

## **WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH XIII**

*(Reading: Romans 6:1-14; 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 3:7-18)*

### **How Holiness Draws Us Closer To His Face!**

In the forests of northern Europe and Asia there lives a little animal called the ermine. This animal is known for his snow-white fur in winter. It's a white coat that he instinctively protects against anything that would make it dirty.

The fur hunters take advantage of this unusual trait of the ermine. You see, they don't set a snare to catch him. Instead they find his home, usually a cleft in a rock or a hollow in an old tree. They smear the entrance and inside of his home with grime.

Then the hunters set their dogs loose to find and chase the ermine. The frightened animal flees toward home but won't enter there because of the filth. Rather than soil his white coat, he is trapped by the dogs and captured while preserving his purity. For the ermine, purity is more precious than life.

What a description of the Christian life! The Lord wants His people to keep themselves separated from the filth of this world at all cost. In fact, what God is doing in us is to become more and more like that ermine, because we are becoming renewed in the image of God. And so we are more and more dying to sin, and living to righteousness.

This is what the 13<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith is about.

### **What God is Working Out in Us**

We begin in drawing out its scriptural teaching by noting, in the first place, WHAT GOD IS WORKING OUT IN US. The first Article here brings this out.

After we have seen the benefits of God's effectively calling us in justification and adoption, we come to the benefit of sanctification. This is why this Chapter begins, "They, who are once effectually called, and regenerated, having a new heart, and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection."

Here we see the nurture and development of the new nature. For while we have seen that justification by faith in Chapter 11 Article 2 is about the "receiving and resting on Christ and His righteousness" we are now also seeing that that is not alone in the person justified. As Chapter 11 Article 2 alluded to, it "is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but works by love."

So when this first Article of Chapter 13 speaks of possessing this righteousness "really and personally" it's talking about sanctification. The word "personally" shows how what this is describing is part of our relationship to the Lord. Sanctification means "making holy" and holy means "belonging to God".

We know this was done in our justification. That was when we were released from the guilt which alienated us from God. And adoption admitted us into the family of God.

But, now, this is about how you, by God's free grace made to belong to God, are becoming the kind of person fit to belong to God. This is the "new man" the apostle Paul speaks about. As we read in Romans 6 verse 6, "For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the old body of death might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves to sin - because anyone who has died has been freed from sin."

So when the apostle John, in his first letter chapter 3 verse 9, speaks about someone born of God not continuing to sin, this is what he means. The believer is constantly at war with this world. Even though sometimes he seems to be so much under the influence and power of this world he's not sitting still inside. He simply cannot!

Here we enter an area where there has been much misunderstanding, for there is a teaching, commonly called "perfectionism", which believes in the opposite. It teaches that only some believers get freed from the power of sin. They will talk about the difference between 'carnal' and 'born-again' Christians, and so it is as though there are two levels in the Church.

But the Bible is quite clear that's not true. Romans 8 verse 14 says that "those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God." Since we're sons we're all born of God. And being born of God means you cannot sin in the way that it's sin which is running your life.

John Newton showed this. Some two or three years before his death, his eye-sight was that bad he couldn't read anymore, but he kept to his custom that when the family prayers were done after breakfast and a passage from the Bible was read out, he would briefly explain it.

One morning this phrase from 1st Corinthians 15 verse 10 was quoted, 'By the grace of God I am what I am.' Newton pause for a moment before he spoke this touching personal testimony: "I am not what I **ought** to be. Ah, how imperfect and deficient! I am not what I **wish** to be. I abhor what is evil, and I would cleave to what is good. I am not what I **hope** to be. Soon, soon, I shall put off mortality, and with mortality all sin and imperfection.

"Yet, though I am not what I **ought** to be, nor what I **wish** to be, nor what I **hope** to be, I can truly say, I am not what I **once** was - a slave to sin and Satan. I heartily join with the apostle, and acknowledge, 'By the grace of God, I am what I am.'"

This is the true scriptural picture as to what sanctification is. It shows that you cannot claim not to sin anymore. As 1<sup>st</sup> John 1 verse 8 says, that itself is a sin!

Sanctification is the work of God's grace. So it's relevant that the verbs in Article 1 are all in the passive voice. But this is not a process of pure passivity, as though we were having an operation performed on us under an anaesthetic. It's this very grace of God which calls us into action. That's practising "true holiness". We are sanctified "really and personally" - not "magically and mechanically"!

This is what Hebrews 12 verse 14 means. It says to us, "Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord."

### **Where God is Working it Out in Us**

So having seen WHAT GOD IS WORKING OUT IN US we turn in Article 2 to WHERE GOD IS WORKING IT OUT IN US. For we have seen that sin isn't wiped out in every true believer. Rather, it's the power and love of sin which has been broken. So sin's not completely gone. Here G.I. Williamson has a helpful analogy about sin. He says this sin is like the penicillin that may break a fever, thus destroying the dominion of a disease, yet there's still some time before every trace of the disease is eliminated.

He further compares it to when the Allied armies invaded Europe and destroyed the threat of Hitler's hope of world domination. For while the end was in sight there was still a time before he was completely defeated.

In the same way there are still some remnants of corruption in every part, as Article 2 confesses. There's fighting going on - "the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh." This is what the apostle Peter urges us, in his first letter chapter 2 verse 11, to do, for there he writes, "Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul."

And let's understand that when Article 2 talks about the flesh it's about what belongs to sin, this world and Satan. That's why the Spirit is spelt with a capital "S". That's the victory God is working out in our lives. The victory Christ claimed for all time on Calvary!

This is illustrated in Jeremiah 18. There the prophet learned something about God in a potter's shop. The craftsman was working at his wheel, shaping a pot from the clay that swirled through his hands. Then something went wrong. Perhaps there was some impurity in the clay. But the potter didn't toss the clay aside. Instead, he started forming another pot with a new design. That's a picture of how our Lord works. He's continually shaping His people. He takes our flawed material and turns it into a new creation.

But notice something else about the potter and the wheel: A potter must be willing to get his hands into the clay. God is involved with his creation - and God is involved with you. He doesn't stand at a distance. He gets right into it. His fingers and hands are getting dirty. And that's exactly so that we'll be moulded and shaped to be like His Son. As Article 2 begins, "This sanctification is throughout, in the whole man."

How can you know it's happening in you? It's actually because you notice sin that much more.

This is what a mature Christian couple testified. When someone said to them that after all those years of growing in the faith sin would be a lot less of a problem, they said, "Actually, it quite the opposite! The more we mature the greater we see the sin between us and the Lord. And those things which were only small pebbles before we now see as huge rocks in the way!"

Friend, if more and more sin disturbs you and frustrates you, then be assured that more and more God is working on you. Because then, in the third place, you're seeing **WHY GOD IS WORKING IT OUT IN US.**

### **Why God is Working it Out in Us**

We have seen that in Christ the victory was won. Because of that we are in one sense already sanctified - we are already holy. But there's the sense we have in this Chapter of the Westminster that it's what God is still working out.

We have to see that that's what God is doing. For many think that an instant miracle or a quick answer to prayer is what God does. But it's actually what He does in us day by day, week by week, month by month, and year by year, that are the true miracles. For just as physically it takes much time to produce the strapping specimens of humanity we now are, so it is spiritually.

Because you're still here, God's still working on you. He's got more for you to learn and to do. So don't despair. Even if you're old and frail, put it in God's plan, for He uses even the weakest means to fulfil His will. He's busy with you still!

There is a story told about Robert the Bruce. He was the man who won back Scotland's independence and so restored the Scottish monarchy.

After a day when he had been spying out the enemy, he was laying down that night in a barn, belonging to a loyal cottager. In the morning, while he was still resting, he noticed a spider climbing up the beam of the roof. The insect fell to the ground. But straightaway he made a second attempt to ascend.

Well, that caught Robert's attention. But with regret he saw the spider fail a second time. It made a third unsuccessful attempt. Concerned and curious, Robert noticed that this happened twelve times. Only on its thirteenth attempt did it get to the top! Bruce got up. He said, "This despicable insect has taught me perseverance. I will follow its example. Have I not been twelve times defeated by the enemy's superior force? On one more fight hangs the independence of my country."

In a few days it all came true. There was the famous victory at the battle of Bannockburn. A victory all true Scotsmen still remember to this day!

Dear Christian, let us learn the same. We have to keep on keeping on. This struggle goes right throughout this life. You see, within this life sin is always right there with us. We can't be perfect in this life.

But we grow in grace because we hope in the perfection coming in the next life. As Paul says in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 3 verse 18, "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Sanctification is the current which flows between the two poles of grace and glory. Let's see that. And let's look for that!