

"WHAT GOD HATH WROUGHT"

(Romans 8:12-17)

(Abraham Kuruvilla)

This discussion of practical, ongoing sanctification and alignment to Christ's image, and of the responsibility of God's people to apply Scripture (thus moving closer to Christlikeness), should not be misconstrued as a sort of do-it-yourself lifting up of oneself by one's own theological bootstraps.¹ Not at all! The gradual conformation to the image of Christ in this life (and ultimate conformation in the next) is a matter of God's grace—notwithstanding the component of human responsibility to obey divine will. Here I echo Wright:

Everything . . . about moral effort, about the conscious shaping of our patterns of behavior, takes place simply and solely within the framework of grace—the grace which was embodied in Jesus and his death and resurrection, the grace which is active in the Spirit-filled preaching of the gospel, the grace which continues to be active by the Spirit in the lives of believers. It is simply not the case that God does some of the work of our salvation and we have to do the rest. It is not the case that we begin by being justified by grace through faith and then have to go to work all by ourselves to complete the job by struggling, unaided, to live a holy life.²

Without the grace extended to humanity in Christ, the law of God in every age is shown up for its incapacity: in and of itself law can do nothing to justify the sinner, it has no expiatory provision to wipe away sin, it exercises no forgiving grace to effect reconciliation with God, and it cannot empower obedience to its own requirements. All law does is depict God's holy standard and pronounce sentence upon those who contravene that standard. But with Christ, all things have been made anew: sinners have been justified, sin expiated, forgiveness gained, and reconciliation with God accomplished for those who believe in Jesus Christ as their only God and Savior. And it is not just his atonement that is efficacious for believers' sanctification, but also his ongoing ministry before the Father for the ones he redeemed: his intercession for them (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25) and his advocacy on their behalf (Heb. 9:24; 1 John 2:1).

But this newness of creation that the Christian is does not nullify the call of God in each pericope of Scripture: relationship with God mandates responsibility toward God. So there is yet another aspect of the work of Christ that is crucial to the Christian's sanctification: Christ's sending of the Holy Spirit (John 14:16; 15:26; 16:7) and Christ's baptism of believers in that divine Spirit, uniting them to himself (Mark 1:8; Rom. 6:3-14; 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27). And with this indwelling of the Holy Spirit in believers, a new life is begun, and they are enabled to fulfill the call of God in all of Scripture. Indeed, Christ's work was accomplished so that God's will (his "righteous requirement") may be fulfilled by his Spirit-indwelt and Spirit-empowered children, "who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Rom. 8:4, 12-16). That it is the Holy Spirit who gives one the ability to obey God is also established by the Old Testament: see, for example, Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:26-28; 37:1-28.³ All of Scripture attests to the working of God through the



¹ Bryan Chapell labels such an approach "sola bootstraps"! *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 289.

² N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 60.

³ In the New Testament, Jesus declares, "Apart from me you are not able to do anything" (John 15:5). Also see 1 Cor. 4:7; 2 Cor. 3:5; 4:7; 8:1 with 8:7 (the grace of God becomes the Macedonians' own work of grace); 12:9-10; Gal. 6:3; Eph. 4:7; 1 Thess. 5:24; and 1 Pet. 4:10-11.

Spirit in and with the work of his children (John 15:5; Eph. 2:10; 3:16; Phil. 2:13; 4:13; Col. 1:9-11), enabling a life of obedience that pleases him (Heb. 13:20-21; also Phil. 2:12-13; Heb. 13:16; 1 John 3:22).⁴

All that to say, it is all of grace, yet there is Christian responsibility. How practical sanctification unto Christlikeness is both a function of divine sovereignty and human responsibility is an inscrutable question. "We are here, as so often in theology, at the borders of language, because we are trying to talk at the same time about 'something God does' and 'something humans do' as if God were simply another character like ourselves, as though (in other words) the interplay of God's work and our work could be imagined on the model of two people collaborating on a project. There are mysteries here."⁵

In sum, the child of God is never to attempt obedience with self-resources: that would be a self-glorifying, flesh-driven, merit-attempting, grace-rejecting, faith-negating obedience to divine law—the legalism Paul so often excoriated. Utterly futile. Instead, the "obedience of faith" (Rom. 1:5; 16:26) that God empowers is a God-glorifying, Spirit-driven, merit-rejecting, grace-accepting, faith-exercising endeavor. So, Christian life, in its entirety, is a function of divine grace, designed to bring glory to God: the Father's choice of men and women to become a holy people in Christ (justification), their empowerment by the Spirit to live lives that are Christlike (sanctification), and, one day, consummation of their transformation into the image of Jesus Christ (glorification).

And so with the author of Hebrews we can affirm that God is the one equipping his children to do his will, even as God himself does it all (13:20-21)—that is how God is pleased and glorified: "Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep . . . even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do [ποιέω, poieō: human doing] his will, he doing [ποιέω]: divine doing] in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen!"

⁴ Such a life is one that is lived in a manner "worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phi . 1:27), "worthy of the God who calls [us] into his own kingdom and glory" (1 Thess. 2:12). This is to "walk" in "good works, which God prepared beforehand, so that we would walk in them" (Eph. 2:10) and not "walk" in trespasses and sins (2:1-2). Undoubtedly, benefits accrue from God's pleasure, even though his people's obedience is a consequence of God's own gracious operation in them. Jesus himself declared, "If keep my commandments, you will remain in my love" (John 15:10; you also see 1 John 2:5; 4:12). The Bible is clear that the one who walks with God is blessed—and not just in eternity: for instance, the promises of peace (in Rom. 8:6; 2 Cor. 13:11; Gal. 6:16; Phil. 4:6-7) are fulfilled when the child of God adopts certain kinds of behaviors (but this is not gain of salvation: Eph. 2:8-9). Any positive consequence from any divinely prescribed and powered behavior is, in the end, an act of divine grace—divine "blessing." On the other side, there are also consequences for the child of God who disobeys divine will (but this is not loss of salvation: Rom. 8:1). Besides, there are eternal rewards for obedience (and loss of rewards for disobedience): Matt. 6:1-4; Rom. 14:10-12; 1 Cor. 3:13; 4:5; 9:24; 2 Cor. 5:10; Col. 3:22-25; 2 Tim. 2:5; James 5:7-11; 1 John 2:28.

⁵ Wright, *After You Believe*, 97. As Gal. 4:19 indicates, the maturation of Christians is the process of Christ being "formed" in them, a work empowered by the Holy Spirit (3:3). Indeed, believers "work out" their own salvation—, acknowledging, at the same time, that it is God who is at "work [ἐνεργέω, energeō a divine work] in you, both to will and to work [ἐνεργέω]—a human work] for his pleasure" (Phil. 2:12-13). A mystery, indeed!