

Christian perfection: What is it?

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There are few thoughtful students of the New Testament who have not, at some time or another, felt a little perplexed as to the real force and application of the word "perfect," which is of frequent occurrence. This word is used in such a variety of connections that it is deeply important we should be clear as to what the Holy Ghost means by it in each particular case. We believe the context will, generally speaking, guide as to a right understanding of the just sense and application of the word in any given passage.

We are aware that the subject of "Christian perfection" has given rise to much theological strife and controversy; but we must at the outset assure our readers that it is not by any means our intention to take up the question in a controversial way; we shall merely seek to bring under their notice the various passages in the New Testament in which the word "perfect" occurs, or at least some of the leading instances of its use, trusting the Lord to use what He may give us to write, for the glory of His name and the profit of those precious souls for whom we ever desire to write. We shall not trace the word in the order in which it occurs, but rather in that order which the real need of the soul would naturally suggest. In this way we shall find that the first great aspect of Christian perfection is presented to us in the ninth verse of the ninth chapter of Hebrews, and may be denominated *perfection as to the state of the conscience*.

"Which was a figure for the time then present, in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices, that could not make him that did the service *perfect* [*teleiosai*] as pertaining to the conscience." The apostle, in this passage, is drawing a contrast between the sacrifices under the Mosaic economy, and the sacrifice of Christ. The former could never give a perfect conscience, simply because they were imperfect in themselves. It was impossible that the blood of a bullock or of a goat could ever give a perfect conscience. It might avail for a day, a month, or a year, but no longer. Hence, therefore, the conscience of a Jewish worshipper was never perfect. He had not, if we may use the expression, reached his moral end as to the condition of his conscience. He could never say that his conscience was perfectly purged, because he had not yet reached a perfect sacrifice.

With the Christian worshipper, however, it is different. He has, blessed be God, reached his moral end. He has arrived at a point, so far as the state of his conscience is concerned, beyond which it is utterly impossible for him to go. He cannot get beyond the blood of Jesus Christ. He is perfect as to his conscience. As is the sacrifice, so is the conscience that rests thereon. If the sacrifice is imperfect, so is the conscience. They stand or fall together. Nothing can be simpler, nothing more solid, nothing more consolatory, for any awakened conscience. It is not at all a question of what I am; *that* has been fully and forever settled. I have been found out, judged, and condemned in myself. "In me, that is in my flesh, dwelleth no good." I have got to the end of myself, and there I have reached the blood of Christ. I want no more. What could be added to that most precious blood? Nothing. I am perfect, as to the state of my conscience. I do not want an ordinance, a sacrament, or a ceremony, to perfect the condition of my conscience. To say so, to think so, would be to cast dishonour upon the sacrifice of the Son of God.

The reader will do well to get a clear and firm hold of this foundation-point. If there be any darkness or uncertainty as to this, he will be wholly unable to understand or appreciate the various aspects of "Christian perfection" which are yet to pass in review before us. It is quite possible that many pious people fail to enjoy the unspeakable blessing of a perfect conscience by reason of self-

occupation They look in at self, and not finding aught there to rest upon — who ever did? — they deem it presumption to think of being perfect in any respect whatever. This is a mistake. It may be a pious mistake, but it is a mistake. Were we to speak of perfection in the flesh (what many, alas, are vainly aiming at), then, verily, true piety might recoil with just horror from the presumptuous and silly chimera.

But, thank God, our theme is not perfection in the flesh, through any process of improvement, moral, social, or religious. This would be poor, dreary, depressing work indeed. It would be setting us to look for perfection in the old creation, where sin and death reign. To look for perfection amid the dust of the old creation were a hopeless task. And yet how many are thus engaged! They are seeking to *improve man and mend the world* and yet, with all this, they have never reached, never understood — yea, they actually deny — the very first and simplest aspect of Christian perfection, namely, perfection as to the state of the conscience in the presence of God.

This latter is our thesis, and we want the anxious reader to understand it in its simplicity, in order that he may see the solid foundation of his peace laid down by the very hand of God Himself. We want him, ere he lays aside this paper, to enter into the joyful sense of sins perfectly forgiven, and his conscience perfectly purged by the blood of Jesus. The entire matter hinges upon the question of the sacrifice. What has God found in that sacrifice? Perfection. Well, then, that perfection is for you, anxious one, and you should at once and forever enjoy it.

Remember, it is not a question as to what you are, nor yet as to what you think about the blood of Christ. No, the question is, What does God think about the blood of His own Son? This makes all so clear. Say, is it clear to you? Can you now rest in it? Is your conscience set free by being brought in contact with a perfect sacrifice? Oh that it may be so! May God's Spirit now show you the fullness and perfectness of Christ's atoning work with such clearness, vividness and power that your whole being may be emancipated, and your heart filled with praise and thanksgiving!

It makes the heart bleed to think of the thousands of precious souls kept in darkness and bondage when they ought to be walking in the light and liberty which flow from a perfectly purged conscience. So many things are mixed up with the simple testimony of the Word and Spirit of God as to the value of Christ's work that it is wholly impossible for the heart to get liberated. You will get a little bit of Christ, and a little bit of self; a little bit of grace, and a little bit of law; a little bit of faith, and a little bit of works. Thus the soul is kept hovering between confidence and doubt, hope and fear, just as one or other of the ingredients predominates in the mixture, or happens to be tasted at the moment. How rare is the gem of full, free, present, and eternal salvation! We would fain cause that gem to sparkle in all its divine and heavenly lustre under the gaze of the reader at this moment. Then shall the chains of his spiritual bondage drop off. If the Son shall make him free he shall be free indeed, and thus be able to rise in the power of this freedom and trample the legal system beneath his feet.

The more we ponder the question now before us — and we have pondered it a good deal — the more we are convinced that the true secret of all the error, confusion and perplexity in which so many are involved in reference to it will be found in the fact that they do not clearly understand death and resurrection — the new birth — the new creation. Were this grand truth only laid hold of in power it would make all clear as to the state of the conscience. So long as I am seeking to tranquilize my conscience by efforts after self-improvement, so long I must be either miserable or self-deceived. It does not matter in the least what means I adopt in carrying on the process; the issue must be one and the same. If I attempt to take up the profession of Christianity for the purpose of bettering *self*-improving nature or mending my condition in the old creation — I must be a total stranger to the bliss

of a perfect conscience. "All flesh is as grass." The old creation lies under the withering influences of sin and its curse. A risen Christ is the Head of the new creation — "the beginning of the creation of God" — "the first-begotten from among the dead" (*ek ton nekron*)

Here in very deed is perfection for the conscience. What more do I want? I see the One who hung upon the cross, charged with the full weight of all my sins, now crowned with glory and honour at the right hand of God, amid the full blaze of Heaven's majesty. What can be added to this? Do I want ordinances, rites, ceremonies, or sacraments? Surely not. I dare not add aught to the death and resurrection of the eternal Son of God. The ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper symbolise and celebrate that grand reality; and, so far, they are precious to the Christian — most precious. But when, instead of being used to symbolise and celebrate death and resurrection, they are used to displace it — used as patches upon the old creation, as crutches for the old man — they must be regarded as a snare, a curse, from which may the Lord deliver the souls of His people!

We would fain dwell upon this our first point because of its immense importance in this day of ordinances, traditional religion, and self-improvement. We should like to ponder it — to elaborate, illustrate, and enforce it — in order that the reader may get a clear, full, bold grasp of it. But we look to God the Holy Ghost to do His own work in this matter; and if He will graciously bring the heart under the power of the truth which has been so feebly unfolded, then indeed will there be both ability and leisure to look at the second great aspect of Christian perfection, namely, *perfection as to the object of the heart*.

Here, again, we are ushered into the new creation. Christ died to give me a perfect conscience. He lives to give me a perfect object. But it is very clear that until I have tasted the deep blessedness of the former, I can never be properly occupied with the latter. I must have a perfect conscience ere my heart can be at leisure to go out after the Person of Christ. How few of us really taste the sweetness of communion with a risen Christ! How little do any of us know of that fixedness of heart upon Him as our one paramount, engrossing, undivided object! We are occupied with our own things. The world creeps in, in one way or another; we live in the region of nature; we breathe the atmosphere — the dark, heavy, murky atmosphere — of the old creation; self is indulged; and thus our spiritual vision becomes dimmed, we lose our sense of peace, the soul becomes disturbed, the heart unhinged, the Holy Ghost grieved, the conscience exercised. Then the eye is turned in upon self and back upon its actings. The time that else might be spent in holy and happy occupation with our Object is, and must be, devoted to the business of self-judgement — heavy, but needed work! — in order to get back into the enjoyment of what we should never have lost, even a perfect conscience.

Now, the moment the eye is turned off from Christ darkness must set in — oftentimes darkness that may be felt. It is only as the eye is single that the body is full of light. And what is a single eye but having Christ for our one object? It is thus that light divine pours in upon us, until every chamber of our moral being becomes lighted up, and we become lights for others, "as when the bright shining of a candle doth give thee light." In this way the soul is kept happily free from obscurity, perplexity, and anxiety. It finds all its springs in Christ. It is independent of the world, and can move on, singing —

Salvation in that name is found,

Cure for my grief and care;

A healing balm for every wound:

All, all I want is there.

It is impossible for words to convey the power and blessedness of having Jesus ever before the

heart as an object. It is perfection, as we have it in Philippians 3: 15, where the apostle says, "Let us therefore, as many as be *perfect (teleioi)*, be thus minded: and if in anything ye be differently minded (*heteros*). God shall reveal even this unto you." When Christ stands before the heart as our absorbing and satisfying object, we have reached our moral end so far as an object is concerned; for how can we ever get beyond the Person of Christ, in whom dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge? Impossible. We cannot get beyond the blood of Christ, for the conscience; neither can we get beyond the Person of Christ, for the heart; we have therefore reached our moral end in both; we have perfection as to the state of the conscience, and as to the object of the heart.

Here, then, we have both peace and power — peace for the conscience, and power over the affections. It is when the conscience finds sweet repose in the blood that the emancipated affections can go forth and find their full play around the Person of Jesus. And oh, what tongue can tell, what pen unfold, the mighty moral results of gazing upon Christ? "But we all, with open face, beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Cor. 3: 18). Observe, "*Beholding . . . are changed.*" There is no legal bondage — no restless effort — no anxious toiling. We gaze, and gaze, and — what then? Continue to gaze, and as we gaze we become morally assimilated to the blessed Object, through the transforming power of the Holy Ghost. The image of Christ is engraved upon the heart, and reflected back in ten thousand ways in our practical career, from day to day.

Reader, remember, this is the only true idea of Christianity. It is one thing to be a religious man, it is quite another to be a Christian. Paul was a religious man before his conversion; but he was a Christian afterwards. It is well to see this. There is plenty of religion in the world, but, alas, how little Christianity! And why? Simply because Christ is not known, not loved, not cared for, not sought after. And even where His work is looked to for salvation — where His blood is trusted for pardon and peace — how little is known or thought of Himself! We are ready enough to take salvation through the death of Jesus, but oh, how far off do we keep from His blessed Person! How little does He get His true place in our hearts! This is a serious loss. Indeed, we cannot but believe that the pale, flickering light of modern profession is the fruit of habitual distance from Christ, the central sun of Christianity. How can there possibly be light, heat, or fruitfulness, if we wander amid the gloomy vaults and dark tunnels of this world's pleasures, its politics, or its religion? It is vain to expect it. And even where we make salvation our object — when we are occupied with our spiritual condition, feeding upon our experiences and looking after our frames and feelings — we must become weak and low, inasmuch as these things are certainly not Christ.

There are many who, as we say, have retired from the world, have given up its balls, its parties, its theatres, its exhibitions its concerts, its flower shows, its numberless and nameless vanities, who, nevertheless, have not found their object in a risen and glorified Christ. They have retired from the world, but have gone in upon themselves. They are seeking an object *in their religion*; they are engrossed with forms of pietism; they are feeding upon the workings of a morbid conscience or a superstitious mind; or they are trafficking in the experience of yesterday. Now, these persons are just as far from happiness — as far from the true idea of Christianity, as the poor pleasure-hunters of this world. It is quite possible to give up pleasure-hunting and become a religious mope — a morbid, melancholy mystic — a spiritual hypochondriac. What do I gain by the change? Nothing; unless, indeed, it be a vast amount of self-deception. I have retired from the world around, to find an object in the world within — a poor exchange!

How different is this from the true Christian! There he stands, with a tranquilized conscience and

an emancipated heart, gazing upon an object that absorbs his whole soul. He wants no more. Talk to him about this world's pleasure? Ask him, has he been to this or that exhibition? What is his calm and dignified reply? Will he merely tell you of the sin, the harm, of such things? Nay; what then? "I have found my *all* in Christ. I have reached my moral end. I want no more." This is the Christian's reply. It is a poor affair when we come to talk of the harm of this or that. It often happens that persons who speak thus are occupied, not with Christ, but with their own reputation, their character, their consistency with themselves. Of what use is all this? Is it not self-occupation, after all? What we want is to keep the eye fixed on Christ; then the heart will follow the eye, and the feet will follow the heart. In this way our path will be as the shining light, shining more and more until it becomes lost in the blaze of the perfect and everlasting day of glory.

May God, in His infinite mercy, grant to the writer and reader of these pages to know more of what it is to have reached our moral end, both as to the state of the conscience and as to the object of the heart!

In considering the subject of Christian perfection, it might seem sufficient to say that the believer is perfect in a risen Christ: "Complete in Him which is the head of all principality and power." This, surely, comprehends everything. Nothing can be added to the completeness which we have in Christ. All this is blessedly true; but does it not still hold good that the inspired writers use the word "perfect" in various ways? And is it not important that we should understand the sense in which the word is used? This, we presume, will hardly be questioned. We cannot suppose for a moment that any thoughtful reader of Scripture would be satisfied to dismiss the matter without prayerfully seeking to understand the exact force and just application of the word in each particular passage in which it occurs. It is plain that the word "perfect" in Heb. 9: 9 is not applied in the same way as it is in Phil. 3: 15. And is it not right — is it not profitable — is it not due to our own souls and to the sacred volume — to seek, through grace, to understand the difference? For our part, we cannot question it; and in this confidence we can happily pursue our examination of the subject of Christian perfection by calling the reader's attention, in the third place, to *perfection in the principle of our walk*.

This is unfolded to us in Matt. 5: 48: "Be ye therefore perfect (*teleioi*), even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." "How," it may be asked, "can we be perfect as our Father which is in Heaven? How can we reach to such an elevated point as this? How can we attain to so lofty a standard? We can understand our being perfect as to the conscience, inasmuch as this perfection is based upon what Christ has done for us. And we can also understand our being perfect as to the object of the heart, inasmuch as this perfection is based upon what Christ is to us. But to be perfect as our Father in Heaven seems entirely beyond us."

To all this it may be said that our blessed Lord does not ask us to do impossibilities. He never issues a command without furnishing the needed grace to carry it out. Hence therefore, when He calls upon us to be perfect as our Father, it is plain that He confers upon us a holy privilege, that He invests us with a high dignity, and it is our place to seek to understand and appropriate both the one and the other.

What, then, is meant by our being perfect as our Father in Heaven? The context of Matt. 5: 48 furnishes the answer: "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you; that (*hopos*) ye may be the children (*huioi*) of your Father which is in heaven; for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."

Here we have a lovely phase of Christian perfection, namely, perfection in the principle of our walk. We are called to walk in grace toward all, and in so doing to imitators of God as dear children. Our Father sends His sunshine and His showers even upon His enemies. He deals in grace with all. This is our model. Are we formed upon it?

Search and see. Are you perfect in the principle of your walk? Are you dealing grace with your enemies and those who are in your debt? Are you demanding your rights? Are you, in principle, taking your fellow by the throat, and saying, "Pay me that thou owest?" If so, you are not "perfect as your Father." He is dealing in grace, and you are dealing in righteousness. Were He to act as you are acting, the day of grace would close, and the day of vengeance open. Had He dealt with you as you are now dealing with others, you should long since have been in that place where hope is unknown.

Let us ponder this. Let us see to it that we are not misrepresenting our heavenly Father. Let us aim at perfection in the principle of our daily walk. It will cost us something. It may empty the purse, but it will fill the heart; it may contract our pecuniary resources, but it will enlarge our spiritual circle. It will bring us into closer contact and deeper fellowship with our heavenly Father. Is not this worth something? Truly it is. Would that we felt its worth more deeply! Would that we felt more of the dignity conferred upon us in our being called to represent, in this evil, selfish, dark world, our heavenly Father, who pours in rich profusion His blessings upon the unthankful and the unholy. There is no use in preaching grace if we do not act it. It is of little avail to speak of God's dealing in long-suffering mercy if we are dealing in high-handed justice.

But, it may be said by some, "How ever could we carry out such a principle? We should be robbed and ruined. How could business be carried on if we are not to enforce our rights? We should be imposed upon and plundered by the unprincipled and the designing." This is not the mode in which to arrive at a just conclusion on our point. An obedient disciple never says, "How?" The question is, "Does the Lord Jesus call upon me to be perfect as my Father in heaven is perfect?" Assuredly. Well, then, am I aiming at this when I summon my fellow-creature to a bar of justice? Is this like my Father? Is this what He is doing? No; blessed be His name! He is on a throne of grace. He is reconciling the world. He is not imputing trespasses. This is plain enough. It only needs full subjection of heart. Let us bow our souls beneath the weight of this most glorious truth. May we gaze upon this most lovely aspect of Christian perfection, and seek to aim at the attainment of it.

If we pause to reason about results, we shall never reach the truth. What we want is, that moral condition of soul that fully owns the power and authority of the Word. Then, though there may be failure in detail, we have always a touchstone by which to test our ways, and a standard to which to recall the heart and conscience. But if we reason and argue — if we deny that it is our privilege to be perfect in the sense of Matt. 5: 48 — if we justify our going to *law* when our Father is not going to law, but acting in the most unqualified *grace*, we deprive ourselves of that perfect model on which our character and ways should ever be formed.

May God the Holy Spirit enable us to understand, to submit to, and carry out in practical life, this perfect principle! It is most lamentable to see the children of God adopting in daily life a course of acting the direct opposite of that adopted by their heavenly Father. We ought to remember that we are called to be His moral representatives. We are His children by spiritual regeneration, but we are called to be His sons in moral assimilation to His character and practical conformity to His ways. "Do good to them that hate you . . . *that ye may be* the sons of your Father which is in heaven." Striking words! In order to our being morally and characteristically the sons of God, we are called to do good to our enemies. This is what He does, and we are called to be like Him. Alas, how little we enter into this!

How unlike we are! Oh for a more faithful representation!

Time and space would fail us to dwell, as we should like to do, upon this deeply practical part of our subject; we must therefore pass on, in the fourth place, to the consideration of *perfection in the character of our service*.

"I have not found thy works perfect (*pepleromena*) before God" (Rev. 3: 2). The English reader should be informed that the word here rendered "perfect" is not the same as that used in the three passages already referred to. It is usually translated "fulfilled" — "finished" — "accomplished." Its use in reference to the works of the church of Sardis teaches us a deeply solemn and heart-searching lesson. There was a name to live; but the works were not fulfilled under the immediate eye of God. There is nothing more dangerous to a Christian than to have "*a name*." It is a positive snare of the devil.

Many a professor has fallen by means of being occupied with a name. Many a useful servant has been destroyed by the effort to keep up a name. If I have gotten a reputation in any department of service — as an active evangelist — a gifted teacher — a clear and attractive writer — a man of prayer — a man of faith — a person of remarkable sanctity, or great personal devotedness — a benevolent person — a name for anything, in short — I am in imminent danger of making shipwreck. The enemy will lead me to make my reputation my object instead of Christ. I shall be working to keep up a name instead of the glory of Christ. I shall be occupied with the thoughts of men instead of doing all my work under the immediate eye of God.

All this demands intense watchfulness and rigid censorship over myself. I may be doing the most excellent works, but if they are not fulfilled in the presence of God they will prove a positive snare of the devil. I may preach the gospel — visit the sick — help the poor — go through the entire range of religious activity — and never be in the presence of God at all. I may do it for a name — do it because others do it, or expect me to do it. This is very serious. It demands real prayer — self-emptiness — nearness to and dependence upon God — singleness of eye — holy consecration to Christ. Self continually intrudes upon us. Oh this self, self, self, even in the very holiest things; and all the while we may appear to be very active and very devoted. Miserable delusion! We know of nothing more terrible than to have a religious name without spiritual life, without Christ, without a sense of God's presence possessing the soul.

Reader, let us look closely into this. Let us see that we begin, continue, and end our work under the Master's eye. This will impart a purity and a moral elevation to our service beyond all price. It will not cripple our energy, but it will tend to raise and intensify our action. It will not clip our wings, but it will guide our movements. It will render us independent of the thoughts of men, and fully deliver us from the slavery of seeking to maintain a name, or keep up a reputation — miserable, degrading bondage! May the good Lord grant us full deliverance from it! May He give us grace to fulfil our works, whatever they may be, few or many, small or great, in His own blessed presence!

Having said thus much in reference to the *character* of our service, we shall close with a few lines on *perfection in our equipment for service*.

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be *perfect* (*ἄρτιος*) thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim. 3: 16-17). Here, again, we have a different word, and one which only occurs in this one place in the entire New Testament. It is most expressive. It signifies *present readiness* for any exigency. The man who is acquainted with, and subject to the Word of God, is ready for every emergency. He has no need to go and cram for an occasion — to consult his authorities — to make himself up on a point. He is *ready now*. If an anxious inquirer comes, he is ready; if a curious

inquirer comes, he is ready; if a sceptic comes, he is ready; if an infidel comes, he is ready. In a word, he is always ready. He is perfectly equipped for every occasion.

The Lord be praised for all these aspects of Christian perfection! What more do we want? Perfection as to the conscience; perfection in object; perfection in walk; perfection in the character of service; perfection in our equipment. What remains? What wait we for? Just this — perfection in glory — perfect conformity in spirit, and soul, and body, to the image of our glorified Head in Heaven!

May the Lord so work on our hearts by His Spirit, producing that which is well-pleasing in His sight, that we may stand "perfect and complete in all the will of God!"