

Perverted Pauline Texts Quoted Against Holiness.

by Daniel Steele

Daniel Steele addresses the misinterpretations of Pauline texts regarding holiness and spiritual perfection.

Scripture: Romans 6:6, 1 Corinthians 15:31, Galatians 5:17, Philippians 3:12, 1 Timothy 1:15

Topics: "Christian Perfection", "Sanctification"

Description

Daniel Steele preaches about the misunderstood texts in St. Paul's epistles regarding Christian perfection and holiness. He clarifies that St. Paul, in Philippians 3:12, is not disclaiming completeness of his spiritual life but rather referring to future resurrection. Steele explains that St. Paul's denial of being 'already made perfect' in Philippians 3:12 actually signifies completing his course, not moral imperfection. He emphasizes that Paul's references to 'dying daily' in 1 Corinthians 15:31 and being the 'chief of sinners' in 1 Timothy 1:15 are not about ongoing sin but about the daily struggle and past sinful life transformed by grace.

Transcript

St. Paul is the great logician of the New Testament. He has long and intricate arguments expressed in an involved style, frequently branching off from the main line of thought and returning to it again further on, making his meaning obscure. Hence, even St. Peter, a brother apostle, and, as the Romanists aver, infallible in all theological and ethical questions, asserts that there "are some things hard to be understood" in all our beloved brother Paul's epistles, which the "ignorant and unlearned," and he might have added, the designing, "wrest, as they do the other Scriptures, unto their own destruction." Thanking Peter for his frank confession that he had to sweat over Paul's epistles, and for freely according to them a rank with the Old Testament Scriptures, we proceed to an examination of texts quoted against Christian perfection, or inward and outward holiness in this life.

It is confidently asserted that St. Paul, in Phil. 3:12, disclaims the completeness of his spiritual life, and professes moral and spiritual imperfection. The R. V. represents him as saying, "Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect."

The verb "obtained" is here absolute; i.e., it has no object after it. What object must we supply? It is natural to supply it from something before uttered. The last preceding noun, "resurrection from the dead," makes good sense as the object of obtained. But why should St. Paul assert a fact so manifest as this, that he

had not risen from the dead? Did any one assert that he had risen? Yes. Some were spiritualizing the resurrection, perverting St. Paul's own words in Eph. 2:6, and Col. 3:1, into an argument against the resurrection of the body, while others were boldly declaring, "that the resurrection is past already." -- 2 Tim. 2:18.

Under this state of the facts, it was not the declaration of a mere truism, for Paul to aver that his resurrection was future, not past.

Let us now see what he means when he denies that he is "already made perfect." The R. V. "made perfect," or perfected, is a more accurate translation of the original than the adjective "perfect" of the A. V. All the Greek lexicons and annotators insist that this verb "made perfect" here signifies "complete my course," just as the same verb is used by our Lord Jesus Christ in

Luke 13:32, "The third day I shall be perfected." Does Jesus here disclaim moral wholeness and spiritual completeness and perfection? Certainly not. Neither does St. Paul. Both speak of finishing their earthly course without the most distant hint of any spiritual imperfection in themselves. In fact, St. Paul in the fifteenth of this chapter classifies himself among the perfect in these words, "Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded." This can mean nothing less than a state of moral completeness and undoubted loyalty to Christ. the love of God being so fully shed abroad in his heart as to exclude all that is antagonistic thereto. He means what St. John calls "the love of God perfected, casting out all fear that hath torment." The twelfth verse is beautifully harmonized with the fifteenth. In the twelfth St. Paul disclaims perfection as a victor, since he has not finished his race and touched the goal; in the fifteenth he claims perfection as a racer, "having laid aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset."

The prince of exegetes, Meyer, thinks that the prize which Paul had not grasped is expressed in 2 Tim. 4:8, "a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day." As this refers to the time of the second coming of Christ, which is followed by the resurrection in which the saints are raised with bodies like unto his glorious body, it follows that our exposition is essentially the same. There is an agreement that the object not yet attained is in verse 12, the reward of the righteous judge, not moral perfection, and that the perfection professed in verse 15 refers to moral completeness.

If any one of my readers still doubts the correctness of our exposition, I refer him to Dr. A. Clarke's Commentary for a full statement of the meaning of the Greek verb teleioo, in connection with the Olympic games, also to all the Greek lexicons, which, without any exception at all, define its secondary meaning "to finish one's course." Paul could well say when midway in his career, I have not yet received the prize; I am not glorified, for I have not finished my course; I have a conflict with the powers of darkness still to maintain, and the issue will prove whether I should be crowned. But a few years after this Paul sees that the end of the race is near. He is a prisoner in Rome, shut up in the Mamertine prison. Looking backwards he says, "I have finished my course." No more conflicts with Satan and his human allies await me; my hand touches the prize in the hand of the judge, -- the crown of righteousness. Up to this hour when the block and the headsman's axe are in full view, he knew that there was a possibility of failure, that he was in an enemy's land. Hence he was "temperate in all things."

This brings us to another misunderstood text --

1 Cor. 9:27, "I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection." This is often quoted to prove that depravity, the root of sin, was still in Paul, and that in these words he disclaims holiness of heart. But mark the terms used. He speaking of the body. and not of the flesh as depravity. He speaks only of appetites, in

themselves innocent, and not of sinful passions and tempers. Adam and Eve in Eden had natural appetites needing moral control and receiving it up to the sad hour when through unbelief sin came into our world. Were our first parents in the least unholy because they had appetites requiring repression? By no means. We argue that subjection of the body to the highest moral ends is a proof of holiness. Natural appetites in men are no more sinful than they are in horses. But they are the gateway through which sin enters when indulgence is granted against the moral law, written or unwritten. Paul set a strong guard at that gate. In so doing he declares his hatred of sin, and not his proneness to sin.

But did not Paul say "I die daily" in

1 Cor. 15:31? And does not this imply, if he was dying to sin daily, the continued existence of sin in him? Yes; if he thus died to sin. But there is no hint of sin in the text. The dying daily is a vivid statement of his peril of a martyr's death every day. See the context. If the dead rise not, and if Jesus Christ has not put the seal of truth upon his gospel by his resurrection, why do I stand in jeopardy every hour, daily running the risk of a violent death? In 2 Cor. 11:23, in a pithy and nervous style, Paul exclaims, "in deaths oft"; and Rom. 8:36, he applies to himself and his fellow Christians, Psa. 44:22, "For thy sake we are killed all the day long." St. Paul died unto sin once for all. Many die unto sin so imperfectly that they are alive and ready to get up out of the coffin every morning in season to die again that day; then they quote, "I die daily." a perfectly irrelevant proof-text, in justification of their playing fast and loose with sin.

St. Paul's death to sin had no resurrection unto sin. So should ours be. 1 Tim. 1:15 is our last perverted text in this chapter. Our readers may be surprised to learn that Paul the aged, in the fullness of his faith and love and professed holiness (1 Thess. 2:10), was, at the time he was writing this epistle, actually out-sinning all the sinners on the earth. This is the interpretation of some who search the Scriptures with the microscope to find proofs that sin must continue in the heart and crop out in the daily life of the best Christian so long as he is in the body. They emphasize the present tense "of whom I am chief." Let us read the context and see whether Paul is describing his past or his present character, "Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious." Now, it is a rhetorical usage for a writer describing past events to change to the present in order to render his narrative more life-like and impressive. This is called the historical present tense, which people of common sense are in no danger of confounding with a real present, especially when the historian begins, as Paul does, by advertising the reader that he is narrating past events. The spirit of inspiration assumes that his readers will exercise the same good sense in reading the Bible as they do in reading other books.

St. Paul had been the chief, or a chief, of sinners. He was now the chief of saved sinners.

Gal. 5:17, "So that ye cannot do the things that ye would." Alas, how many unsanctified souls have made this astounding mistranslation the pillow upon which they have slept the sleep of death! There is no "cannot" in the original, nor in the R. V., which is word for word the version of John Wesley a century and a quarter before: "The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh, in order that ye may not do the things that ye would." The doctrine taught by Paul is that in the regenerate, but not in the entirely sanctified, there is a struggle going on, the purpose of which is this: When ye would do the works of the flesh the Spirit strives to prevent you; and when ye would follow the leading of the Spirit, the flesh opposes. This warfare ceases when "the flesh is crucified" (verse 24) and "the body of sin is destroyed." -- Rom. 6:6. Of this mistranslation Wesley says. "It makes Paul's whole argument nothing worth; yea, asserts just the reverse of what he is proving." The author was once giving a Bible Reading on the subject of practical holiness, when an official of his church arose and read this mistranslation, alleging the

impossibility of living up to his moral ideal. With such a conception of God as a hard master he soon after became so demoralized as to wreck a national bank and flee to Canada, where he died. Apologies for sin, and extenuations of sin as unavoidable, are fraught with the utmost moral peril.

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