner chamber of your being (i.e., your heart), the control panel out of which your thoughts and motives proceed. The word *soul* includes your mind, will, and emotions. These must be cleansed of self-centeredness and consecrated for God's glory. The word *body* refers to the physical, material, fleshly part of man that is to be used only for His honor and glory, in harmony with His Word. The term *entire* does not mean you become as sanctified (Christlike) as it is possible for a human to be (intensively sanctified). Rather it means every part of you is sanctified (extensively sanctified), spirit, soul, and body. No aspect of your being is excluded from God's work of entire sanctification.

V. The Cleansing of Inherited Depravity: Distinguishing the Principle from its Consequences.

In entire sanctification, the remaining self-centeredness in the Christian's life (inherited depravity) is cleansed (Acts 15:9) when we unconditionally surrender ourselves to God as a holy, living sacrifice, thereby yielding ourselves to the indwelling Spirit's full control (Rom. 12:1; Eph. 5:18). The phrase “full control” is not speaking of the Holy Spirit “making” a Christian do something contrary to his will. There is nothing coercive about the Holy Spirit. Rather, it speaks of a willing, on-going, moment-by-moment surrender and obedience to whatever changes the Spirit wishes to make in the Christian's life.

A. Why the need for an on-going cleansing after we are entirely sanctified?

At this point in our study, it becomes very important to distinguish between God's cleansing our hearts of the principle of self-centeredness at the moment of entire sanctification and from the needed on-going cleansing of the mental and emotional consequences of self-centeredness that occur as we continue to walk in the light after we are entirely sanctified. There are programmed habits, ways of thinking, and responses to stimuli that became part of our personality while living under the tyranny of self-centeredness. For example, some people grew up in an extremely competitive environment and were taught either by example or precept that “winning” is not only desirable, it is crucial for self-esteem. Such competitiveness becomes a compulsive, controlling, way of life and shows up in attitudes and activities associated with games, grades, interpersonal relationship, and ends up permeating every aspect of life, including spiritual activities.

After conversion, the Holy Spirit works in the believer's life to transform his thinking (to renew him “in knowledge” -- Col. 3:10) and to bring to his attention changes that need to be made. The Holy Spirit will direct him and empower him to make these changes. This process continues after entire sanctification. As long as the fully surrendered, entirely sanctified person walks in the light, he is not guilty of conscious or willful self-centeredness, for he is being kept cleansed from all sin (1 John 1:7) and from God's point of view is declared “blameless” (1 Thess. 3:13). Further, the image of God

has been restored in the believer's life in the sense that his primary motive now is to please Jesus in everything (Col. 1:9) and to love God and others as he should. The manifestations of this love will improve as the Christian continues to walk in the Spirit and continues to make the adjustments that the Holy Spirit indicates need to be made.⁵ The process of sanctification (making the Christian Christlike in every respect) continues after entire sanctification. We shall not be completely like Him until we see Him as He is at His Second Coming (1 John 3:1-3).

B. An analogy to illustrate the need for our on-going cleansing after entire sanctification.

The following analogy may help clarify the sense in which a fully surrendered, entirely sanctified, Spirit-filled Christian is continually kept cleansed from self-centeredness. Consider a piece of thin plastic pipe that was originally straight but has become bent in upon itself and hardened in this condition. The bend is analogous to our in-born, inherited, self-centeredness (Psa. 51:5; Isa 53:6). In order to restore the pipe to its original straight condition, we can run hot water through it to soften it and (allow gravity to) pull the bend out of the pipe until it is straight. The hot water (and gravity) is analogous to the cleansing power and influence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. [Jesus himself used the metaphor of flowing water to represent the Holy Spirit in a person's life. He is likened to a river of flowing water (cf. John 7:38-39)].

When we were saved, the Holy Spirit entered our lives and began straightening the pipe (Rom. 8:9-11). Some bend (self-centeredness) still remained, but it was no longer ruling our life. When we presented our bodies to God as a living, holy sacrifice, we chose to appropriate by faith what was declared to be true of us through our union with Christ—our death to sin and our freedom from it (Rom. 6:2, 7, 18). We acted upon the exhortations to “reckon ourselves indeed dead unto sin but alive unto God” (Rom. 6:11), and to present ourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and our members as instruments of righteousness to God (Rom. 6:13, 19). We asked the Holy Spirit to take full uncontested control of our life and by faith we received the fullness of the Spirit.

In our analogy, the fullness of the Spirit (His full control of us) is what was necessary to take the remaining bend (self-centeredness) out of the pipe. As long as the Holy Spirit has full control, the pipe will continue to be straight (no self-centeredness). However, since self-centeredness is not a “substance” or a “thing,” its cleansing does not produce a static state of being. Being cleansed of self-centeredness (inherited depravity) is not the equivalent of removing a tree stump from the ground. Once a tree stump has been removed, there is no danger of it sending forth any growth. Nor is being cleansed of self-centeredness analogous to the removal of cancer from the body. Rather, the cleansing of self-centeredness is the consequence of a dynamic relationship with the Holy Spirit that must be maintained moment-by-moment. Continual yielding to the Spirit's control

⁵ He usually reveals these needs through interaction with other people.

allows us to remain continually free from the inner bent to self and remain submissive to God. However, if we resist the Spirit and don't cooperate with His checks and prompts, just as the pipe will revert to its bent condition if the hot water no longer runs through it, we too will revert to living according to self-centered desires. There is nothing "automatic" about maintaining a fully surrendered, Spirit-filled life. Many times each day one must choose to make self-denying choices as one takes up his cross and follows Christ (Mat. 16:24).

C. Warning: a return to self-centered living is a real threat to the entirely sanctified.

The warnings in Scripture to watch and pray, and to keep on the whole armor of God suggest that a return to self-centeredness is a real threat to the entirely sanctified believer (Eph. 6:10-20). Paul exhorts us that as we yield to the Spirit and walk in the Spirit, we must continually put to death the deeds of the body (Rom. 8:13). This implies that there is no deliverance in this life from the temptation to return to self-centered living and once again start living in the flesh. Maintaining flesh free living is possible only in a vital relationship of walking in and being led by the Spirit, that is, living each moment in obedience to His voice as He speaks to us through His Word and through our conscience.

VI. Maintaining entire sanctification: a dynamic relationship of on-going submissive obedience to the Holy Spirit.

The need for an entirely sanctified person to maintain a dynamic relationship of submissive obedience to the Holy Spirit can be illustrated by an analogy of driving a car. To some people, the idea of a fully surrendered life would be the equivalent of removing ourselves from the driver's seat and letting the Holy Spirit drive. That would eliminate the stress of decision making. It would let us take a passive role. Instead, the Holy Spirit insists that we stay in the driver's seat. He is going to ride with us, but He is going to tell us what to do. So He issues instructions (through the Word and through our conscience in the form of prompts and checks), and we, as the driver, decide moment-by-moment whether or not we will submit to His control.

This analogy highlights the fact that the fullness of the Spirit is not a simplistic "let go and let God have His way," a one-time decision that becomes automatic from that point forward. There is nothing automatic about it. A person who has fully surrendered to the control of the Holy Spirit must live out his surrender in moment-by-moment obedience. As he moment-by-moment submits to the Spirit's control he experiences a moment-by-moment cleansing from self-centeredness.

Conclusion

When the Psalmist prayed, “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me” (Psa. 51:10), he chose a Hebrew verb (“create”) that is limited to God’s activity. No one, apart from God, can create in fallen creatures a clean heart. A clean heart is a heart that is cleansed not only from the guilt of sinful behavior, but also cleansed from the pollution of self-centeredness. Once God has created in us a clean heart, it remains clean only as we continue to walk in all the light that God’s Word and Spirit sheds on our pathway. A clean heart begins with getting saved, and is furthered by entire sanctification. After entire sanctification, it is maintained only by the on-going cleansing of the Holy Spirit as we submit to His further illumination of our minds to Scripture as well as to His prompts and checks.

Have you been entirely sanctified? If you have, are you maintaining the dynamic relationship of on-going cleansing by a moment-by-moment obedient walk in the Spirit?