

# The Three Perfections

by Daniel Steele

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*The sermon explores three distinct meanings of perfection in the Bible, including Adamic perfection, perfection of the paradise above, and perfection of the paradise of love.*

**Scripture:** Genesis 17:1, Leviticus 11:44, Psalm 37:37, Philippians 3:12, Hebrews 10:14, James 3:2, 1 John 4:18

**Topics:** "Christian Perfection", "Sanctification"

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## Description

Daniel Steele delves into the concept of perfection as described in the Holy Scriptures, highlighting three distinct meanings: the perfection of the paradise of Eden, the perfection of the paradise above, and the perfection of the paradise of love. He explains how Adam was created perfect but had the potential to sin due to his finiteness, contrasting it with the perfection to be attained in the glorified state after the resurrection. Steele emphasizes that evangelical perfection is achieved through perfect love, fulfilling the law of Christ and reflecting the completeness found in Christ. He explores the idea that perfection is not merely about legal obedience but about inherent completeness in Christ, where every aspect of the soul is filled with love and devoted to serving the Savior.

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## Transcript

ASIDE from the absolute perfection of God, the term perfection, as used in the Holy Scriptures, in its application to human beings, has three distinct meanings. Much of the difficulty in understanding the doctrine of Christian perfection arises from a confusion of these three significations.

1. The perfection of the paradise of Eden. Adam came forth from the hand of the Creator complete in his physical organism, in his mental structure, in the enthronement of his moral sense, in the harmony and balance of all his faculties. His appetites, in perfect subjection to a will holy in all its moral choices, ministered to his existence as a person and a race in a manner wholly consistent with the utmost purity. His passions afforded motive power to his spiritual aspirations, as the steady trade-winds waft the well-freighted argosy to its destined port. He was as perfect as his all-wise Creator could make him. His lack of experience, in the very nature of the case of a being just called from nothingness, must be supplied by himself, and not by his Maker. There was no original proclivity to sin, no secret spring coiled up in his nature moving him to step over the fiery boundary between right and wrong, and no fatal debility of his moral nature which must inevitably break down under the pressure of temptation. We must, moreover, suppose that, as his affections were perfect, they were fixed upon God, their proper object, thus leaving the soul not in a state of equilibrium between sin and holiness, but giving it a strong upward tendency.

In what, then, consisted the probation of this perfect being? Is sin possible to the intelligence thus launched upon its orbit under the attraction of the central sun? Aside from the agency of the satanic tempter, it was possible for a perfect Adam, by reason of his very finiteness, walking forth amid infinitudes, to miss his way. The limitation of his knowledge made faith a necessity. But there was no inherent defect, no downward inclination, no darkening of the moral perceptions by sin, and no infirmity of the will in the direction of righteousness. He was adapted to the law of perfect obedience. This law he might have perfectly fulfilled. This is Adamic perfection. Since sin has marred the image of God in man, and disturbed, in their federal head and representative, the moral balance of each individual of the race, the man Jesus Christ only excepted, this perfection has disappeared with the paradise in which it was found. "I have seen the end of all [legal] perfection, [for] Thy law is exceeding broad," Says Job: "if I say I am perfect, it shall also prove me perverse." This perfection is no longer required as the ground of salvation. It is now a myth whenever professed, and always will be, so long as men are begotten in the image of their father. "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?"

2. The perfection of the paradise above. We look back with regret upon a perfection irrecoverably lost by reason of the flaming sword of the cherubim guarding the gate of a lost Eden; yet we look forward with hope toward another perfection enthroned above the cherubim, in the glorified state after the resurrection of the righteous dead. No candid reader, with ordinary acumen, can read the third chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Philippians and fail to discover that this is the goal on which this spiritual athlete has his eye intently fixed. "I count all things but loss, if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead. Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect," 'teteleiomai', "crowned," says Bengel, "with the garland of victory, his course completed and perfection absolutely reached." For this St. Paul groaned, and for this manifestation of the sons of God the earnest expectation of the creation waiteth. Toward this all our holiest aspirations rise. "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is." Then will the brightest ideals of perfection which our imaginations are capable of forming be fully realized. For we can imagine nothing more excellent than the Son of Man in His glory, wearing the diadem of universal dominion, and adored by all the unfallen and all the redeemed intelligences, rank above rank, who veil their faces before His throne. We speak now of perfection in kind. The degree of our love will be for ever increasing, as the beauties of the God-man eternally unfold before our enraptured vision. Mathematicians demonstrate that a curve may be drawn of such a nature that a straight line, lying in the same plane, may for ever approach and never touch it. This line is called an asymptote. In this ever-increasing love the glorified saints will be spiritual asymptotes to the Son of God. Progress is an attribute of mind. At no point in the endless future will God bandage the loving soul, to check its growth for ever afterward like a Chinese foot. This distinction between perfection of kind and of degree is not difficult to comprehend, yet many intelligent people are perpetually confounding them.

3. The perfection of the paradise of love. Perfect love constitutes evangelical perfection, the sum of all duties, the bond which binds all the virtues into unity. As we stand midway between the perfect estate of paradise lost and of paradise regained, regretting the one and aspiring to the other, but excluded so long as we are in the flesh, our gracious God, through the mediation of Christ, commissions the Holy Ghost to come down and open the gates of a new paradise of love made perfect, love casting out all fear, love fully shed abroad in our hearts.

Love is the fulfilling of the law. To fulfil is perfectly to keep, not the old Adamic law, but the law of the new Adam, the Lord from heaven. "Fulfil ye the law of Christ, the royal law of liberty." This law is graciously

adapted to our diminished moral capacity, dwarfed and crippled by original and actual sin. All there is left of us after sin has spread its blight may be filled with the fullness of God. Every faculty may be energized, every capacity be filled, and every particle and fibre of the being be pervaded with the love of Christ, so that the totality of our nature may be subsidized in the delightful employment of love, attesting itself by obedience, rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, and in every thing giving thanks.

Says Wesley, "I know of no other Christian perfection." The hypercritical may criticize the term, and say that perfection cannot be predicated of anything human, and some advocates of entire sanctification may unwisely substitute other terms supposed to be less offensive, such as "the higher life," "the rest of faith," and "full trust," and other words which man's wisdom teacheth, but it will be found that they all fail to convey the exact and definite idea of the word "perfection" which the Holy Ghost teacheth.

This signifies not only our justification -- sometimes called the imputation of Christ's righteousness, though improperly -- but our inherent completeness in Christ, who is our sanctification as well as our righteousness or justification. The term perfection is the best word in the English language for expressing that state of spiritual wholeness into which the soul has entered, when the last inward foe is conquered, and the last distracting force is harmonized with the mighty love of Christ, and every crevice of the nature is filled with love, and every energy is employed in the delightful service of the adorable Saviour, and the soul is as "dead indeed unto sin" as the occupants of the Stone Chapel grave-yard are to the tide of Boston business and pleasure which rolls along Tremont Street.

However fractional the man may be in all other respects, he is in one sense an integer: love pervades the totality of his being. Early in divine revelation do we find Jehovah pointing to this state, saying to Abraham, "Walk before me, and be thou perfect;" and to Moses, "Thou shalt be perfect with the Lord thy God." In many other places the same Hebrew word is used in describing character, but three times it is unfortunately translated by 'sincerely' or 'in sincerity', twelve times by 'upright' and 'uprightly', once by 'undefiled', as "Blessed are the undefiled [perfect] in the way," and once by 'sound' "Let my heart be sound [perfect] in thy statutes.

Forty-five times the Israelites are commanded to bring sacrifices without blemish; and every time the word should have been translated perfect, God thus teaching by impressive symbols that the heart of the offerer must be perfect before God. Leviticus is the book of all the Old Testament wherein is typically taught the need of inward cleansing, whose end is holiness, whose tabernacle is holy, whose vessels are holy, whose offerings are most holy, whose priests are holy, and their garments are holy, and whose people are holy, because their God is holy.

Opening the New Testament, we find the Greek word 'teleios', perfect, as descriptive of fitness for the kingdom of God, dropping from the lips of Christ and from the pen of St. Paul seventeen times, while the cognate noun Perfection is twice used, and the verb to perfect fourteen times. This examination shows that the Spirit of inspiration had a deep design, persistently followed from the book of Genesis to the epistles of John. That design is to set forth the holiness of the service demanded of us, and the perfectibility of the Christian under the dispensation of the Spirit.

For this perfection is not on a level with man's natural powers, but is the work of the Sanctifier through the mediation and blood of Jesus Christ, who "by one offering hath perfected forever them that are sanctified." By one offering he has procured the Sanctifier, who, so long as the world shall stand, is able by His office of cleansing to perfect believers, and present them complete in Christ Jesus.

It is easy now to see why perfection is both affirmed and denied in the Scriptures, with respect to the same individuals. God styles Job perfect, while Job himself repudiates that adjective. Compare chapter i. 1, with ix. 20. Thus David sees the "end of all perfection," and soon after calls on all men to "mark the perfect man," and note his peaceful death (Psa. cxix. 96; xxxvii, 37). St. Paul seems to blow hot and cold with the same breath, when he denies that he is perfect, and then assumes that he is (Phil. iii, 12-15); and St. James contradicts himself in the same way in chapter iii. 2. The explanation is easy. Legal perfection is disclaimed, while evangelical perfection is claimed. In other words, perfect love-service can be rendered; while perfect law-service is beyond the power of moral cripples to render.

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