



The Ultimate Question

by Steve Gallagher

One of the very real questions I have had to face in ministry is whether or not men in habitual sexual sin are truly saved. I have diligently studied the issue in Scripture with some of the best teachers from the three great schools of thought: Calvinism, Fundamentalism and Arminianism. After 20 years of sincerely considering this question with an open mind, I think I have finally arrived at a conclusion with which I am satisfied.

Before that question can be answered, a more fundamental one must be addressed: What does it mean to be saved? It was in the great "grace chapter" of Ephesians two that everything began to make sense to me. Look at the description of the unbeliever's life presented there:

- They are dead in their trespasses and sins
- They walk according to the course of this world
- They walk according to the prince of the power of the air
- They indulge the desires of the flesh and mind
- They are by nature children of wrath

The next five verses indicate a change in the lives of those who have been regenerated that can be described as nothing less than spectacular:

- God made them alive together with Christ
- God raised them up with Him
- God seated them with Him in the heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus,
- God showed them the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness
- God created them for good works, which were prepared beforehand

It isn't difficult to see the stunning difference between these two groups. There seems to be a great chasm separating them. Paul elsewhere describes this transformation in this way: "For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son." (Colossians 1:13) He also wrote, "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come." (II Corinthians 5:17) Unquestionably, the true believer experiences a dramatic inward change.

This brings us to those men who seem to be standing with one foot in the domain of darkness and one foot in the Kingdom of God. Is it possible to be in both?

The apostle John made a statement that at first glance seems to solve the mystery. "The one who practices sin is of the devil... No one who is born of God practices sin..." (1 John 3:8-9) Taken at face value, these statements could easily cause one to conclude that anyone bound in habitual sin is not truly a believer. But 20 years of ministering to sexual addicts causes me to hesitate to accept such a simple explanation. Instead, experience seems to tell me that there are two distinct groups of "Christian" men bound up in sin. First, there are those who have truly been born anew but have not yet completely broken away from their past life of sin. As the man draws spiritual strength through his relationship with Christ, the longstanding habit gradually loses its power. His growing love for God is displacing his idolatrous love for sin.

The second group would be constituted as “tares,” men who have had some kind of religious experience that hasn’t actually taken hold in their hearts: “they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away.” (Luke 8:13) It seems that they have drawn near to the Light, but have drifted away from it without having experienced a true conversion. I call them tares because they continue in church alongside true believers, even though they really cannot be considered such.

How can a person in habitual sin know to which group he belongs? Well, let me first say that most insincere people don’t tend to question their salvation. They are presumptuous with God’s grace and assume because they have had some kind of encounter with Him that they are saved.

The difference between tares and wheat is found in the heart. Nothing short of a new heart can bring about the sudden and vivid transformation indicated by the second list above.

The heart is primarily the center of a person’s being: the seat of his emotions, feelings, affections, motives and attitudes. Just like the physical heart pumps life-giving blood throughout the entire physiological being, so too the inner heart of man functions as the nucleus of all that goes on in a person’s life. It is the breeding ground for all of his thinking; the seedbed where ideas are formed, attitudes developed and out of which thoughts spring forth. It is the essence of man’s being.

When God has written His laws on a person’s heart—as the New Covenant promises in Jeremiah 31—the basic disposition of his life changes. There is more to this than simply changing one’s speech, stopping some bad habits and going to church. He now walks “in newness of life;” or as Jesus put it: “From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.” (John 7:38)

One minister expressed it this way: “At the moment of regeneration Christ enters the deepest being of man — enters that which underlies all faculties — changes it; makes it His Holy of Holies, and from it works through the whole range of man’s nature. Christ is at the very center of our being, and becomes so interlaced with it as to be present in all our life, to think in our thoughts, to speak in our words, to act in our actions.”

With a new heart come new desires. Whereas once his life revolved around the things of this world, now his greatest passion is the Kingdom of God. The Word of God thrills him. He may not be free from outward sin, but his attitude toward it is different. It is losing its luster. He is increasingly growing in love with Jesus Christ. As his relationship with God continues to grow, his spiritual lapses occur increasingly less frequently. Eventually, he looks back upon his life and realizes he hasn’t fallen into his old pet sin in quite some time. He is free!

Perhaps this is why Martyn Lloyd-Jones, one of the great Reformed teachers of the 20th Century, asked what he considered to be the clarifying question: “The greatest desire of the true Christian is to draw nearer to God. Can you say, honestly, that the greatest thing you desire at this moment is to know God better, and to realize His presence? If you can, you are a Christian. If you cannot, you had better examine the foundations again; for when a man is in Christ he has a new nature, and this new nature cries out for God.”

Is a man bound by habitual sexual sin truly saved? Ultimately, I suppose “The proof is in the pudding.” If a person has truly been regenerated, sin will not hold him. It will only be a matter of time before his old habits of sin are gone and he is enjoying the liberty of Christ. If he has not been converted, though he possesses a form of godliness, it is unlikely that he will find freedom from sin’s malignant power. The proof is in the pudding.

Steve Gallagher is the founder of Pure Life Ministries. He has dedicated his life to helping men find freedom from sexual sin and the abundant life in God that comes through deep repentance.

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