

Christian Perfection (1)

by Charles Finney

Christian Perfection is a duty, attainable in this life, requiring perfect obedience to God's law and the use of our natural faculties.

Scripture: 1 Chronicles 29:17

Topics: "Christian Obedience", "Spiritual Sincerity"

Description

Greek Word Studies delves into the concept of sincerity (haplotēs) as singleness, simplicity, and uprightness, emphasizing the importance of genuine obedience without hidden agendas or pretense. The heart of haplotēs is fixed on pleasing Christ, not seeking worldly gain, and is characterized by openness, integrity, and a lack of duplicity. This sincerity is seen in actions that are not feigned but genuine, reflecting a heart that is undivided and pure in its devotion to Christ.

Transcript

TEXT.--"Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."--Matthew v. 48.

IN the 43rd verse, the Savior says, "Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy; 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 ye may be the children 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. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."

In discoursing on the subject of Christian Perfection, it is my design to persue this order:

I. I shall show what is not to be understood by this requirement, "Be ye therefore perfect;" or, what Christian Perfection is not.

II. Show what is the perfection here required.

III. That this perfection is a duty.

IV. That it is attainable; and,

V. Answer some of the objections which are commonly urged against the doctrine of Christian Perfection.

I. I am to show you what Christian Perfection is not.

1. It is not required that we should have the same natural perfections that God has.

God has two kinds of perfections, natural and moral. His natural perfections constitute his nature, essence, or constitution. They are his eternity, immutability, omnipotence, &c. These are called natural perfections, because they have no moral character. They are not voluntary. God has not given them to himself, because he did not create himself, but existed from eternity, with all these natural attributes in full possession. All these God possesses in an infinite degree. These natural perfections are not the perfection here required. The attributes of our nature were created in us, and we are not required to produce any new natural attributes, nor would it be possible. We are not required to possess any of them in the degree that God possesses them.

2. The perfection required in the text is not perfection of knowledge, even according to our limited faculties.

3. Christian Perfection, as here required, is not freedom from temptation, either from our constitution or from things that are about us. The mind may be ever so sorely tried with the animal appetites, and yet not sin. The apostle James says, "Every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed." The sin is not in the temptations, but in yielding to them. A person may be tempted by Satan, as well as by the appetites, or by the world, and yet not have sin. All sin consists in voluntarily consenting to the desires.

4. Neither does Christian perfection imply a freedom from what ought to be understood by the Christian warfare.

5. The perfection required is not the infinite moral perfection which God has; because man, being a finite creature, is not capable of infinite affections. God being infinite in himself, for him to be perfect is to be infinitely perfect. But this is not required of us.

II. I am to show what Christian perfection is; or what is the duty actually required in the text.

It is perfect obedience to the law of God. The law of God requires perfect, disinterested, impartial benevolence, love to God and love to our neighbor. It requires that we should be actuated by the same feeling, and to act on the same principles that God acts upon; to leave self out of the question as uniformly as he does, to be as much separated from selfishness as he is; in a word, to be in our measure as perfect as God is. Christianity requires that we should do neither more nor less than the law of God prescribes. Nothing short of this is Christian perfection. This is being, morally, just as perfect as God. Every thing is here included, to feel as he feels, to love what he loves, and hate what he hates, and for the same reasons that he loves and hates.

God regards every being in the universe according to its real value. He regards his own interests according to their real value in the scale of being, and no more. He exercises the same love towards himself that he requires of us, and for the same reason. He loves himself supremely, both with the love of benevolence and the love of complacency, because he is supremely excellent. And he requires us to love him just so, to love him as perfectly as he loves himself. He loves himself with the love of benevolence, or regards his own interest, and glory, and happiness, as the supreme good, because it is the supreme good. And He requires us to love him in the same way. He loves himself with infinite complacency, because he

knows that he is infinitely worthy and excellent, and he requires the same of us. He also loves his neighbor as himself, not in the same degree that he loves himself, but in the same proportion, according to their real value. From the highest angel to the smallest worm, he regards their happiness with perfect love, according to their worth. It is his duty to conform to these principles, as much as it is our duty. He can no more depart from this rule than we can, without committing sin; and for him to do it would be as much worse than for us to do it, as he is greater than we. God is infinitely obligated to do this. His very nature, not depending on his own volition, but uncreated, binds him to this. And he has created us moral beings in his own image, capable of conforming to the same rule with himself. This rule requires us to have the same character with him, to love as impartially, with as perfect love--to seek the good of others with as single an eye as he does. This, and nothing less than this, is Christian Perfection.

III. I am to show that Christian Perfection is a duty.

1. This is evident from the fact that God requires it, both under the law and under the gospel.

The command in the text, "Be ye perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect," is given under the gospel. Christ here commands the very same thing that the law requires. Some suppose that much less is required of us under the gospel, than was required under the law. It is true that the gospel does not require perfection, as the condition of salvation. But no part of the obligation of the law is discharged. The gospel holds those who are under it to the same holiness as those under the law.

2. I argue that Christian Perfection is a duty, because God has no right to require any thing less.

God cannot discharge us from the obligation to be perfect, as I have defined perfection. If he were to attempt it, he would just so far give a license to sin. He has no right to give any such license. While we are moral beings, there is no power in the universe that can discharge us from the obligation to be perfect. Can God discharge us from the obligation to love Him with all our heart and soul and mind and strength? That would be saying that God does not deserve such love. And if he cannot discharge us from the whole law, he cannot discharge from any part of it, for the same reason.

3. Should any one contend that the gospel requires less holiness than the law, I would ask him to say just how much less it requires.

If we are allowed to stop short of perfect obedience, where shall we stop? How perfect are we required to be? Where will you find a rule in the Bible, to determine how much less holy you are allowed to be under the gospel, than you would be under the law? Shall we say each one must judge for himself? Then I ask, if you think it is your duty to be any more perfect than you are now? Probably all would say, Yes. Can you lay down any point at which, when you have arrived, you can say, "Now I am perfect enough; it is true, I have some sin left, but I have gone as far as it is my duty to go in this world?" Where do you get your authority for any such notion? No; the truth is, that all who are truly pious, the more pious they are, the more strongly they feel the obligation to be perfect, as God is perfect.

IV. I will now show that Christian Perfection is attainable, or practicable, in this life.

1. It may be fairly inferred that Christian Perfection is attainable, from the fact that it is commanded.

Does God command us to be perfect as he is perfect, and still shall we say it is an impossibility? Are we not always to infer, when God commands a thing, that there is a natural possibility of doing that which he commands? I recollect hearing an individual say, he would preach to sinners that they ought to repent,

because God commands it; but he would not preach that they could repent, because God has nowhere said that they can. What consummate trifling! Suppose a man were to say he would preach to citizens, that they ought to obey the laws of the country because the government had enacted them, but he would not tell them that they could obey, because it is nowhere in the statute book enacted that they have the ability. It is always to be understood, when God requires any thing of men, that they possess the requisite faculties to do it. Otherwise God requires of us impossibilities, on pain of death, and sends sinners to hell for not doing what they were in no sense able to do.

2. That there is natural ability to be perfect is a simple matter of fact.

There can be no question of this. What is perfection? It is to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. That is, it requires us not to exert the powers of somebody else, but our own powers. The law itself goes no farther than to require the right use of the powers you possess. So that it is a simple matter of fact that you possess natural ability, or power, to be just as perfect as God requires.

OBJECTION. Here some may object, that if there is a natural ability to be perfect, there is a moral inability, which comes to the same thing, for inability is inability, call it what you will, and if we have moral inability, we are as really unable as if our inability was natural.

ANSWER 1. There is no more moral inability to be perfectly holy, than there is to be holy at all. So far as moral ability is concerned, you can as well be perfectly holy as you can be holy at all. The true distinction between natural ability and moral ability, is this: Natural ability relates to the powers and faculties of the mind; Moral ability only to the will. Moral inability is nothing else than unwillingness to do a thing. So it is explained by President Edwards, in his Treatise on the Will, and by other writers on the subject. When you ask whether you have moral ability to be perfect, if you mean by it, whether you are willing to be perfect, I answer, No. If you were willing to be perfect, you would be perfect; for the perfection required is only a perfect conformity of the will to God's law, or willing right. If you ask then, Are we able to will right? I answer, the question implies a contradiction, in supposing that there can be such a thing as a moral agent unable to choose, or will. President Edwards says expressly, in his chapter on Moral Inability, as you may see, if you will read it, that strictly speaking, there is no such thing as Moral Inability. When we speak of inability to do a thing, if we mean to be understood, of a real inability, it implies a willingness to do it, but a want of power. To say, therefore, we are unable to will, is absurd. It is saying we will and yet are unable to will, at the same time.

ANSWER 2. But I admit and believe, that there is desperate unwillingness in the case. And if this is what you mean by Moral Inability, it is true. There is a pertinacious unwillingness in sinners to become Christians, and in Christians to become perfect, or to come up to the full perfection required both by the law and gospel. Sinners may strongly wish to become Christians, and Christians may strongly wish or desire to be rid of all their sins, and may pray for it, even with agony. They may think they are willing to be perfect, but they deceive themselves. They may feel, in regard to their sins taken all together, or in the abstract, as if they are willing to renounce them all. But take them up in the detail, one by one, and there are many sins they are unwilling to give up. They wrestle against sin in general, but cling to it in the detail.

I have known cases of this kind where individuals will break down in such a manner that they think they never will sin again; and then perhaps in one hour, something will come up that they are ready to fight for the indulgence, and need to be broken down again and again. Christians actually need to be hunted from

one sin after another, in this way, before they are willing to give them up, and after all, are unwilling to give up all sins. When they are truly willing to give up all sin, when they have no will of their own, but merge their own will entirely in the will of God, then their bonds are broken. When they will yield absolutely to God's will, then they are filled with all the fulness of God.

After all, the true point of inquiry is this: Have I any right to expect to be perfect in this world? Is there any reason for me to believe that I can be so completely subdued, that my soul shall burn with a steady flame, and I shall love God wholly, up to what the law requires? That it is a real duty, no one can deny. But the great query is, Is it attainable?

I answer, Yes, I believe it is.

Here let me observe, that so much has been said within a few years about Christian Perfection, and individuals who have entertained the doctrine of Perfection have run into so many wild notions, that it seems as if the devil had anticipated the movements of the church, and created such a state of feeling, that the moment the doctrine of the Bible respecting the sanctification is crowded on the church, one and another cries out, "Why, this is Perfectionism." But I will say, notwithstanding the errors into which some of those called Perfectionists have fallen, there is such a thing held forth in the Bible as Christian Perfection, and that the Bible doctrine on the subject is what nobody need to fear, but what every body needs to know. I disclaim, entirely, the charge of maintaining the peculiarities, whatever they be, of modern Perfectionists. I have read their publications, and have had much knowledge of them as individuals, and I cannot assent to many of their views. But the doctrine that Christian Perfection is a duty, is one which I have always maintained, and I have been more convinced of it within a few months, that it is attainable in this life. Many doubt this, but I am persuaded it is true, on various grounds.

1. God wills it.

The first doubt which will arise in many minds, is this; "Does God really will my sanctification in this world?" I answer: He says he does. The law of God is itself as strong an expression as he can give of his will on the subject, and it is backed up by an infinite sanction. The gospel is but a republication of the same will, in another form. How can God express his will more strongly on this point than he has in the text? "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." In the Thessalonians, iv. 3, we are told expressly, "For this is the will of God, even your sanctification." If you examine the Bible carefully, from one end to the other, you will find that it is every where just as plainly taught that God wills the sanctification of Christians in this world, as it is that he wills sinners should repent in this world. And if we go by the Bible, we might just as readily question whether he wills that men should repent, as whether he wills that Christians should be holy. Why should he not reasonably expect it? He requires it. What does he require? When he requires men to repent, he requires that they should love God with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength. What reason have we to believe that he wills they should repent at all, or love him at all, which is not a reason for believing that he wills they should love him perfectly? Strange logic, indeed! to teach that he wills it in one case, because he requires it, and not admit the same inference in the other. No man can show, from the Bible, that God does not require perfect sanctification in this world, nor that he does not will it, nor that it is not just as attainable as any degree of sanctification.

I have turned over the Bible with special reference to this point, and thought I would note down on my card, where I have the plan of my discourse, the passages that teach this doctrine. But I found they were altogether too numerous to do it, and that if I collected them all, I should do nothing else this evening, but

stand and read passages of scripture. If you have never looked into the Bible with this view, you will be astonished to see how many more passages there are that speak of deliverance from the commission of sin, than there are that speak of deliverance from the punishment of sin. The passages that speak only of deliverance from punishment, are as nothing, in comparison of the others.

2. All the promises and prophecies of God, that respect the sanctification of believers in this world, are to be understood of course, of their perfect sanctification.

What is sanctification, but holiness? When a prophecy speaks of the sanctification of the church, are we to understand that it is to be sanctified only partially? When God requires holiness, are we to understand that of partial holiness? Surely not. By what principle, then, will you understand it of partial holiness when he promises holiness. We have been so long in the way of understanding the scriptures with reference to the existing state of things, that we lose sight of the real meaning. But if we look only at the language of the Bible, I defy any man to prove that the promises and prophecies of holiness mean anything short of perfect sanctification, unless the requirements of both the law and gospel are to be understood of partial obedience which is absurd.

3. Perfect sanctification is the great blessing promised, throughout the Bible.

The apostle says we have exceeding great and precious promises, and what are they, and what is their use? "Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, HAVING ESCAPED THE CORRUPTION that is in the world through lust." 2 Peter i.4. If that is not perfect sanctification, I beg to know what is. It is a plain declaration that these "exceeding great and precious promises" are given for this object, that by believing and appropriating and using them, we might become partakers of the divine nature. And if we will use them for the purposes for which they were put in the Bible, we may become perfectly holy.

Let us look at some of these promises in particular. I will begin with the promise of the Abrahamic covenant. The promise is that his posterity should possess the land of Canaan, and that through him, by the Messiah, all nations should be blessed. The seal of the covenant, circumcision, which everyone knows is a type of holiness, shows us what was the principal blessing intended. It was HOLINESS. So the apostle tells us, in another place, Jesus Christ was given, that he might sanctify unto himself a peculiar people.

All the purifications and other ceremonies of the Mosaic ritual signified the same thing; as they are all pointed forward to a Savior to come. Those ordinances of purifying the body were set forth, every one of them, with reference to the purifying of the mind, or holiness.

Under the gospel, the same thing is signified by baptism; the washing of the body representing the sanctification of the mind.

In Ezekiel xxxvi. 25, this blessing is expressly promised, as the great blessing of the gospel: "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you: and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you shall keep my judgments, and do them."

So it is in Jeremiah xxxiii. 8: "And I will cleanse them from all their iniquity, whereby they have sinned against me; and I will pardon all their iniquities, whereby they have sinned, and whereby they have transgressed against me." But it would take up too much time to quote all the passages in the Old Testament prophecies, that represent holiness to be the great blessing of the covenant. I desire you all to search the Bible for yourselves, and you will be astonished to find how uniformly the blessing of sanctification is held up as the principal blessing promised to the world through the Messiah.

Why, who can doubt that the great object of the Messiah's coming was to sanctify his people? Just after the fall it was predicted that Satan would bruise his heel, but that he should bruise Satan's head. And the apostle John tells us that "For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil." He has undertaken to put Satan under his feet. His object is to win us back to our allegiance to God, to sanctify us, to purify our minds. As it is said in Zech. xiii. 1, "In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness."

And Daniel says, "Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the Most Holy." But it is in vain to name the multitude of these texts. The Old Testament is full of it.

In the New Testament, the first account we have of the Savior, tells us, that he was called "JESUS, for he shall save his people from their sins." So it is said, "He was manifested to take away our sins," and "to destroy the works of the devil." In Titus ii. 13, the apostle Paul speaks of the grace of God, or the gospel, as teaching us to deny ungodliness. "Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God, and our Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works." And in Ephesians v. 25, we learn that "Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish." I only quote these few passages by way of illustration, to show that the object for which Christ came is to sanctify the church to such a degree that it should be absolutely "holy and without blemish." So in Romans xi. 26, "And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob; For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins." And in 1 John i. 9, it is said, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." What is it to "cleanse us from ALL unrighteousness," if it is not perfect sanctification? I presume all of you who are here to-night, if there is such a thing promised in the Bible as perfect sanctification, wish to know it. Now, what do you think? In 1 Thessalonians, v. 23, the apostle Paul prays a very remarkable prayer: "And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit, and soul, and body, be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." What is that? "Sanctify you wholly." Does that mean perfect sanctification? You may think it does not mean perfect sanctification in this world. But the apostle says not only that your whole soul and spirit, but that your "body be preserved blameless." Could an inspired apostle make such a prayer, if he did not believe the blessing prayed for to be possible? But he goes on to say, in the very next verse, "Faithful is he that calleth you, who also WILL DO IT." Is that true, or is it false?

4. The perfect sanctification of believers is the very object for which the Holy Spirit is promised.

To quote the passages that show this, would take up too much time. The whole tenor of scripture respecting the Holy Spirit proves it. The whole array of gospel means through which the Holy Spirit works, is aimed at this, and adopted to the end of sanctifying the church. All the commands to be holy, all the promises, all the prophecies, all the ordinances, all the providences, the blessings and the judgments, all the duties of religion, are means which the Holy Ghost is to employ for sanctifying the church.

5. If it is not a practicable duty to be perfectly holy in this world, then it will follow that the devil has so completely accomplished his design in corrupting mankind, that Jesus Christ is at fault, and has no way to sanctify his people but by taking them out of the world.

Is it possible that Satan has so got the advantage of God, that God's kingdom cannot be re-established in this world, and that the Almighty has no way but to back out, and to take his saints to heaven, before he can make them holy? Is God's kingdom to be only partially established, and is it to be always so, that the best saints shall one-half of their time be serving the devil? Must the people of God always go drooping and driveling along in religion, and live in sin, until they get to heaven? What is that stone cut out of a mountain without hands, that is to fill the earth, if it does not show that there is yet to be a universal triumph of the love of God in the world?

6. If Perfect Sanctification is not attainable in this world, it must be, either from a want of motives in the gospel, or a want of sufficient power in the Spirit of God.

It is said that in another life we may be like God, for we shall see him as he is. But why not here, if we have that faith which is the "substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen?" There is a promise to those who "hunger and thirst after righteousness" that "they shall be filled." What is it to be "filled" with righteousness, but to be perfectly holy? And are we never to be filled with righteousness till we die? Are we to go through life hungry and thirsty and unsatisfied? So the Bible has been understood, but it does not read so.

OBJECTIONS.

1. "The power of habit is so great, that we ought not to expect to be perfectly sanctified in this life."

ANSWER. If the power of habit can be so far encroached upon that an impenitent sinner can be converted, why can it not be absolutely broken, so that a converted person may be wholly sanctified? The greatest difficulty, surely, is when selfishness has the entire control of the mind, and when the habits of sin are wholly unbroken. This obstacle is so great, in all cases, that no power but that of the Holy Ghost can overcome it, and so great in many instances, that God himself cannot, consistently with his wisdom, use the means necessary to convert the soul. But is it possible to suppose, that after he has begun to overcome it, after he has broken the power of selfishness and the obstinacy of habit, and actually converted the individual, that after this God has not resources sufficient to sanctify the soul altogether!

2. "Many physical difficulties have been created by a life of sin, that cannot be overcome or removed by moral means."

This is a common objection. Men feel that they have fastened upon themselves appetites and physical influences, which they do not believe it possible to overcome by moral means. The apostle Paul, in the 7th of Romans, describes a man in great conflict with the body. But in the next chapter he speaks of one who had gotten the victory over the flesh. "And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the spirit

is life because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you." This quickening of the body is not spoken of the resurrection of the body, but of the influence of the Spirit of God upon the body--the sanctification of the body.

You will ask, "Does the Spirit of God produce a physical change in the body?" I will illustrate it by the case of the drunkard. The drunkard has brought upon himself a diseased state of the body, an unnatural thirst, which is insatiable, and so strong that it seems impossible he should be reclaimed. But very likely you know cases in which they have been reclaimed, and have entirely overcome this physical appetite. I have heard of cases, where drunkards have been made to see the sin of drunkenness in such a strong light, that they abhorred strong drink, and for ever renounced it, with such a loathing that they never had the least desire for strong drink again.

I once knew an individual who was a slave to the use of tobacco. At length he became convinced that it was a sin for him to use it, and the struggle against it finally drove him to God in such an agony of prayer, that he got the victory at once over the appetite, and never had the least desire for it again. I am not now giving you philosophy, but FACTS. I have heard of individuals over whom a life of sin had given to certain appetites a perfect mastery, but in time of revival they have been subdued into perfect quiescence, and these appetites have ever after been as dead as if they had no body. I suppose the fact is, that the mind may be so occupied and absorbed with greater things, as not to give a thought to the things that would revive the vicious appetite. If a drunkard goes by a grocery, or sees people drinking, and allows his mind to run upon it, the appetite will be awakened. The wise man, therefore, tells him to "Look not upon the wine when it is red." But there is no doubt that any appetite of the body may be subdued, if a sufficient impression is made upon the mind to break it up. I believe every real Christian will be ready to admit that this is possible, from his own experience. Have you not, beloved, known times when one great absorbing topic has so filled your mind, and controlled your soul, that the appetites of the body remained, for the time, perfectly neutralized? Now, suppose this state of mind to continue, to become constant; would not all these physical difficulties be overcome, which you speak of as standing in the way of perfect sanctification?

3. "The Bible is against this doctrine, where it says, there is not a just man on the earth, that liveth and sinneth not."

ANSWER. Suppose the Bible does say that there is not one on earth, it does not say there cannot be one. Or, it may have been true at that time, or under dispensation, that there was not one man in the world who was perfectly sanctified; and yet it may not follow that at this time, or under the gospel dispensation, there is no one who lives without sin. "For the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did." Heb. 7. 9. i.e. The gospel did.

4. "The apostles admit that they were not perfect."

ANSWER. I know the apostle Paul says in one place, "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect." But it is not said that he continued so till his death, or that he never did attain to perfect sanctification, and the manner in which he speaks in the remainder of the verse, looks as if he expected to become so: "But I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus." Nor does it appear to me to be true that in this passage referred to, he is speaking of perfect sanctification, but rather of perfect knowledge.

And the apostle John speaks of himself as if he loved God perfectly. But whatever may be the truth, as to the actual character of the apostles, it does not follow, because they were not perfect that no others can be. They clearly declare it to be a duty, and that they were aiming at it, just as if they expected to attain it in this life. And they command us to do the same.

5. "But is it not presumption for us to think we can be better than the apostles and primitive Christians?"

ANSWER. What is the presumption in the case? Is it not a fact that we have far greater advantages for religious experience, than the primitive churches. The benefit of their experience, the complete scriptures, the state of the world, the near approach of the millennium, all give us the advantage over the primitive believers. Are we to suppose the church is always to stand in regard to religious experience, and never to go ahead in any thing? What scripture is there for this? Why should not the church be always growing better? It seems to be the prevailing idea that the church is to be always looking back to the primitive saints as the standard. I suppose the reverse of this is a duty, and that we ought to be always aiming at a much higher standard than theirs. I believe the church must go far ahead of the primitive Christians, before the millennium can come. I leave out of view the apostles, because it does not clearly appear but what they become fully sanctified.

6. "But so many profess to be perfect, who are not so, that I cannot believe in perfection in this life."

ANSWER. How many people profess to be rich, who are not;. Will you therefore say, you cannot believe any body is rich? Fine logic!

7. "So many who profess perfection have run into error and fanaticism, that I am afraid to think of it."

ANSWER. I find in history, that a sect of Perfectionists has grown out of every great and general revival that ever took place. And this is exactly one of the devil's master-pieces, to counteract the effects of a revival. He knows that if the church were brought to the proper standard of holiness, it would be a speedy death blow to his power on earth, and he takes this course to defeat the efforts of the church for elevating the standard of piety, by frightening Christians from marching right up to the point, and aiming at living perfectly conformed to the will of God. And so successful has he been, that the moment you begin to crowd the church up to be holy, and give up all their sins, somebody will cry out, "Why, this leads to Perfectionism;" and thus give it a bad name and put it down.

8. "But do you really think any body ever has been perfectly holy in this world?"

ANSWER. I have reason to believe there have been many. It is highly probable that Enoch and Elijah were free from sin, before they were taken out of the world. And in different ages of the church there have been numbers of Christians who were intelligent and upright, and had nothing that could be said against them, who have testified that they themselves lived free from sin. I know it is said, in reply, that they must have been proud, and that no man would say he was free from sin for any other motive but pride. But I ask, why may not a man say he is free from sin, if it is so, without being proud, as well as he can say he is converted without being proud? Will not the saints say it in heaven, to the praise of the grace of God, which has thus crowned his glorious work? And why may they not say it now, from the same motive? I do not myself profess now to have attained perfect sanctification, but if I had attained it, if I felt that God had really given me the victory over the world, the flesh and the devil, and made me free from sin, would I keep it a secret, locked up in my own breast, and let my brethren stumble on in ignorance of what the grace of God can do? Never. I would tell them, that they might expect complete deliverance, if they would only lay

hold on the arm of help which Christ reaches forth, to save his people from their sins.

I have heard people talk like this, that if a Christian really was perfect, he would be the last person that would tell of it. But would you say of a person who professed conversion, "If he was really converted, he would be the last person to tell of it?" On the contrary, is it not the first impulse of a converted heart to say, "Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my soul!" Why then should not the same desire exist in one who feels that he has obtained sanctification? Why all these suspicions, and refusing to credit evidence? If any one gives evidence of great piety, if his life is irreproachable, and his spirit not to be complained of, if he shows the very spirit of the Son of God, and if such a person testifies that after great struggles and agonizing prayer God has given him the victory, and his soul is set at liberty by the power of divine grace; why are we not bound to receive his testimony, just as much, as when he says he is converted. We always take such testimony, so far. And now, when he says he has gone farther, and got the victory over all sin, and that Christ has actually fulfilled His promise in this respect, why should we not credit this also?

I have recently read Mr. Wesley's "Plain account of Christian Perfection," a book I never saw until lately. I find some expressions in it to which I should object, but I believe it is rather the expression than the sentiments. And I think, with this abatement, it is an admirable book, and I wish every member of this church would read it. An edition is in the press, in this city. I would also recommend the memoir of James Brainerd Taylor, and I wish every Christian would get it, and study it. I have read the most of it three times within a few months. From many things in that book, it is plain that he believed in the doctrine that Christian perfection is a duty, and that it is attainable by believers in this life. There is nothing published which shows that he professed to have attained it, but it is manifest that he believed it to be attainable. But I have been told that much which is found in his diary on this subject, as well as some things in his letters, were suppressed by his biographer, as not fitted for the eye of the church in her present state. I believe if the whole could come to light, that it would be seen that he was a firm believer in this doctrine. These books should be read and pondered by the church.

I have now in my mind an individual, who was a member of the church, but very worldly, and when a revival came he opposed it, at first; but afterwards he was awakened, and, after an awful conflict, he broke down, and has ever since lived a life of the most devoted piety, laboring and praying incessantly, like his blessed Master, to promote the kingdom of God. I have never heard this man say he thought he was perfect, but I have often heard him speak of the duty and practicability of being perfectly sanctified. And if there is a man in the world who is so, I believe he is one.

People have the strangest notions on this subject. Sometimes you will hear them argue against Christian Perfection on this ground, that a man who was perfectly holy could not live, could not exist in this world. I believe I have talked just so myself, in time past. I know I have talked like a fool on the subject. Why, a saint who was perfect would be more alive than ever, to the good of his fellow men. Could not Jesus Christ live on earth? He was perfectly holy. It is thought that if a person was perfectly sanctified, and loved God perfectly, he would be in such a state of excitement, that he could not remain in the body, could neither eat nor sleep, nor attend to the ordinary duties of life. But there is no evidence of this. The Lord Jesus Christ was a man, subject to all the temptations of other men. He also loved the Lord his God with all his heart and soul and strength. And yet it does not appear that he was in such a state of excitement that he could not both eat and sleep, and work at his trade as a carpenter, and maintain perfect health of body and perfect composure of mind. And why needs a saint that is perfectly sanctified, to be carried away with uncontrollable excitement, or killed with intense emotion, any more than Jesus Christ? There is no need of

it, and Christian Perfection implies no such thing.

REMARKS.

We can see now the reasons why there is no more perfection in the world.

1. Christians do not believe that it is the will of God, or that God is willing they should be perfectly sanctified in this world.

They know he commands them to be perfect, as he is perfect, but they think that he is secretly unwilling, and does not really wish them to be so; "Otherwise," say they, "why does he not do more for us, to make us perfect?" No doubt, God prefers their remaining as they are, to using any other means or system of influences to make them otherwise; because he sees that it would be a greater evil to introduce a new system of means than to let them remain as they are. Where one of the evils is unavoidable, he chooses the least of the two evils, and who can doubt that he prefers their being perfect in the circumstances in which they are, to their sinning in these circumstances. Sinners reason just as these professors reason. They say, "I don't believe he wills my repentance; if he did, he would make me repent." Sinner, God may prefer your continued impenitence, and your damnation, to using any other influences than he does use to make you repent. But for you to infer from this, that he does not wish you to yield to the influences he does use, is strange logic! Suppose your servant should reason so, and say, "I don't believe my master means I should obey him, because he don't stand by me all day, to keep me at work." Is that a just conclusion? Very likely, the master's time is so valuable, that it would be a greater evil to his business, than for that servant to stand still all day.

So it is in the government of God. If God were to bring all the power of his government to bear on one individual, he might save that individual, while at the same time, it would so materially derange his government, that it would be a vastly greater evil than for that individual to go to hell. In the same way, in the case of a Christian, God has furnished him with all the means of sanctification, and required him to be perfect, and now he turns round and says, "God does not really prefer my being perfect; if he did, he would make me so." This is just the argument of the impenitent sinner, and no better in one case than the other. The plain truth is, God does desire, of both, that in the circumstances in which they are placed, they should do just what he commands them to do.

2. They do not expect it themselves.

The great part of the church do not really expect to be any more pious than they are.

3. Much of the time, they do not even desire perfect sanctification.

4. They are satisfied with their hunger and thirst after righteousness, and do not expect to be filled.

Here let me say, that hunger and thirst after holiness IS NOT HOLINESS. The desire of a thing is not the thing desired. If they hunger and thirst after holiness, they ought to give God no rest, till he comes up to his promise, that they shall be filled with holiness, or made perfectly holy.

5. They overlook the great design of the gospel.

Too long has the church been in the habit of thinking that the great design of the gospel is, to save men from the punishment of sin, whereas its real design and object is to deliver men FROM SIN. But Christians

have taken the other ground, and think of nothing but that they are to go on in sin, and all they hope for is to be forgiven, and when they die made holy in heaven. Oh, if they only realized that the whole frame-work of the gospel is designed to break the power of sin, and fill men on earth with all the fulness of God, how soon there would be one steady blaze of love in the hearts of God's people all over the world!

6. The promises are not understood, and not appropriated by faith.

If the church would read the Bible, and lay hold of every promise there, they would find them exceeding great and precious. But now the church loses its inheritance, and remains ignorant of the extent of the blessings she may receive. Had I time to-night, I could lead you to some promises which, if you would only get hold of and appropriate, you would know what I mean.

7. They seek it by the law, and not by faith.

How many are seeking sanctification by their own resolutions and works, their fastings and prayers, their endeavors and activity, instead of taking right hold of Christ, by faith, for sanctification, as they do for justification. It is all work, work, WORK, when it should be by faith in "Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and SANCTIFICATION, and redemption." When they go and take right hold of the strength of God, they will be sanctified. Faith will bring Christ right into the soul, and fill it with the same spirit that breathes through himself. These dead works are nothing. It is faith that must sanctify, it is faith that purifies the heart, that faith which is the substance of things hoped for, takes hold of Christ and brings him into the soul, to dwell there the hope of glory; that the life which we live here should be by the faith of the Son of God. It is from not knowing, or not regarding this, that there is so little holiness in the church.

And finally,

8. From the want of the right kind of dependence.

Instead of taking scriptural views of their dependence and seeing where their strength is, and realizing how willing God is to give his Holy Spirit to them that ask, now and continually, and thus taking hold and holding on by the arm of God, they sit down, in unbelief and sin, to wait God's time, and call this depending on God. Alas, how little is felt, after all this talk about dependence on the Holy Spirit, how little is really felt of it, and how little is there of the giving up of the whole soul to his control and guidance, with faith in his power to enlighten, to lead, to sanctify, to kindle the affections, and fill the soul continually with all the fulness of God!

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/charles-finner/christian-perfection-1/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net