

Christian Perfection Not Ideal

by Daniel Steele

The speaker argues that Christian perfection is possible in this life, but it is often confused with ideal perfection, which is an outward life of faultlessness.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:6, Matthew 5:48, Romans 3:23, Ephesians 4:13, Philippians 3:12, Hebrews 7:25, 1 John 1:8

Topics: "Christian Perfection", "Sanctification"

Description

Daniel Steele preaches against the confusion between evangelical perfection, which consists of supreme love to God, and ideal perfection, focusing on outward perfection achieved through enlightened conscience. He emphasizes that God requires supreme love as the central element of perfection, made possible by God's work in removing depravity and filling the soul with love. Steele argues that absolute, ideal perfection is unattainable in this life, contrary to the belief that one can fulfill the whole law without the merits of Christ. He highlights the ongoing need for Christ's atonement for voluntary transgressions, omissions, and shortcomings, rejecting the notion of sinless perfection.

Transcript

OUR author is not satisfied with that perfection which consists in "loving God with the whole heart and having every action spring from love, which appears to be the popular modern synonym for Christian perfection, or entire sanctification." He quotes Dr. Borden P. Bowne as sustaining his position: "The will to do right in no way implies the perfection of the moral life, but only its central element and its indispensable condition." Is our professor of philosophy discussing Christian perfection and entire sanctification, or the abstract "principles of ethics" when carried out till they reach absolute perfection? The rest of the quotation shows that he has not in mind evangelical perfection -which consists in supreme love to God, but an ideal perfection, not of the heart but of the outward life, resulting from the application of this love through a perfectly enlightened conscience: "The will must be realized in fitting forms and the entire life be made an expression of right reason before that which is perfect is come." Just so. Then ideal perfection will come forth in the beauty of faultlessness. But God condescends to call "its central element" -- supreme love -- that perfection which he requires and which he enables to emerge, when he has removed hereditary depravity and filled the soul with love: "The Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart . . . to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart" (Deut. xxx, 6). On the selfsame day that Abraham was circumcised God said unto him: "I am the Almighty God, walk before me, and be thou perfect." Jesus Christ reiterates this command to all his followers: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." The context to which "therefore" relates proves that the command refers to the present time and that it is

fulfilled by perfect love to-day, which in the future will be more and more "realized in fitting forms."

This confounding evangelical perfection with ideal perfection mars this book from the title to the finis. Of the title we have already spoken. The most eloquent pages are those in which the writer shows the impossibility of young people of seventeen, and ignorant and narrow-minded believers, becoming immediately perfect Christians. "A child cannot be a perfect Christian, in the higher sense of that term." Will that remark help him to become a perfect Christian in the lower sense? Will it encourage him to pray for

A heart in every thought renewed,

And full of love divine?

He expatiates on "the length, breadth, depth, and height of God's mighty law" sufficient "for the study of saints and sages all their days" as a reason why our boys and girls from thirteen to seventeen cannot exemplify the standard of New Testament perfection or entire sanctification. To such God's commandment is grievous and oppressive indeed. The Sermon on the Mount is impracticable to most of Christians till they know more!

The reader of this book will rise from its perusal with the impression that it aims to prove that absolute, ideal perfection is not possible in this present life. This was the impression made upon the mind of an honored bishop of the Church who listened to the author's reply to our criticism. These are his words when called on to speak to the Boston Preachers' Meeting after that reply: "I would say one thing with added emphasis -- ideal perfection is an impossible attainment in this life; and that I understand to be Dr. Mudge's contention." This is his contention throughout his book. He seems to imply that this is the significance of Wesley's Christian perfection. This is a great injustice to the honored name of our denominational founder, who always and everywhere disclaimed ideal perfection. He says:

Absolute or infallible perfection I never contended for. Sinless perfection I do not contend for, seeing it is not scriptural. A perfection, such as enables a person to fulfill the whole law, and so needs not the merits of Christ -- I acknowledge no such perfection; I do now, and always did, protest against it;....

The best of men still need Christ in his priestly office, to atone for their omissions, their shortcomings (as some not improperly speak), their mistakes in judgment and practice, and their defects of various kinds;

I believe there is no such perfection in this life as excludes therein voluntary transgressions which need an atonement.

Much of the argument in this book is directed against a man of straw.

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