



Articles and Sermons :: The Self Can't Be Improved

The Self Can't Be Improved, on: 2016/5/12 13:47

Our great error is in thinking that our human selves can be improved. And we think that because we have this false concept of being separated self-developing selves. This is false deception from the spirit of error. But in Christ we are not separated. We are in an eternal union. That is what, we were crucified with Him, buried with Him, risen with Him, means. That is the symbol of the Lord's Supper, eating His flesh and drinking His blood. From the moment we received Him, we were restored through Him to the eternal union, which I prefer to call unity, because union keeps the attention on the two, whereas unity settles us in the realization of something eternally indivisible--which is the fact by grace.

The relationship in this unity is positive and negative, so that all the illustrations given in the Bible point to that. We are branches in the Vine. The branch is the negative means by which the Vine can bear its fruit. But it is a unity, and when we see a vine we really only see its straggling branches and we call that the vine. The branches are the vine in their branch forms, and we are Christ in our human forms.

We are called the body of Christ. The body is the negative to the head, by which the head goes into action. But head and body are a unity. So Paul called the body Christ in 1 Corinthians 12:12.

We are called the temples of the living God, the buildings in which God may be seen; and we are the earthen vessels whose treasure is the Christ within. Temple and vessel don't illustrate the unity, but do make it plain that they are merely negative containers, and we don't look for change or improvement in them.

So then how does this all work out? First, by a recognition, which is a revelation, that the human self by itself can only be motivated by its own self-interests; for its only true place in creation is in its unity with God, as the means by which He manifests Himself in other love through our human selves. Apart from our destined place in the unity, we can only be self-loving selves. Therefore it is useless and a waste of time for us to ask God to make us loving, or patient or pure, or free us from human reactions of hate or fear or worry or depression. It is asking an absurdity and an impossibility. The human self can never change. The vessel can never be the living water it contains. The branch cannot be the vine.

When that recognition is a reality to us, then we can start by accepting ourselves in our weakness and all normal human reactions. In this distorted world we are besieged all day long by fear and doubt and hate and worry and all the rest of them. To feel them is normal, not wrong. We shall always be responding to them. We hate or dislike this person. We are jealous of that one. We are afraid of what we are called on to do. We are worried by daily problems. We have fits of deep depression. Our minds are assaulted by all kinds of wrong thinking. If we struggle against them, what help is that? If we condemn ourselves for such reactions, we remain still bound and full of guilt. If we call on God to help or change us, we don't get changed, or maybe just a momentary relief.

Then on what grounds can we accept ourselves? Because of this great revelation: we are merely the negative joined to the Positive. We are no longer we, but Christ in us. Christ the real we! Listen to Paul. He starts by saying Christ died for us, then speaks of the Lord with us, and goes on to his special revelation of Christ in us; but he ends up, when he gives his personal witness, by Christ is the real I. "I live," he says in Galatians 2:20. "No," he corrects himself. "It is not I, but Christ living in me." Christ not with, not in, but replacing Paul, Christ in Paul's form. And Christ in your and my form. Put your name there. You are Christ in Jack's form, Christ in Elizabeth's form, I, Christ in Norman's form, and so on.

Now, in the light of this revelation, when we in our humanity are moved in this direction or that by our negative reactions, we don't struggle, we don't condemn, we above all don't try to change ourselves (trying to be good is the worst sin); no, we replace. We transfer our inner believing from what has its hold on us because we are believing in it, fear, lust, hate, etc., and attach our believing to who we really are, not our human selves, but Christ in ourselves. And as we affirm and recognize Him, He who is the peace, love, courage, purity, manifests Himself in and by us.

There is the secret--discovering who we really are. We have come back home at last as the branch in the Vine and the Vine in the branch. "Abiding" in that John 15 chapter is, in the Greek, just "remaining"; and we remain by simple faith-recognition. The negative to God the Positive, and necessary as a negative, for only when we are consciously weak, as Paul said, then His strength is perfectly manifested. When we are fearing, He is the courage. When we dislike, He is the love. And Paul goes as far as to say he personally takes pleasure in negative situations of weakness, hurts, needs, proble

ms, for when he is weak, then he is strong.

There is no doubt that this is the biggest tie-up in thousands of God's people; in fact all of us have to start tangled to get the knots untied. We are just so bogged down in taking ourselves for granted as normal functioning people, and we are so used to preserving an image, that it is a second spiritual breakthrough for us to grasp the fact of helplessness. We had come to acknowledge that we had not kept God's law and were guilty sinners. But it is another thing, when we are the Lord's, to discover and admit that we are also helpless saints. We can't do it, and not only can't but are not meant to. We call that the second collapse.

That is the whole meaning of Paul saying we can have dominion over sin, because we are not under the law. This is why there is that important chapter of Romans 7, which has been such a ground of puzzlement and controversy. There it is sandwiched in between the two victory chapters: in Romans 6, in Christ's death we are cut off from the former control of the spirit of self-centredness, "dead to sin"; in Romans 8 we are joined to Christ in resurrection life, by His Spirit replacing that former spirit in us. Then in between comes Romans 7, saying we are not only dead to sin, but dead to the law. Why? Because if we are to function as living sons, we must know once for all in what sense our human selves can be manifestations of Christ.

So Romans 7 is the human self which now has God's Spirit and delights in His law in the inward man, and wills to do it, and serves the law of God with the renewed mind. But self, when regarded as just by itself, has the virus of independence and self-reliance which Paul calls "the sin that dwelleth in us." That is the Satanic spirit of self-sufficiency which he calls sin. So the moment we humans, not yet recognizing Christ in us as the only keeper of His own law, want ourselves to keep it, and slip into this old habit of thinking we can do it, then down we fall. We can't do what we would, and do what we should not. Oh wretched man! And the law of God stands there to demand of us that we keep it, if we think we can! Then at last it dawns. Our human self is now a container of Another Self, Christ, the Spirit of Christ. We never were meant as humans to keep God's laws of self-giving love.

Left to our human selves, we can only be ourselves and love ourselves. But this is just why Christ has come into us--to replace that evil spirit of self-centredness by which we had lived. By ourselves, we would still remain self-loving selves, but we are not ourselves any more. By inner union, Christ is our real self. So what do we now do? We tell the law it is no good its shouting at us, because we can't fulfill it, were never meant to; but we contain the One who can and does. So the law has not a thing more to say to us or demand of us. We are "dead to the law" in Christ. And now we are free by simple recognition that Christ in us, Christ as us, keeps His own law in us, so that "the righteousness of the law is fulfilled in us" who are now walking by inner recognition of the Spirit, and not recognition of that old self-effort.

How thankful I was when, as a young missionary, longing to be "improved"--to love more, have more faith, the Spirit said to me, "Drop that. You can never be improved. You are just a vessel." And then He showed me that simple fact that God is love, not has love, and I saw for the first time that love is a person, God Himself; and that it was not a matter of my being made loving, but of me being the vessel which contained Him who is the love. I learned then to change from the false idea of becoming something to containing Someone.