

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. We are currently discussing the doctrine of sanctification and, more specifically, the means of grace. Last week we reminded our listeners that Christians are in a constant state of spiritual warfare and the means of grace are there to help us to be victorious in this struggle. We ended the session by quoting a question received from one of our listeners, who asked, "How do we fight against our sinful nature since God did not remove it completely and how can I overcome the sinful nature?" Dr. Spencer, how would you like to respond to that question?

Dr. Spencer: The first thing I want to say is that God promises victory to all those whom he has chosen to save, so in the end, it isn't our own strength that we depend on. In Romans 8:29-30 the apostle Paul wrote, "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."¹ Now, if God has predestined us to be conformed to the likeness of Christ, you can be sure that it will happen. We are told that those God called, he also glorified. The end is just as certain as the beginning.

Marc Roby: Which is why Paul wrote to the believers in Philippi, in Philippians 1:6, saying that he was "confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

Dr. Spencer: Yes. Our confidence is in God, not ourselves. But that doesn't mean we can sit back and do nothing. These promises are only for God's children, so we have a responsibility to do all that we can to make sure that we belong to God.

Marc Roby: And because this responsibility is important, we are admonished in 2 Peter 1:10 to make our calling and election sure.

Dr. Spencer: Yes. And Peter goes on in 2 Peter 1:10-11 to make the point that if we can be sure we have been called, we can also be sure that we will be glorified. He wrote, "For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." In other words, we can know that we are headed to heaven. And when Peter referred to doing "these things" he was referring back to the previous verses, where he said much that has a direct bearing on our current topic, so I'd like to examine them briefly.

Marc Roby: Alright. Peter started the letter off, in 2 Peter 1:1, by greeting his readers. He wrote, "Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours".

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Dr. Spencer: That greeting follows the format typical of the time. He starts by introducing himself. He is the apostle, Simon Peter. The New International Version we are using says that he calls himself a “servant” of Jesus Christ, but in the Greek the word is δούλος (doulos), which should be rendered slave.

Marc Roby: Now, we can understand the translator’s reluctance to use that word, it has an incredible amount of negative baggage associated with it.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it does. But we, as Christians, should not shy away from this word. It is important. The word slave does not always imply the brutal and abominable practices that are most often associated with slavery. But it does convey, far better than the word servant, the idea that the person is not free. He is bound in some way and obligated to serve his master.²

And as a short side note, slavery has been around since the beginning of recorded history. The abolition of slavery took place in a piecemeal fashion around the world, and it will come as a surprise to many in the United States today that England, France and the United States were the first major countries to ban the practice.

Marc Roby: Yes, that is not the common perception.

Dr. Spencer: No, but it is the truth. In any event, the word slave is important biblically. And the Old Testament provided many protections for slaves and regulated the practice significantly.³ We have to remember that in the ancient world, many slaves were taken in warfare, and becoming a slave was more humane than simply being killed.

Marc Roby: Yes, that is certainly true.

Dr. Spencer: And it is also true that the Bible uses the word slave for good reasons. As we have noted in previous sessions, before a person is regenerated, or born again, he or she is a slave to sin. In John 8:34 we are told that Jesus himself said, “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.”

Marc Roby: And Paul then said the same thing in Romans 6:16, where he wrote, “Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?”

Dr. Spencer: And Paul also wrote, in 1 Corinthians 7:22, that “he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord’s freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ’s slave.” The paradoxical truth is that if we have been born again, we are free and we are also Christ’s slave. Or, as Paul put it in Romans 6:16, we are slaves to obedience.

² See the lengthy discussion in G. Kittel, (Trans. By G. Bromley), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. II, Eerdmans, 1964, esp. pp 276-277

³ For example, see *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Zondervan, 1976, Vol. 5, pg. 453f

Marc Roby: And Jesus paid the ultimate price to make us his slaves. In 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 Paul wrote, “You are not your own; you were bought at a price.” And 1 Peter 1:19 tells us that the price was “with the precious blood of Christ”.

Dr. Spencer: Praise God for Jesus’ marvelous work of redemption. To be a slave of Christ is to be free in the greatest sense possible. We are free to not sin. We are free to live in the best way possible, which is to be obedient to God’s perfect law. And so the Bible keeps this tension of calling us slaves while, at the same time, saying we are children of God and free. Both are true, but our slavery to Christ has to be understood in the right way.

Jesus even contrasted slaves and children in one of his best-known sayings. In John 8:31-32 we read that “To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, ‘If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’”

Marc Roby: And the Jews strenuously objected to Jesus implying that they were not free. In John 8:33 we read that “They answered him, ‘We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?’”

Dr. Spencer: To which Jesus replied, in Verses 34-36, “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

The bottom line is that everyone is a slave to his fundamental nature. The fundamental nature of unregenerate people is sinful and they are slaves of sin. The fundamental nature of regenerate, or born-again, people has been changed. They are now slaves to righteousness and are owned by their Lord, Jesus Christ.

Marc Roby: Although, as our listener points out in his question, our sinful nature has not been removed.

Dr. Spencer: No, it hasn’t. And so we have a battle to fight. But let’s get back to looking at Peter’s letter. After identifying himself, the apostle goes on in 2 Peter 1:2-4 to greet his readers and tell them that God has provided everything that they need for life and godliness.

Marc Roby: And godliness, of course, refers to living a life that is obedient to God’s revealed will. In other words, obedient to his laws.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. In other words, to overcome our sinful nature. And then Peter speaks about God’s precious promises and says that we may escape the corruption in this world caused by evil desires. Then, in 2 Peter 1:5-7 he writes, “For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.”

Marc Roby: That is quite a list of Christian virtues.

Dr. Spencer: And in Verse 8 Peter tells us why they are so important. He says, “For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and

unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Notice that we are to possess these qualities in increasing measure. That is progressive sanctification. And when Peter says that doing that will keep us from being ineffective and unproductive in our knowledge of Christ, he is really saying our sanctification will prevent us from being deceived by a phony faith.

Marc Roby: James wrote in James 2:26 that “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”

Dr. Spencer: And Peter wants us to avoid a dead faith. A person who has just died may look like he is only asleep. The body looks the same. But a body without the spirit is dead. And so-called faith without any good deeds, without any fruit, without any progress in sanctification, is a dead faith that will condemn you. It is the faith that Jesus spoke of in Matthew 7:21 when he said that “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” If you don’t have any obedience, any good works, you have a phony faith, a dead faith, and it will not save you. And that is why sanctification is so important. We must see the Christian virtues listed in 2 Peter 1 and elsewhere in Scripture showing up in our lives in increasing measure.

Marc Roby: Alright, but how does all this answer the question asked at the beginning of the session?

Dr. Spencer: Well, so far all I’ve done is make the point that our victory is certain *if* – and this is the most important question in life – our victory is certain *if* we have been born again. So the first thing I want us to know about sanctification, is that it demonstrates our faith is real.

We are never perfectly obedient in this life, but we can be encouraged by the fact that we *long* to be more obedient and are improving. When we do sin, if we truly repent, get up and move on with a firm resolve to not sin again, that is a very good sign that we have been born again. And then, if we look back on our lives and see progress in holiness, that is also a very good sign. We should realize that it is God working in us and he will not fail.

Marc Roby: We are told explicitly in Philippians 2:12-13 that God works in us in our sanctification. Paul wrote, “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”

Dr. Spencer: That is a great statement and it should provide encouragement to every believer. And it starts with “therefore” because Paul had just gone over the amazing passage about the humble obedience of Jesus Christ in accomplishing our redemption and he had called on us to be encouraged by that work and to strive to do the same.

God promises us victory in our battle with sin. In 1 Corinthians 10:13 we are told that “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”

Marc Roby: That is a wonderful promise. And all of this all seems like a reasonable prelude, but it still leaves unanswered the basic question our listener asked. How do we fight against and overcome our sinful nature?

Dr. Spencer: Well, the first step in winning any fight is to recognize who the enemy is. We must try to understand our enemy's strengths and weaknesses as well as his methods. In our session last week, I quoted Ephesians 6:12, which tells us that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." That is the first thing we must know. Our enemy is spiritual. Our external enemy is Satan and those under his rule.

Marc Roby: And Satan is much more powerful than we are.

Dr. Spencer: That's true. But there is great encouragement available for us in spite of this fact. In his first letter, the apostle John speaks about spirits in the world who do not acknowledge Christ and he calls them anti-Christ. Then, in 1 John 4:4 he wrote, "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."

Marc Roby: Now, that is great encouragement. Satan is powerful, but the one who is in us is even more powerful.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, God is infinitely more powerful than Satan. Satan is a fallen, rebellious creature, that is his weakness. He is not God. God made all things. There is no comparison and no contest. Satan cannot do anything without God's permission.

Marc Roby: Alright, so Satan's strength is that he is much more powerful than we are, and his weakness is that he is completely powerless against God.

Dr. Spencer: Right. And the fact that he is much more powerful than we are makes it obvious that we can't be victorious over him on our own. We must depend on God.

Marc Roby: That is all reasonable. You also said though that we need to know our enemy's methods. What do we know about Satan's methods?

Dr. Spencer: Well, there is mystery here in terms of exactly what power Satan has, but we must always remember he is a creature. He is *not* omnipotent, nor does he know all things. And, fortunately, the Bible tells us what we do need to know about his power.

For example, in his second letter to the church in Corinth, in 2 Corinthians 2:9-11, the apostle Paul refers to his first letter to that church. And he says, "The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes."

Marc Roby: I think those statements require some explanation.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. Paul's first letter to this church had contained some hard counsel, he had commanded them to put an unrepentant sinner out of the church. And the church had obeyed that counsel.

Marc Roby: And the man's excommunication had brought about the desired result, he repented.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, he did. Which then led the apostle to tell the church to forgive him fully and accept him back into fellowship. And so he says in the passage I just read that he also forgives the man in the sight of Christ and that he does this so that Satan will not outwit them. Paul's meaning is clear. Satan brings all sorts of temptations to people. In this case, I'm sure that at least some people in the Corinthian church were tempted to not obey Paul's original counsel to put the man out of fellowship. That is a difficult thing to do. Had the church given in to that temptation, Satan would have won a minor skirmish.

Marc Roby: But he can never win the war as we noted earlier.

Dr. Spencer: Thank God that's true. But he would have, to use Paul's phrase, outwitted them by causing them to sin. And by not exercising discipline, the church would also have failed to bring the man to repentance. So his sin would have continued and both he and the church would have been weakened and suffered as a result.

Marc Roby: But the church did obey the apostle and put the man out.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, and he repented as you noted. Therefore, Paul says in this second letter that they need to completely forgive, which is one of the most difficult things people are commanded to do. We aren't very good at forgiving. But Paul notes that if they fail to forgive, that would yet again be an example of Satan outwitting them.

Marc Roby: Certainly we are strongly tempted to not fully forgive others even when they ask us.

Dr. Spencer: And it is a temptation that comes from Satan, aided and abetted by our sinful nature of course. And Paul says that we should not fall into this trap. He says that we are not unaware of Satan's schemes. The Greek word translated as "schemes" here is νόημα (noēma), which can also be translated as thoughts. For example, in 2 Corinthians 10:5, which says that "we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ", the same Greek word is translated as "thought". So the idea is clear. Satan will prompt us to think in ways that are sinful.

Marc Roby: And, as you noted, he is aided in that task by our sinful nature.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, he is. I'm sure that sometimes he doesn't have to do much, if anything at all. But we are to recognize when thoughts are sinful and we are to oppose them.

Marc Roby: Well, we have provided the first step in answering our listener's question, we need to understand our enemy. I look forward to hearing the rest of your answer, but we are out of time for today, so now I'd like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We will do our best to answer you.