

Effects of Christ's Baptism - Christian Perfection - Perfect Love

by Dougan Clark

Christian perfection is perfect love, which is the fulfilling of the law and the end of the commandment.

Scripture: Matthew 5:48

Topics: "Christian Perfection", "Perfect Love"

Description

Dougan Clark preaches on the importance of Christian perfection, emphasizing the need to build on the foundation of fundamental doctrines like repentance, faith, baptism, laying on of hands, resurrection, and judgment. He explains that Christian perfection is not about physical or intellectual perfection but about being freed from sin and filled with perfect love for God and others. Clark highlights that Christian perfection is a gift from God, received by faith, and is exemplified by a heart made perfect in love, leading to a life devoted to God and obedience to His commandments.

Transcript

The inspired writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews begins the sixth chapter of that letter as follows, viz.: "Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this will we do, if God permit."

It is evident that there is nothing here that should lead us for a moment to under-value the foundation, nor to under-estimate the importance of laying it aright. The Church of Christ, including every individual believer, is founded upon the Eternal Rock. "Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." Whoever would be a good reader must first learn the alphabet. Whoever would be a mathematician must first learn the properties of numbers. Whoever would be an adept in any science must begin with acquainting himself with the elements of that science.

And thus every believer needs to be indoctrinated into the fundamental principles of Christianity. These are enumerated in the text as (1) Repentance from dead works, whether the works of the flesh in the unconverted, or the works of the Jewish law which could not give life. (2) Faith towards God, which is the acceptance of His plan of salvation in Christ. (3) The doctrine of baptisms, or rather of washings--meaning the divers washings of the Jewish ritual--and, as the epistle was to Hebrew Christians, it was particularly fit

that they should know the typical meaning of their own ceremonial law. (4) Laying on of hands. In the Apostolic days the laying on of hands was employed in healing the sick, in setting apart the various officers of the Church for their respective positions and duties, and in conferring the Holy Ghost. (5 and 6) The resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment, which involve our hope and our fear for the unending future.

It is quite clear that these fundamental doctrines of Christianity are not to be regarded as of no importance, nor of small importance. What we are urged to do is not to get away from the foundation, nor to lay a new foundation, but to proceed to build on the foundation already laid--not to spend all our lives in laying it again, but to go on unto perfection. The perfection here meant, I suppose, to be Christian perfection or holiness.

The word perfect, as applied to any man, is very generally regarded as odious and absurd, not only by the unconverted but by Christians as well. Yet from a very early period in human history down to New Testament times at least, there were men whom God called perfect. Nor can it be disputed, as I think, that the same remark continues to be true down to the present age, nor that it will be equally true to the end.

"Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God." "Hast thou considered my servant Job, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God and escheweth evil." "I am the Almighty God: walk before me, and be thou perfect." "Asa's heart was perfect with the Lord all his days." "And thou, Solomon, my son, know thou the God of thy fathers, and serve Him with a perfect heart and with a willing mind." "Be ye, therefore, perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect." "Be perfect." "For the perfecting of the saints." "Whom we preach, warning every man and teaching every man, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus."

Now, I am very far from denying that even the most noted worthies of the scripture history sometimes exhibited such traits of character, and were guilty of such practices as were not at all perfect, when judged by the ordinary human standard; and I am equally far from suggesting for a moment, the preposterous idea that God's standard of perfection is lower than man's. Nevertheless, the undeniable fact remains, that, by the grace of God, these servants of His had been brought into such a condition of heart that He could, and did, call them perfect. Let us ascertain, if possible, what that condition was.

The word perfection is, undoubtedly, employed in the Scriptures in more senses than one. We have the expression perfect as pertaining to the conscience, where justification, the perfect remission of past sins is meant. Then again we read, "To make the Captain of their salvation perfect through suffering." Jesus took not on Him the nature of angels, but He took on Him the seed of Abraham, and was fitted for the work of human redemption by assuming our humanity, and suffering with and for us. In that sense, He was made perfect through sufferings; and in that sense also, the disciple, like his Master, may be made perfect, i.e., fitted for the work he has to do, or the place he has to occupy in God's building, by the discipline of suffering and trial. Still, again, in the third chapter of Philippians, Paul claims perfection in the fifteenth verse, and disclaims it in the twelfth. That which he claims is doubtless Christian perfection, or a clean heart. That which he disclaims, but which he is pressing towards, is the eternal perfectedness of the saints in light, when the resurrection body, joined to the soul in endless union, shall promote, instead of retarding, as does our corruptible body now, the unceasing exercises of holy love and holy joy.

Christian perfection is not the absolute perfection of Deity. God's perfection is infinite in degree, and applies to all His attributes. It is inherent in Himself, and wholly independent of all other existences. He

stands alone, and is the only absolutely perfect Being in the universe. The holiest Christian has no perfection which is not derived from Christ, and which is not every moment dependent upon His merits. "We are nothing, Christ is all." Christian perfection is not the perfection of the angels, nor that of the redeemed in glory. True it is, indeed, that holiness in its nature is ever the same, but in heaven its blessed exercises are not interrupted or suspended, as they are liable to be on earth, by physical and other causes.

Nor will those who are permitted to dwell in that happy place be any longer subject to the heavy and perpetual temptations which assail even the holiest believer here. Sanctification does not bestow upon its possessor freedom from temptation, but freedom from sin; not freedom from spiritual warfare, but freedom from defeat. And this only when looking unto, and abiding in Jesus.

Paul describes the true spiritual warfare, as a wrestling, "not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against wicked spirits in heavenly places." (Margin) In order to wage this war, therefore, we have to get into heavenly places. The strong man who has possession of our hearts, must be not only bound, but cast out. The foes must be expelled from our own household; our hearts must be entirely loyal to our commander. If there are traitors within, they will be constantly endeavoring to open the door to the enemies without.

Entire sanctification, or Christian perfection--a heart made perfect in love--is one of the most important qualifications for the soldier who would do valiantly in the army of the Lamb. The armor which the Apostle so graphically describes in the Epistle to the Ephesians, armor for the head, for the breast, for the body, for the feet, and for each hand--is an armor which the Christian must wear, and which he must use so long as he lives in this world. It is to be employed, however, not against the citadel of his own heart--which is supposed to be already wholly surrendered to the Lord--but against the hosts of Satan and of sin all around him.

Christian Perfection does not pertain to the physical system, nor to the intellect. It is not Adamic perfection. The progenitor of our race was doubtless created with a perfect body and a perfect mind. He was not omniscient; but so far as his knowledge was permitted to extend, it was right knowledge, i.e., a knowledge of things as they really were, and of their true relations to each other. He was not liable to be deceived either by his perceptions or his judgment, either in the acquisition of facts, or the deduction of conclusions from them. What he perceived, he perceived correctly; and what he knew, he knew correctly.

But with us, in our fallen condition, all our faculties and powers being crippled by sin, our bodies subject to disease and death, our minds intimately associated with them and partaking of their infirmity--the case is entirely different. Our senses, the avenues through which information reaches us from the external world, may themselves deceive us. The supposed facts upon which our judgments about many things are based, may not be real facts. The premises from which we reason may be fallacious; the reasoning itself may be unsound; the conclusion may be incorrect.

And if our judgments are thus liable to error, our practice also will be liable to mistake. In our present state of being, a perfect knowledge of things, either as they are in themselves, or as they are related to each other, is wholly impossible. And God does not require such perfect knowledge, as the necessary condition of gospel holiness. Imperfections, infirmities, and errors, will cling to us so long as we are in the body. They are the effects of sin--effects inherited from Adam, our federal head, in his fallen condition--and, if any one chooses to call them sins of ignorance, I shall make no objection.

Now, sacrifices were distinctly appointed under the Mosaic Law, not only for voluntary and conscious transgression, but for sins of ignorance as well. Therefore, even our infirmities and imperfections require confession, and the atoning application of the Saviour's blood, that their stains may be washed away. God has a right to require of each of us, all that we might have rendered to Him if Adam had not fallen; but, for the sake of Jesus Christ, He mercifully remits and forgives all things in which we unavoidably fall short of that standard. Without requiring mental or physical perfection, He confers upon His consecrated, believing children, the inestimable grace of Christian Perfection.

Dispossessing our minds, then, of all these erroneous ideas, having ascertained what Christian Perfection is not, let us now proceed to inquire what it is. A question so momentous can find a satisfactory answer nowhere else but in the Book which is "profitable for doctrine," the teachings of the prophets, of the apostles, and of the Saviour Himself. And the humble, candid, inquiring mind, searching the Scriptures daily "whether these things are so," will not be left long in doubt as to what it is that constitutes the Holiness, or the Perfection, which God requires of His people, and which He confers upon them as a grace and a privilege under the Gospel dispensation.

When, on a certain occasion, Jesus was asked, "Which is the great commandment in the Law?" His answer was, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment; and the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." All the teachings of the Old Testament, therefore, we must infer, hinge upon these two commandments--the first and second tables of the Law--love God, and love man.

The same truth is expressed by the Apostle in his Epistle to the Romans, in one pithy sentence: "Love is the fulfilling of the law." Now, all that God requires of us, is the fulfilling of His law, and if that is comprised in love, then, he who loves aright fulfills the law, pleases God, and is, in the Christian sense, perfect. Again, he writes to Timothy, "Now the end of the commandment is charity, out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned." Love, therefore, flowing out of a sanctified heart, a conscience void of offense, and a sincere faith; that is the end of the commandment--that is Christian Perfection. "A new commandment," said the Lord Jesus to His disciples, "I give unto you," a commandment which may supersede all others, because it includes them all, "That ye love one another." And the beloved John tells us of a "perfect love, which casteth out fear;" and that if we love one another, "God's love is perfected in us." Christian Perfection, therefore, my dear reader, is nothing else than Perfect Love.

The man who loves God supremely, and his neighbor as himself, who enthrones God as it were in the very center of his heart, and allows Him to reign there without a rival, and who, while loving God above everything else, yet loves everything else also as God would have him love it, is, in the Scriptural sense of the terms, a holy or a perfect man. Such an one may be rich or poor; he may be learned or ignorant; he may have one talent or five; his body may be healthy or diseased; his mind may be active or sluggish; his judgment may be strong or weak; his involuntary imperfections and infirmities may be few or many; he may differ much from the angels, and much from Adam, but he bears--in his measure--the moral image of God, for "God is love."

Thus, in the Sermon on the Mount, when the Saviour is contrasting human love, which only extends to friends and neighbors, with the love of God, who "maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust," He tells us, that in order to show by our likeness to such a Father that we are His true children, we must adopt His sentiments, and love in our degree as He loves;

i.e., "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." And it is in this connection that He employs the stupendous words, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in Heaven is perfect." That is to say, Be ye perfect in love, and thus--to the extent of your finite capacity--like Him who is Perfect Love.

We do not hesitate to say that holiness, or perfection, in the sense in which it has just been explained, is required of all Christians. And, if required of all, it is the privilege of all to obtain it. Like every other Gospel blessing, it is the gift of God in Christ; and like every other Gospel blessing, it is to be received by faith. It is a part of our Father's legacy to His children. Let none despise it, nor fail to seek and find it.

In every age of the Church, God has had His experimental witnesses to the wondrous grace of perfect love. Not the least conspicuous among these were the founders of the Society of Friends. George Fox, and many of his coadjutors, not only taught the possibility of holiness--through faith in Christ--as a doctrine, but they claimed it for themselves as an experience.

"They asked me," says George Fox, in giving an account of his examination before some magistrates in Derby, "whether I was sanctified? I answered, yes, for I was in the Paradise of God. Then they asked me if I had no sin? I answered, Christ, my Saviour, had taken away my sin; and in Him is no sin. They asked me, how we knew that Christ did abide in us? I said, By His Spirit, which He has given us. Then they temptingly asked if any of us were Christ? I answered, Nay: we were nothing! Christ was all."

Equally explicit were the teachings of John Wesley and the early Methodists. In opposition to Count Zinzendorf, who maintained that all sin is removed from the heart in conversion. Wesley upheld the doctrine, that sin still exists, as an "infection of nature," in justified believers. But he also clearly recognized the possibility of its entire removal; such removal being effected by an act of God's grace, and the result to the individual being entire sanctification, Christian perfection, or Perfect Love.

The questions still addressed to Methodist ministers at their ordination, indicate the same thing. The candidate is asked, "Have you faith in Christ? Are you going on unto perfection? Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?" Not--Do you expect to be made perfect in knowledge, or in wisdom, or in practice? but, in love.

But we need not particularize the distinctive teachings of Christian sects. Every denomination has had its witnesses. Some of the most holy men and women of whom we have any account, have been Roman Catholics. Such were Tauler, and the Friends of God, Thomas aKempis, Fenelon, and Lady Guyon. The names of many holy men and women adorn the annals of the Church of England. I need only mention Archbishop Leighton. Swiss Calvinists like d'Aubigne; Presbyterians like President Edwards, and James Brainerd Taylor; Baptists like Dr. Levy of Philadelphia; Congregationalists, Moravians, Brethren. All these, and other sects, have had among their members those who could bear testimony to the "perfect love which casteth out fear."

And never, since the Apostolic Age, have larger accessions been made to the ranks of these witnesses than in our own days. Thousands and tens of thousands throughout Christendom, have been awakened in recent years to an apprehension of their privileges in the Gospel, such as they had not known before; and coming to Jesus with consecrated hearts, they are entering by the open door of faith into the fulness of the blessing of the Gospel. To His name be all the glory. Amen.

Remarks

1. To be holy is not to be perfect in body, it is not to be perfect in mind, it is not to be infallible; it is simply to be freed from sin.

2. Christian perfection makes its possessor perfect in his Christianity, not necessarily perfect in anything else.

3. Perfect Christianity, or Christian perfection, consists in perfect love. Perfect love is that which loves God supremely, and your neighbor as yourself. Such love is the fulfilling of the law and the end of the commandment.

4. Love is in proportion to faith. Little faith, little love; much faith, much love; perfect faith, perfect love. Perfect faith can only exist in connection with perfect surrender to God.

5. Out of a heart made perfect in love, there must necessarily flow a life devoted to God. "A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit."

6. Knowledge, judgment, and practice will always be imperfect in our present state of being. But Christian perfection implies perfect submission, perfect faith, perfect love, and, up to the standard of knowledge, perfect obedience.

7. Christian perfection is a bestowment and an impartation, wholly derived from the merits of Christ and constantly dependent upon the indwelling Spirit. It cannot exist a single moment in any branch that is not abiding in the Vine.

8. Christian perfection does not exclude growth. Both in nature and in grace God's works may be perfect in every stage of their development, and yet constantly growing in their perfections.

9. Christian perfection in the sense explained in this chapter is required of all Christians; and what is duty is also privilege. Every believer may and should have a heart made perfect in love.

10. "Accepting our punishment is just being of one mind with God, in hating and condemning sin, and longing for its destruction. It is submitting ourselves to the process of its destruction, and setting our seals to the righteousness of God in the process. It is the death-pang of the crucified Head thrilling through the members, and accomplishing in them what it did in the Head." -- Thomas Erskine. If instead of the phrase "accepting our punishment," we read Christ's baptism, these observations--and especially the last--will be equally impressive and equally true.

11. "Sins of ignorance" are spoken of in the Law of Moses, as possible, but not necessary. They might or might not occur. Ignorance of God's will, when the knowledge of it is within our reach, is itself criminal. And ignorance is no valid excuse for sins committed under such circumstances; although God, in His mercy, provides sufficient sacrifice for these, as for all other sins, in Christ.

Evils arising out of unavoidable ignorance, are not sins, in the sense of attaching guilt to the perpetrator. They are his misfortune, not his fault. Their penalty may be suffering, but it is not condemnation. Whoever "walks in all the light he has and can acquire," is delivered and kept by the power of God from all sin.

Father, Thy all-absorbing love

Draws out my heart in love to Thee;

Yet, save Thy love came down to me,
Mine never could have reached above.
Lord, I had nothing; till, within,
Thy grace revealed Thy blessed cross
My very righteousness was dross,
And all my life a trace of sin.
Thou asked for that which Thou had'st made:
My life, myself, my love, my heart;
Yet, when thou would'st Thy grace impart,
My gift, though poor, was long delayed.
At length surrendered to Thy call,
I scarcely knew then what I gave;
I cannot now know all I have,
But I have Christ, and He is "All."

W. C. W.

So let us love, dear love, like as we ought,
Love is the lesson which the Lord us taught.

Edmund Spenser

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