

Cleansing for the Corinthians

by Colin Peckham

Paul calls the Corinthian believers to cleanse themselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

Scripture: Zechariah 13:1, Romans 12:1, 1 Corinthians 1:4, 2 Corinthians 5:17, 2 Corinthians 6:16, 2 Corinthians 7:1, 1 John 1:9

Topics: "Spiritual Cleansing", "Holiness"

Description

Colin Peckham delivers a powerful sermon on the importance of cleansing ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit to perfect holiness in the fear of God, drawing from 2 Corinthians where Paul passionately intertwines theology with personal experience. The promises of divine acceptance, adoption, indwelling, presence, protection, and possession form the basis of an intimate relationship with God, transcending national barriers and emphasizing the need for a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Paul's compassionate plea for separation and cleansing reflects his deep love for the Corinthians, urging them to avail themselves of God's transforming grace and power for a decisive, deliberate, divine, and definite cleansing.

Transcript

Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God' (2 Cor. 7.1).

Nowhere in his writings does Paul so open his heart to his readers as in 2 Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians Paul is instructing and correcting, but in 2 Corinthians his theology is mingled in a remarkable way with personal experience. Segments of truth seem to float as it were, on a sea of inspiration as his great heart erupts in passionate testimony in the midst of concentrated teaching. The tender love of the pastor, the spiritual passion of the evangelist, the guidance and exhortations of the teacher all flow together as he discloses the motives for his service, vindicating his apostleship and instructing in spiritual truth.

His stirring call to separation at the end of chapter six culminates in his insistence on their personal cleansing and holiness in the first verse of chapter seven: 'Let us cleanse ourselves ...' What a wonderful verse it is! Let us examine it.

The context

'Having therefor these promises ...'

What promises? Obviously those in the preceding verses. And what were they? Ah, promises of divine acceptance, 'I will receive you', to divine adoption, 'And I will be a Father unto you and you shall be my sons and daughters', to divine indwelling, 'I will dwell in them'; to the divine presence, 'and walk in them'; to divine protection, 'I will be their God'; to divine possession, 'and they shall be my people'. These promises must surely be the basis of an intimate relationship.

In the last three verses of chapter six there are no fewer than ten Old Testament promises. (Lev. 26:12; Jer. 31:1,9,33, 32:38; Ezek. 36:28, 37:26; Zech. 8:8, 13:9; Is. 52:11). These promises were made to Israel, not to the despised gentiles yet here Paul is addressing Corinthians, people who were excluded from the covenants of promise.

Things had changed. Jesus Christ had come, and the message of salvation was not longer confined to the Jewish nation for long the custodians of divine truth. It spread everywhere now and all were included, even the Corinthians. The Believers there were not part of the New Israel of God. National barriers crumbled before the flow of divine grace. The issue was not race but relationship, and that to God through Jesus Christ.

'I will be a Father unto you and ye shall be my sons and daughters ...' As a father He imparts His family likeness, and all have a unique relationship to him in that His children have His life, and they conform in varying degrees to the Elder Brother, the Lord Jesus Christ. A world-wide fellowship is born in Christ. These Corinthians are now part of that fellowship.

If the promises are the basis of the relationship, 'having' those promises must be the substance of that relationship. No man can 'have' these promises and not be a child of God. The Corinthian believers 'had' the promises, and because they believed them, the substance of the promises was theirs. The promises were not merely nice-sounding words written on paper. These promises were seen to be God's offer of salvation to them. They believed them, they experienced them; they lived in them; they were transformed by them! They became living evidences of God's life-giving power and transforming grace.

They were given grace (1 Cor. 1:4); they were called to fellowship of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:9); they were 'in Christ' (1 Cor. 1:320); they were 'Babes in Christ'; (1 Cor. 3:1); the Spirit lives in them (1 Cor. 3:16); they belonged to Christ (1 Cor. 3:23); they are new creatures (2 Cor. 5:17)-to quote but a few of the spiritual qualities of the new Corinthian Christians.

There is certainly no doubt about it, Paul was writing to those who were the children of God. They were experiencing and living in the wonderful promises of God. They knew and rejoiced in the life of Christ and His glorious salvation. They 'had' the promises; they were saved and they knew it.

The Compassion 'dearly beloved'

In addressing them Paul uses a most tender word, 'dearly beloved'. In all his writings Paul uses it only seven times, four of those seven to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 10:14, 15:58; 2 Cor. 7:1, 12:19; Rom. 12:19, Phil. 2:12, 4:1). It is all the more significant of the warmth of his love towards them because of its comparative infrequent use. 'Beloved'-what a beautiful form of address.

The following words, 'Let us cleanse ourselves,' are another evidence of the affectionate tone of his earnest exhortation. He had every reason to have spoken harshly and to have ordered them to cleanse

themselves, but his approach is filled with compassionate grace-'let us' he says. this is a plea which sometimes reaches deeper into the soul's responses that any command could ever do.

They had treated him disgracefully (1 Cor. 4:13) and discredited his authority and ministry (2 Cor. 10:10) they had been fragmented into parties, three of which rejected Paul who was their 'father in the Gospel'. Grief must have torn Paul's heart to pieces. he must have mourned over their lack of love and acceptance. There at the moment when he could crack the whip, he draws alongside them and pleads with infinite love and tenderness, reaffirming his oneness with them.

The Crisis 'let us cleanse ourselves ...'

Whenever the Greek word for cleansed used here (and its cognates) is translated, it is always related to cleanliness and purity. Sometimes it speaks of spotless garments or utensils, and sometimes of cleansing from leprosy. Sometimes it describes clean water or pure gold, meaning a substance without admixture, and sometimes it speaks of the ceremonial or ritual cleanliness. Sometimes it speaks of a moral and spiritual cleansing, a purging from the defilement of sin. The context leaves us in no doubt, that this is the meaning here 'let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit.'

Paul had described these Christians to whom he was writing as carnal. There were envyings and strifes among them (I.3:3). they had gloried in their gifts and in their wisdom (I.4:7,10). Living immorally (I.5.1-13);6:13f) they had divisions and heresies (I.11:18,19); there was gluttony and drunkenness (I.11:21).

He had already pressed them to 'purge out the old leaven' (I.5:7) and not to 'keep company with fornicators' (I.5:11). He had forbidden them to eat meat offered to idols if it caused offence (I.10:28ff). He had told them that all things must be done decently and in order (I.14:40), BUT HERE IS THE CULMINATING COMMAND, 'Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness ...'.

It is interesting to note that Paul speaks very little of cleansing-that is John's particular emphasis-but a great deal of crucifixion, particularly in the book of Romans. Here, however, he is very clear and definite in demanding cleansing from sin. The ethical cleavage from the old way of life is decisive, deliberate, divine and definite.

It is decisive in that the tense used here is aorist, which indicates an instantaneous happening. Grammarians speak of the aorist tense as being punctiliar and not linear, a point and not a line.

A point! It is something which takes place in a moment and which has been called the 'singleness of the act'. It is cleansing at a stroke, a definite and divine act.

Remember, Paul is not speaking to those who know nothing of God's saving grace. He is speaking to the saints in Corinth and Greece (II.1:1) who are yet carnal and worldly. What is to be done with these immature, wrangling, self-opinionated, selfish, fleshly Christians? What shame they bring on the name of Christ.

How many of this very kind are abroad today, filling our churches with the whines of petulant infants. They cannot be satisfied, they are not pleased with the programme, or the pastor, or the people. In fact, they have never found true satisfaction in Christ Jesus and consequently hanker after worldly things to fill the aching void in their lonely hearts. They have had a very shallow experience of divine grace and have never matured into useful Christian men and women. Marks of grace and evidence of the Holy Spirit's

operation are rarely seen. There may be culture and kindness of a human sort, tingled with Christian veneer, but the heart-throb of a life in touch with God is strangely absent. The heart is cold, the fire burns low, deep and meaningful fellowship with those who walk with God does not take place. spiritual conversation is embarrassing because there is little to say. Prayer is an effort which is often neglected. What little enjoyment they have in Christ! How tragic their frustrated and unfulfilled desires. How can they be helped? What must be done?

Paul's answer is clear and decisive: they need to be cleansed: from their boasting and pride, from their fornication and immoral indulgence, cleansed indeed from all the filthiness of the flesh and spirit. There is something which can be done, and done in an instant of the mighty, divine intervention. Not only is it decisive, it is also deliberate. They must deliberately come for the proffered cleansing. Only God can cleanse the heart, but God can do nothing for them until they come for that cleansing and avail themselves of it. Not only is there a sovereign act of cleansing, but there is the necessity of human responsibility and involvement.

Responsibility has been described as 'my response to God's ability.' He is able to cleans, but it is for me to respond by the enabling for the Holy Spirit. He draws me by grace and enables me by grace. It is all of grace, both His calling and my coming. But I must come! I can continue on in an unsatisfactory and selfish Christian experience, or I can respond to the Holy Spirit's tender pleading and come for His mighty transforming cleansing. there must be a deliberate coming. like the prodigal, I must deliberately arise and go to my Father, and, like the prodigal, I will receive mercy and forgiveness. It is a deliberate recourse to the cleansing fountain. I can be beside the cleansing stream and still remain filthy unless I expressly avail myself of it's cleansing power.

The cleansing is also divine. It is God who cleanses me (I John 1:9). If I had worked in my garden, or on the car and went into a nearby house to get washed and cleaned, the good lady of the house would take me to the bathroom. 'There is all you need to be clean,' she would say. 'There is the bath, water, the soap, the scrubbing brush and the towel. You can clean yourself here.' If after an hour she returned to the bathroom and found me walking around, wringing my hands and agitatedly saying, 'I wish I could be clean; if only I could be clean' she would certainly think that there was something wrong with my mind. 'Put your hands in the water, she would say, 'cleanse yourself!' When at last I do so it is not I who am making myself clean. It is the water and soap which are cleansing me. I am merely taking that which has been provided for me and it cleanses me.

In the same way, the provision for my cleansing is there, even the Blood of God's Son, Jesus Christ. It is not I who am cleaning myself, it is God who cleanses me, and yet, in the sense that I have availed myself of His provision, having come for His free cleansing, I, by faith, am cleansing myself.

At the heart of this verse, then, is appropriating faith! I hear His Word and I respond by grace to His invitation and take what He offers. As I do so it becomes real to me and I am cleansed by His divine provision and ability.

The cleansing is also definite. The blood of Christ is my only plea. Jesus died for the specific purpose of forgiving me and cleansing me from my sin. There is 'a fount opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and uncleanness' (Zech. 13:11). The prophet speaks here of a provision for the cleansing of the people of God, not for the heathen. Here God is speaking to the Corinthian Christians, not to those who know nothing of divine grace. God wants His people to be cleansed from sin.

He wants a holy people, and He has made provision for their cleansing in the death of Jesus Christ who took their sin and bore their punishment.

If it could not be accomplished, why did Jesus die, and why the divine plea for our purification? Through the Apostle Paul, it is the voice of God which pleads with His people-'Let us cleanse ourselves ...'. God wants to see the application of the provision. He wants to see His people rise from the cleansing fountain having been purged from their sin and impurity. He pleads with us today. Come, let us cleanse ourselves in his gracious provision. It is a cleansing which He desires for us, which He has provided for, to which He calls us, for which He pleads with us and which He will effect in us. It can be done only by His mighty power as we dare to trust Him.

Come, let us listen to His voice, respond to His call, trust in His faithfulness, lean on His promises and experience His cleansing.

Come now.

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