

Section I. the Scripture Argument

by Jesse T. Peck

The sermon emphasizes that the central idea of Christianity is perfect holiness, which is essential for understanding the purpose of the Scriptures and the process of salvation.

Scripture: Matthew 5:8, 2 Corinthians 7:1, Ephesians 1:4, 1 Thessalonians 4:7, Hebrews 12:14, 1 Peter 1:15

Topics: "Christian Holiness", "Spiritual Transformation"

Description

Jesse T. Peck preaches about the central idea of Christianity being holiness, emphasizing the necessity of purity of heart and life as the ultimate goal of the Christian faith. He highlights how the doctrine of holiness should be the guiding principle in every aspect of Christian belief and practice, condemning any deviation from this central idea. Peck urges Christians to prioritize the pursuit of holiness above all else, as it is the core purpose of the gospel and the key to true spiritual transformation.

Transcript

The interpretation of a system depends upon its central idea. This is seen in mechanism. The different parts of a watch, for instance, would be perfectly unintelligible to the most careful observer, without the idea which produced it. To mark the division of time being the problem, every wheel becomes a part of the solution. In the same way, government without the idea of social rights, is a collection of unmeaning forms; but, with this idea, all its details are luminous and significant. No man can understand the system of Mohammed, until he examines it as a scheme for sensual gratification, He will then see the reason for every thing that is peculiar to it. So the religious sentiment under the control of hope or fear explains the stupendous system of human folly called heathenism. Judaism exists to support the idea of national preeminence, and Catholicism has been known for ages only by its magnificent designs of political power and universal domination. These are only illustrations of the general law that every system has its central idea; and though we may generalize sufficiently from an examination of particulars, to ascertain that idea, yet no system can be thoroughly understood, nor justly interpreted, but in the light of it.

We purpose, therefore, to discuss the question, What is the central idea of Christianity?

We do not propose to examine the various answers which have been given to this question. They are to be found not so much in books as in systems; for the different organizations under the Christian scheme have all received their distinctive forms from the notions of men with regard to the great end contemplated -- the final cause of the enterprise. The Christian institutes have not produced the central idea, but the idea has produced them. There can be but one central idea of the Christian scheme, and that is, as it exists in

the mind of God. Any human conception of it can only approximate the truth in proportion as it resembles the idea which existed in the mind of God when he constructed the system in its divine and essential forms. In exact proportion as the various branches of the Christian church and the heretical sects have departed from this original, have been their errors in doctrine, in ceremonies, in morals, and in government. We shall attempt to reach and expose these various errors only so far as the development and brief application of what we believe to be the true idea, may serve this purpose.

And first, we shall consult the Scriptures. The doctrines, institutions, and obligations included in Christianity, are discussed, separately and combined, in the Holy Bible, in a great variety of forms. But he must read very superficially who can regard them as detached and independent truths. The more profoundly we study the sacred volume, the more clearly we shall see that it embodies and illustrates a splendid scheme of remedial government. Not a thought, not a fact, not a truth, bears a foreign stamp, or indicates in the slightest degree that it exists for itself alone, or for any other system whatever. The great idea which originated the several parts of this amazing scheme, is to be ascertained, not by accidental reading or limited study of the Bible, but by the strictest attention to its drift. Principles, in the abstract and in the concrete, must be collated with the utmost care. The minutest particulars, as well as the most prominent and extensive, must be viewed in their relations to each other, and the grand scope of the whole divine teaching ascertained. whoever does this, will, we think, find the following truths, tending to a solution of our problem, clearly established:

1. The choice of God for the moral condition of the human race was perfect purity; hence he created man in his own image.
2. As this was once the choice of God, it must be eternally so, and the divine preference or will can never be met but by perfect moral purity.
3. Sin interfered with this choice, to the full extent of its existence and reign, and hence called out the severest divine displeasure.
4. There has, therefore, never been and never can be the slightest toleration of sin in any divine communications; it is condemned with unsparing severity in its most secret and plausible forms.
5. As man, by becoming a sinner, has incurred the divine displeasure, he can be saved from calamity and made perfectly happy only by entire deliverance from sin.
6. Remedial measures, originating in God, must aim directly at the destruction of sin. Excepting it in any of its forms, making provision for its continuance, its justification, or excuse, in the soul of the saved, to any extent, would be trifling, impossible in him.
7. The sacrificial offering of Christ, and the means and appliances of the gospel, reveal the plan of salvation by the destruction of sin and the restoration of man to the image of God, and can, in no way, be reconciled with the idea of salvation in sin.

We have not room to amplify these propositions, or to introduce the Scriptures which prove them. Nor is it necessary, as they will not be questioned by any whom we can hope to reach. But if they truly indicate the drift of revelation, they show, incontestably, that the great idea of Christianity is holiness; that this vast scheme of suffering, teaching, labor, and agency, has all been produced and is carried on solely to deliver man from his sins, for the ultimate perfection of Christian character. There are certain Scriptures which

show conclusively that we have not mistaken the teachings of revelation upon this great question.

St. Paul to the Colossians has this remarkable saying in regard to Christ: "Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus; whereunto I also labor, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily." Then to "present every man perfect in Christ Jesus," is the grand and sole design of apostolic preaching. Christ, as our Mediator, appears among men to answer to that idea. He throws himself into the greatest of the apostles to energize his soul, his eloquence, and his labors, for that purpose alone. Can there be a stronger declaration that the perfection of Christian character is the central idea of the gospel? if so, we have it in this: "And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." Holiness, then, or the "perfecting of the saints," produced the pastorate in all its forms. This alone, therefore, can explain its sacred functions; and in every endowment and authorized effort, it points to the splendid idea which called it into existence.

We give one quotation more, which covers the whole ground of revelation. Paul says to Timothy: "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, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." Here, then, are "the Holy Scriptures " "given by inspiration of God," with their vast details of doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction, for the sole purpose of producing experimental and practical perfection; and in this life, as it is thus that "the man of God" is to "be thoroughly furnished unto all good works." There is, then, no resisting it. This great idea produced the Bible -- the whole Bible -- and it is this alone that renders every part of it luminous. If this is the thing to be done, to make "the man of God perfect," it is just the Bible we need; and it is most appropriately entitled, by universal consent, "The Holy Bible." It is therefore settled, by authority, that holiness or Christian perfection is the central idea of Christianity.

SECTION II. THE ANALYTICAL ARGUMENT.

It is not so much to strengthen our position, as to rouse attention and induce action, that we now propose to subject the system to a critical and searching analysis, to see if we are thus conducted to the same result. Let us take our position outside of the system, and travel inward, taking up and carefully examining every part of it as we proceed, until we reach the centre, and ascertain what is that one condition and life upon which all the rest depends. And the first thing we find is, perhaps, a building -- numerous buildings, indeed, of various sizes, architecture, and expense. But a building can be the central idea of nothing; for we instinctively ask, What is it for? In this instance, we observe, that the convenience of assembly is the object. The gathering next attracts our attention; but a meeting is no central idea, for we wish to know why the people meet. We soon perceive the observance of certain rites which, considered alone, seem idle, might be as well performed with far less pains. But we are told that this sacrament is an oath, that it implies a covenant between these men and the invisible God, and that this bread and wine are used to symbolize the body and blood of a victim for sinners. The Lord's Supper then is no central idea. And the application of water by one man, to the person of another, can be of no importance in itself; but solemnly performed "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost," it carries us out of itself to the wondrous work of which it is "the sign and seal." Baptism, then, is not the central idea of the system. But upon further observation we perceive that an organization exists, that there is a vast and extended brotherhood, with all the powers and functions of a distinct and vigorous life; and we may ask, Is not this

the consummation of the scheme? Certainly not; for an idea must produce an organization, and hence must be anterior to it and essentially independent of it. It may pervade the organization, but only as the soul the body, without losing its identity. The church, then, is not central in this system. Examining still more closely the acts of this society, we perceive that stated public addresses are delivered; but these, like all speeches or harangues, are to get something done. Preaching is, therefore, not the idea which produced Christianity. Solemn invocation addressed to an invisible Being is another stated exercise; but this expresses an emotion or thought, or implores some good or the aversion of some ill, out of itself. It was not, then, for the production of prayer that this system was instituted; and the same is true of praise.

Traveling inward, the light increases, indicating nearer approach to the sun at the centre. An unseen power has revealed to the soul the fact of its guilt, and it writhes in agony. But is this an object? Is the sufferer to be left in this condition? Surely not. Conviction, then, is not central to this system. This state is followed by an inward loathing of sin -- a voluntary and decisive turning away from it. But repentance cannot exist alone. It can only be conceived of as a consequence or a means. Faith grasps a Redeemer, and hence, great as it is, is only an instrumentality -- a condition of blessings out of itself. It was not, then, merely that men might believe, that this dispensation was given. Pardon only absolves for the past. Of itself, it effects no radical change in the moral condition or tendencies of the sinner. Left at this point, he must the next instant commence a fresh accumulation of guilt. Justification is not, therefore, the central idea of Christianity. Bring the dead soul to life, let it be "begotten of God" -- "born again" "born from above," and does this alone meet the divine purpose in commencing the work of grace? Is regeneration the grand ultimate point to which the whole gospel scheme tends? Does this properly imply that specific moral state which, of itself, fits the soul for heaven? We grant that the word may be used in a sense which would comprehend it; but is this its proper use? We think not, and for the following reasons:

1. There is a broad and necessary distinction between the existence of a thing and the state of the thing existing, between the fact of life and the mode of life, between a soul spiritually alive and the moral condition of the living spirit. Just as natural life and the condition of the living being are distinct, spiritual life and the moral condition of the spiritually alive are distinct. Certain invariable coincidences between these two things, in no respect interfere with their essential difference. Now, two things so entirely distinct, as the fact of spiritual life and the moral state of the spiritually alive, ought to have different names.

2. Regeneration appropriately designates the former, sanctification the latter. The first term includes both the sign and the thing signified. Generation denotes the production of natural life, re-generation the production of spiritual life. Now the force of the illustration is seen in the following-particulars: (1.) The soul in its natural state is "dead" -- "dead in trespasses and in sins." It is so, because "to be carnally minded is death." (2.) Natural life is the product of divine power alone, and spiritual life must be also. Generation expresses the operation of this power in the one instance, and re-generation in the other. A similar relation exists between the ideas represented by the words creature and "new creature," born and "born again." (3.) Generation and birth produce new natural powers and functions, which demonstrate the omnipotence of their Creator; re-generation and the new birth produce spiritual powers and functions entirely new, which demonstrate equally the divinity of their origin. (4.) The result of generation is natural life with its accidents, the result of re-generation is spiritual life with its accidents; the degree of health may be mentioned as an accident of the former, the degree of sanctification. or holiness as an accident of the latter. The word sanctification just as appropriately denotes certain treatment of the soul, which God has brought to life, as regeneration does the fact of bringing it to life. Sanctify is from sanctus, holy, and facio, to make. Sanctification is literally the act of making holy, and this is its essential meaning in systematic

divinity.

Now here are two things totally distinct from each other, as much so as a fact and, a quality of a fact, a thing and an accident of a thing can be; and here are two terms, of entirely different import, completely adapted to represent these two things respectively -- regeneration, the production of spiritual life; sanctification, the treatment of the soul spiritually alive -- neither of which can, without violence to the laws of language, perform the office of the other. We humbly submit, therefore, that they ought not to be used interchangeably, and that attempts so to use them have caused nearly all the confusion which has embarrassed these great points in theology.

3. The experience of Christians amply sustains the distinctions we have made. It is generally if not universally: (1.) that, in conversion, they receive a new life, manifesting powers and functions entirely spiritual, and different from any they have before exhibited; as before this they have proved that "to be carnally minded is death," they now prove that "to be spiritually minded is life and peace:" (2.) that with regeneration they have received but an imperfect sanctification; or, in other words, that God has commenced to sanctify the souls which he has regenerated, making the progression and completion of the work depend upon conditions which he has clearly revealed: (3.) that, so far from being identical, regeneration may be truly affirmed of those who are in all stages of sanctification, and only a few profess or believe that they are sanctified wholly, whereas all Christians claim to be and really are regenerated: (4.) that the great business and chief difficulty of all regenerate men is to secure their entire sanctification. This is the great question between them and God on the one hand, and Satan on the other; and, too generally, it takes nearly the whole of probation to settle it. Now the strength of this argument is in the circumstance that it is of the nature of fact and utterly undeniable.

4. The Scriptures conclusively settle the question. They plainly assume the distinction. To sinners God says, "Ye must be born again;" to the regenerate "Be ye holy, for I am holy." In this exhortation they persist with the greatest possible earnestness. "Having, therefore, these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord." The great apostle was, therefore, aware that these Christian brethren, "dearly beloved," had yet need of cleansing "from filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness." Again: Knowing that there was such a thing as being sanctified but in part, and aware that this was the real condition of his brethren at Thessalonica, as it is of Christians generally, in his most fervent devotions he prayed, "And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly." Quotations are unnecessary. The whole tenor of Scripture upon this subject assumes that the merely regenerate have need of further sanctification. They, and they only, are the persons to whom it is offered; who are required, by the most positive command, to "go on to perfection," and encouraged by the most gracious promises to expect the blessing, in answer to believing prayer -- "Faithful is he that hath called you, who also will do it."

If, then, there is a broad and necessary distinction between a soul spiritually alive, and the moral condition of the living spirit -- if the terms regeneration and sanctification are strictly and only appropriate to the production of spiritual life, and to the treatment of the soul so brought to life, and cannot be used interchangeably -- if the experience of all Christians recognizes this distinction, which is really so far from being questionable, that it is the great duty and work of all regenerate persons to secure the progress and ultimate completion of the work of sanctification -- and if, for this purpose, the Holy Scriptures address to them the most pointed declarations of want, the most peremptory commands to go forward to its acquisition, and the most gracious assurances of success,-- then regeneration is not sanctification, and regeneration is not the central idea of Christianity.

We have now reached, in our analysis, the great fact to which we were guided in our Scripture test, as affording the true explanation of the whole gospel scheme -- perfect purity -- the choice of God for the moral condition of the human race. Let the work of sanctification, which commences at the time of regeneration, go on to its completion; let the inward foes which were then conquered be slain and exterminated, so that those who at first could only say, "Being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ," now say, with equal assurance, "The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin;" and this must be precisely the thing which God saw at the beginning was necessary to counteract the evil which had been done; and reproduce the moral state from which man had fallen. To accomplish this he instituted the scheme of redemption. If it was for any object less than this, then the divine purposes could be harmonized with the permanent existence of sin in his redeemed ones. But we have taken up, one by one, the facts and principles, and operations of the system, and found no one of them that could stand alone -- that could explain all the rest, and entirely answer to the divine will -- until we reached that "holiness without which no man shall see the Lord." This is a principle independent of all others, in its essential character. It existed prior to all gospel institutions and remedial acts. It is an object of such immense importance as to justify the vast arrangements of the remedial dispensation. It explains every one of them; and, if we suppose it absent from the system, they all immediately become unintelligible and valueless. To do less for man than to make him holy would be, in effect, to do nothing for him; and to do this is to do all. Holiness is, therefore, the central sun which pours its glorious light through every part of the system, and illustrates every thing which it contains. Remove it, and all is dark as midnight.

Let us, however, test the matter still further. Going again to the outside of the scheme, let us approach the centre from another direction. There are certain requisitions of the gospel which are evidently fundamental. Take that great one which includes all others: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart," etc. The question now is, What moral condition of the soul is capable of this result? You observe Christian love that is mingled with fear. This you trace to a state of imperfect sanctification. But find the outbeamings of that "perfect love" which "casteth out fear," in the countenance -- in every feeling -- in every word -- in every act, and trace them to their home in the inner being, and you will find it perfectly pure. You will say in raptures to that child of God, "Being made free from sin, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life." The same is certainly true of every one of the Christian graces -- of every attempt at obedience. Those which, from their mixed character, must be condemned, not merely by the flaming law, but by the high standard of perfection made attainable by the gospel, can be traced, in every instance, to an unsanctified state of the heart, showing that something yet remains to be done to complete the work of purification; and those which meet this standard, can be traced to a state of perfect inward purity. How clearly, then, this purity -- the state which originally gave out these manifestations, and which alone can now produce them -- is and must be the centre of the remedial system!

But, finally, let us take our position in heaven, and thence move out into the kingdom of grace until we reach its centre. The question now is, What state of mind is a full preparation for heaven? Here everything is holy. God -- the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost -- reigns in holiness, immaculate and infinite; the angels shine in unsullied purity; and the saints, having "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb," are without a stain. Not an impure thought or feeling, desire or motive, can be found in all that bright world. The employments of the place are suited only to holy beings. And going out to find the persons adjusted to the place, we reject all others, and by universal consent accept the souls cleansed from all unrighteousness. The most splendid talents would be no substitute for holiness; the brightest genius the world ever saw must pause at the gate of this celestial paradise, if a spot of sin be found upon

his garments.

Let no man assert, by way of objection to this position, that all truly converted persons, who do not backslide, are safe. If it is meant that justification and regeneration are intended to supersede entire sanctification -- that they are of themselves a preparation for that holy place -- the position is dangerously false. If it is intended to claim that a state of continued justification includes the assurance of entire sanctification,-- or, in other words, that he who retains the favor of God, must and will press on to the point of entire purification, it is a glorious truth; but as this is, therefore, a mere question of the mode and probability of reaching a particular state, it in no way affects the argument we have adduced, to show that this state of purity is of itself, however or whenever reached, a full preparation, and the only preparation for heaven.

Thus we see that, from whatever point we commence our analysis, we reach the same result. All the other great facts and duties which the system includes, all the operations of divine grace upon the heart, are but so many means to this glorious end -- all lead directly in to holiness at the centre. The results which are fully in accordance with the expressed will of God, all point directly back to it; and, coming out from heaven itself, to find the true preparation for that glorious place, we ascertain it to be holiness alone. Carefully examining every particular of the system, within our reach, we find nothing else that will, as an end, meet the demands of the Almighty, explain the vast details of the remedial scheme, or account for the splendid results of that scheme in this world and in the next. By the test of analysis, then, as well as of revelation, holiness is the central idea of Christianity.

SECTION III. THE HISTORICAL ARGUMENT.

Our next appeal is to history. And the question raised here, is, What is the law of religious development and power as an agent of reform? Or, in other words, regarding Christianity as the one grand agent, ordained by the Almighty to reform the world, in proportion to what has it been successful?

The following facts are beyond question. An individual professor takes his place in the church. He has wealth, and uses it freely for the benefit of the organization. He has talents, and they are zealously devoted to the defense of the church. He has popular influence, and he uses it to gather proselytes to the faith. But his piety is superficial. Words escape him every day which show that they come from an impure fountain. He is, in spirit, a man of the world, and he has very little power to reform men. He may induce them to attend his church, and even to join it; but in all his efforts to reform them he feels that he is weak, and they turn away in disgust, or look to others for their models, and advice. But let this same man improve in his piety, and his power to do good at once begins to increase. Let him approximate nearer and nearer the standard of Christian perfection, and it will be seen that his spiritual power increases in exact proportion.

On the other hand, take a man whose heart is entirely consecrated; whose pure life indicates purity of heart, whose holy example commands universal respect, whose simple, unpretending efforts move all who hear his voice in prayer, or praise, or exhortation. Now, let him yield to temptation, -- admit corruption into his heart, -- and how soon it is seen that he is shorn of his strength! Just in proportion as he recedes from his elevated position in Christian holiness, his power of usefulness diminishes. Nor can he supply this deficiency by any other element. He who loses his purity may strive to save his power by increase of zeal, by enlarged charities, by the severest austerities; but it is all of no avail. He makes himself a living proof that, holiness is the measure of power.

A comparison of two men in the ministry' will strengthen this conclusion. One is a man of shining talents, of genteel address, of popular eloquence; the other. ordinary in all these respects -- in all natural qualities, the inferior of his brother. But he is a man of God -- a man of faith. His soul is filled with love -- "perfect love that casteth out fear." He moves among the people like a spirit from eternity. His rebukes of sin fall with dreadful force upon the hearts of the wicked. His sermons, his prayers, his expostulations, his tears, all indicate the presence of an extraordinary power; and thousands are converted, sanctified, and saved through his instrumentality. But the other man sees no such fruits of his labor. Souls may be converted, but he feels that it is in spite of him rather than through his instrumentality. He wonders at the difference. He increases his exertions -- elaborates his sermons with more learning and research -- improves their rhetoric and oratory, but all to little purpose. He may increase the admiration of his hearers, but he cannot subdue their hearts, bring them weeping to the foot of the cross, and present them with joy as the trophies of the Redeemer. But let him seek and obtain the baptism of the Holy Ghost. Let fire from God's altar touch his lips and purify his soul, and he is a new man. He does not throw away his talents, his genius, his learning; but they are all sanctified. With the simplicity of a child, and a heart overflowing with love, he preaches the truth, and it is "in the demonstration of the Spirit, and of power," and a glorious reformation follows. Whatever may be the seeming variations arising from the deficiency of our knowledge, we have, in these particular instances, strong historic indications of a general law.

What is true of individuals is true of churches also. Wherever a number of Christians have associated together, with the evident and exclusive aim of promoting purity of heart and life, they have prospered. Their creed may have included strange inconsistencies, their forms and ceremonies may have frequently been the offspring of conceit, and devoid of taste -- they may have been generally uneducated and without the advantages of wealth or influential friends, -- but with a supreme devotion to experimental holiness they have revealed an inner spiritual and powerful life, which has defied all persecution, and survived the rage of enemies.

Upon the other hand, churches having the purest creed ever drawn from the Sacred Records, combining the accumulated wealth, and learning, and power of ages, have perished in the very midst of their greatness, simply by becoming corrupt. We affirm that there is not a superannuated Christian denomination in history, whose decline has not been in exact proportion to its sins. Not unfrequently have men been amazed at the want of reformatory power in Christian communions of vast extent and influence, exhibiting many signs of external prosperity. But God has been witness to their departure from Christian simplicity and purity, and written "Ichabod" upon their sacred altars and splendid temples.

Finally: the most profound attention to the history of the general church will show the same unvarying truth. Under the influence of apostolic purity, the early victories of the cross were as decisive in the reformation of individual character and public manners, as they were unparalleled in their extent and power. But the gradual departure from primitive simplicity, and the immense accumulation of corruption in heart and life which followed, by slow degrees destroyed the power of the church to act as a reforming agent, and that long, dark night of a thousand years, which closed in upon her spiritual vision, was a night of corruption. When the Reformation dawned, it showed the most revolting spectacles of vice, pervading all classes, from the obscure monk to the haughty prelate in the pretended chair of St. Peter. Honest minds were alarmed at the revelation; and as the noble men who led the movement humbled themselves before God, "renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully," they began to acquire the power to benefit the race, which had been lost by apostasy; and just in proportion to their purity they became actual and successful reformers. The history of that great

work of God which commenced through their instrumentality, extends to every land on the face of the earth, and on into eternity, illustrating at every step of its progress the great principle which we are endeavoring to develop.

The Wesleyan reformation was eminently a movement in favor of holiness. The true doctrine of Christian Perfection was perhaps more clearly taught and powerfully enforced than at any former time since the days of primitive purity. And while the great mass of converts made it their aim, large numbers pressed on to the actual experience and living demonstration of the power of Christ to cleanse from all sin. And mark the result: "No weapon formed against them could prevail." From the feeblest beginnings, without wealth, without power, in the midst of the most violent persecutions, they have moved on in a career of usefulness unparalleled since the days of the apostles.

Now this uniformity of facts, extending from individuals up through special Christian organizations, to the general church, and pervading all ecclesiastical history, can be the result of no accident. It shows with the force of demonstration that holiness is the great law of religious development, and hence that holiness is the central idea of Christianity.

SECTION IV. THE EXPERIMENTAL ARGUMENT.

Our final appeal is to experience. And here the heart of every man must answer for itself. If the grand design of the gospel be any thing less than perfect purity, then the soul can find full rest without it. If it be only pardon and regeneration, then the discovery of remaining corruptions ought to be no cause of uneasiness; the prayers of those who groan for full redemption ought to be unheeded; or, if relief be found, it ought to be in some other system -- through some other name than the name of Jesus.

But what facts does experience reveal? Why, that a deep and painful sense of inward impurity may remain after all guilt is washed away; that in the midst of the divine comforts of adoption the soul longs for the rest of perfect love; that the more devoted the life of the regenerate Christian, the more intense is his desire to be cleansed from all sin, and while he is without the evidence of this finished work, he has more or less of fear for the future. By the most powerful internal convictions, and the most obvious tendencies of every work of grace that has is heretofore been wrought upon his heart, he is urged on to this glorious consummation. And it is not in accordance with experience that he who sighs for purity of heart must sigh in vain -- that he who cries, "Create in me a clean heart, O God," must pray in vain. From numerous examples in Scripture, from the testimonies of thousands long since gone to their reward, and of thousands still living, the declaration of Jesus is amply sustained: "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled." So far were they from being compelled to look to other systems and other names for deliverance, that they declare with the utmost confidence it was well said by the angel, "And thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins;" for we have in our hearts the divine assurance that "the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanseth us from all sin."

And precisely as it ought to be, if this is the centre of the scheme, here the soul finds rest -- here perfect satisfaction. All its desires, all its passions, all its plans are in complete harmony with the will of God. From this sanctified state it can develop itself without inward obstruction -- from this position it can expand and advance with freedom and power. The growth of the spirit, which in its original purity must certainly have been infinite, has been sadly interrupted by its dreadful disease. And since the cure commenced it has been much retarded by the remains of the disease. But, now that the cure is complete, and faith is strong and active, growth in grace is free, natural, and rapid. It is true the effects of this malady may long remain

after the remedy has been thoroughly successful. Infirmities of body and mind, which constantly need the compassion of God, the merits of Christ, and the charity of men, will press upon us till our probation ends; but, in spite of them all, the soul in a state of perfect salvation, rises, enlarges, and triumphs as it could never have done under any but a remedial system.

Thus directly and inevitably does experience conduct us to holiness as the great want of immortal man -- the grand design of redemption.

We have now examined this question in the light of the Holy Scriptures, and found that this stupendous system of revelation and redeeming mercy was undertaken "that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." We have subjected the scheme to the severest analysis. Moving inward from different positions outside of it, we have found holiness alone at its centre. We have consulted history and experience, and found that in fact holiness is the measure of power. We are compelled, therefore, by the strictest logical necessity, to assert that holiness is the central idea of Christianity.

SECTION V. THE ARGUMENT APPLIED

It will, we think, at once be perceived that we have reached a position of immense practical importance. If this be the true central idea of the Christian scheme, we may try everything by it, which, in the lapse of centuries has come to be attached to this scheme. Evidently enough, whatever has no adaptation to produce entire sanctification in the hearts of believers,-- "to present every man perfect in Christ Jesus," -- does not belong to the system, and must be promptly rejected.

From the nature of God it must be certain that he has made no mistakes in the details of a system designed to restore to man his lost image; and it is wonderful to see with what skill and directness he has adjusted everything to this grand aim. He has revealed his fiery law, which flames out in wrath against all species of sin. He has exhibited the immaculate purity of his own character, which causes seraphim to cry, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." He has uttered the unchangeable law to his people, "Ye shall be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy." He provided a Redeemer, whose blood made ample atonement for all sin. He gave the Holy Ghost to awaken, to regenerate, and to sanctify us. He gave his word to teach us the necessity of holiness. He moved men of strong faith to pray for the blessing in behalf of his people, and sketched with the pen of inspiration the characters and lives of those who had reached this glorious perfection. He bade us "mark the perfect man and behold the upright, for the end of that man is peace." He established the ministry to explain to us the way of holiness, to rouse us from the slumbers of sin, and persuade us to "lay hold on eternal life." He provided the church to cherish and build us up from our feeble infancy, and aid us to "go on to perfection." He gave us the holy sacraments to bind us to himself, and keep us perpetually in mind of the cleansing blood. Indeed it may be safely said that while every thing which God has instituted for man is most evidently designed and adapted to lead to purity of heart, he has omitted nothing which is essential to this result.

But how is it with man? Alas! he has too frequently "perverted the right way of the Lord." There is much in the faith, and forms, and practice of the different branches of the church, to show that the great idea of holiness has been denied its central position, and that others of far less importance, and even wholly untrue, have been assumed in its stead. Let us test these three particulars far enough to indicate in a slight degree, the power of a central idea in the formation of opinions, and the adjustment of subordinate parts of a system, and the importance of a correct development of that idea, in attempts to ascertain our

position, to detect our errors, and establish ourselves in the truth.

Let it be inquired, for instance, how the doctrine of fate, in any of its forms, came to be incorporated into the creeds of the Christian denominations. And taking holiness as the central idea of the system, we cannot account for it. Holiness is a moral state. Its restoration is a moral result; but there can be no moral quality without freedom. God cannot change to be pleased at one time, with that which displeased him at another. The law cannot change to render that holy which it once condemned. There must therefore be a change in the sinner, or he must retain his corruptions forever. He may be graciously aided and encouraged to put forth the volition upon which the moral change depends. But he must put it forth, or no change in his moral state is practicable. To say that God could, by any act of authority or power, cleanse a sinner unconditionally, is saying no more than that the same offensive thing, the same corrupt state, and the same vicious acts, can be regarded and treated by him differently at different times. Let the sovereignty of God be the central idea, and we can easily see how it would produce this doctrine. If he designed, in the structure of the Christian scheme, merely to illustrate his independence of man, and the fact of his unlimited control over the thoughts and feelings, and purposes of the human race, then he might have excluded man from all participation in the events of his government, excepting as a passive recipient of almighty power. He might then have efficiently secured the fall and all its succession of evils. But if he intended to purify the hearts of men by faith in the blood of Christ, he would undoubtedly leave them free to exercise that faith. In the same way divine sovereignty, assumed as the central idea, could account for the doctrine of certain final perseverance, the doctrine of doubt or uncertainty in regard to adoption, and of necessary indwelling sin. For beyond question, absolute sovereignty would be illustrated by withholding repentance and faith, pardon and sanctification, from all but those whom God had determined to save. The witness of the Spirit would be incompatible with possible subsequent evidence of reprobation; and as the final disposition of the soul would depend upon God's sovereign pleasure, a state of full salvation here would interfere with that uncertainty to man, and appearance of contingency, which had been predetermined, and is a necessary part of the system.

Again: it is impossible, upon the theory developed in this discussion, to explain the introduction of certain universal salvation into any faith nominally Christian. If we are right, holiness is an indispensable prerequisite of happiness in heaven or elsewhere; and though this is also roundly asserted by the errorists to whom we refer, it, does not belong to the system, which plainly provides for the final salvation of those who die in a state of deepest corruption, as inevitably and unconditionally as for the purest of Christians. And the wholly gratuitous and merely nominal introduction of holiness into the scheme cannot save it, as in the absence of volition, or the obstinate rejection of the atonement, there is no way to produce it. Happiness must be the central idea of Universalism -- happiness, irrespective of character or condition. Employ this idea to construct a system of theology, and it would of course reject all punishment in another world, or, at least, make the suffering due to sin as slight, and terminate it as soon as possible.

It would, in like manner, be impossible to account for the doctrine of priestly intervention, the real presence, the worship of saints, the celibacy of the clergy, and of purgatory, by assuming holiness as the central idea of Christianity; With this for a forming power, we want as little as possible of the merely human, the material, the ceremonial in the system. The most direct possible way to the mercy of God, and the cleansing power of the Holy Ghost, must, be the law of this spiritual organism; and this is plainly through faith in Christ, and nothing else. But take political power for the central idea of a system, and see how inevitably it requires and produces the very doctrines we have mentioned. The head of the organization must then be a monarch, clothed with absolute authority over the souls and bodies of men.

His subordinate officers of state must be taken from the ranks of the clergy. The importance of the priest must be magnified by the exclusive right to dispense the souls of men, and the people must be compelled to literal obedience, by their hope of heaven, and their dread of eternal damnation. That which from the nature of the case can only be spiritually present, and apprehended by faith must be physically and literally present, and be made palpable to the senses. The objects of worship must be material or human, like the worshippers; and hence appreciable by the intellect, without faith. An appearance of sanctity, extending even to the denial of lawful desires in holy wedlock, must divert the attention of the people from gross sensuality; and as preparation for heaven here, in the mode required is, to the understandings of all, an acknowledged failure, it is necessary to make arrangements for its consummation in another life. All these, with their nameless kindred errors, are given in political domination as a central idea.

In the same way will the application of this obvious test reveal what is merely human and artificial in the outward forms and ceremonies of the church. We have seen that holiness assumed as the grand object of the Christian scheme, leaves room for little that is merely instrumental, and with the greatest possible directness leads the sinner into his own heart, and thence to the mercy of God. If this be the object, whatever obstructs his way, or retards his movements, must be foreign to the system, and ruinous to the soul. It is obvious, then, that this idea could never have added to the sacraments of baptism, and the Lord's supper, those of confirmation penance, extreme unction, holy orders and matrimony. But a moment's reflection will show how legitimately the false position of each arises from the political central power, which we have assumed as the origin of a false system. The novice must not be allowed to have reached a state of spiritual security, nor acquired a right to the blessings of the new covenant, until that security is obtained, and that right recognized by priestly intervention. Self-inflicted tortures, which accord with a sensational, in distinction from a spiritual religion, must be prescribed by the priest, upon obedience to whom the wretch depends for the relief of conscience. Justification by faith destroys the political power of the priest. The diseased or dying man, instead of looking to rational remedies and the grace of God in the hour of trial, must be taught that his safety, in body and soul, depends upon the presence and good dispositions of his ghostly confessor, who uses with official efficacy the anointing oil. The same officer is clothed with authority, which in no sense depends upon purity of heart, or virtuousness of life; which, reaching back in prelatical succession to the apostles, is irrevocable in its rights, conclusive in its functions, and, above all moral contingency whatsoever. And finally, the domestic relations must depend on the the same prerogatives. No matrimonial alliance can be valid unless sanctioned by a Romish priest. But to make all this practicable, these rights must be elevated to the dignity and solemnity of sacraments, and hence, of course, depend entirely upon the will of the clergy. In this manner, a vast centralizing scheme is constructed, combining all the elements of immense political power.

But the theoretical is not always the practical central idea. Systems are gradually formed and modified under the control of views and aims which are widely different from those which originated them. The ever-changing ideal of man, in relation to the true good, does not allow of permanency and consistency in the institutions and means relied upon to produce it. A succession of clear, stern, and powerful minds may; it is true, preserve for ages the great idea upon which a vast scheme of selfish interest depends; but multitudes who are visibly arranged under its banner will be practically severed from it by an inherent independence of thought, and a greater or less submission to the guidance of an invisible hand.

It will hence occur, that many who adopt as a whole a theory which makes the sovereignty of God the central idea of Christianity, will, in fact, feel that sin is their only real evil, and recognize the gospel as a grand provision of mercy for their deliverance from it. And thus thousands, whose creed actually denies

the possibility of deliverance from all sin in this life, are striving, with all their might, to reach this result; and thousands have doubtless succeeded, thus making holiness the practical, while something else was the theoretical centre; and, we may as well say it, for it is a momentous truth, in the present condition of theological systems, the safety of a vast majority of nominal Christians depends upon this real contradiction.

Upon the other hand, the true central idea may be adopted in theory, and renounced in practice. The clearest possible recognition of the truth may have been handed down to us by our fathers. In our creeds and standard authors we may be taught, "that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world, looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify to himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works;" and yet we may show by our lives that a much lower aim has been accepted in its stead. Indeed, to many who have before God and the world declared their firm belief in the great doctrine of holiness, mere justification has become the central idea of religion. A sense of forgiveness is all they ask, and they direct all their efforts to this point. Others aim simply at regularity of external life, and their best resolutions of reform extend no farther; while, alas! multitudes of others have formally adopted the honor of self, the gratification of worldly pleasures, or the splendor of an organization, as the real centre of their religion.

It appears, therefore, that to accept in theory the central idea which God has revealed, is not enough. What men admit to be the divine purpose in the establishment of Christianity is not the great question; but how far, in feeling, in motive, in design, and effort, do they agree with this purpose? The real, not the ideal, the practical, not the theoretical central idea, moves the heart and controls the life; and with the great majority of nominal Christians, it must be admitted, this is any thing but holiness.

But we cannot conclude this discussion without inquiring, Why must the doctrine of holiness be assigned a subordinate place in systematic divinity, or even be excluded altogether? We have seen that this was not the intention of God; and, so far from retracting the true evangelical view of the doctrine, or apologizing to the world for the importance we have given it, we must in all candor ask pardon of God and man for having asserted it so timidly, dwelt upon it with so little pathos and power, and so seldom reduced it to practice. It is the centre of our system. The mission which we have accepted at the hands of God, is "to spread scriptural holiness over these lands;" and we cannot allow the doctrine a secondary, or inoperative place in the faith of the church. It must come out from its obscurity, extend its light, and its controlling power through every communion, and permeate the doctrines, the hearts, and the lives of the people, before Christianity can assert its rights in the conquest of the world. In the presence of Christians of every name, we demand for it the position which God has assigned it. What worthy motive can we have in denying it this position? Opposition to holiness is opposition to Christianity -- a real, though not an intended denial of the rights of God and the privileges of man -- a setting aside of the one grand object for which the Redeemer died and the church was instituted. And when this is done, what have we left? What one doctrine of the gospel is of any use, or of any significance, if holiness is excluded from the system? As well might you tear out the heart, and then attempt to give value to the veins and arteries and blood, as to reject holiness and still hope to save the gospel scheme. As well might you burn up your towns and leave your guide-boards standing, as to destroy holiness, and still insist upon justification by faith, or any other great doctrine of Christianity.

But, what is the effect of admitting the true position of this idea? It cuts off at a stroke the vast multitude of improvements which men have dared to attach to the system. It condemns all our extravagance in style,

our follies in outward forms, and our sins of heart and life. It shows every man the value of his work. If he prays, or speaks, or sings, for the exhibition of his talents, or for the gratification of others, it is all to no purpose. Nay, he is condemned for the perversion of the most sacred services. We value a popular harangue for its power to please and move the multitude, and a lecture for its learning; but upon the principle we have developed, we must value a sermon for its adaptation to promote the holiness of men. What a shameful abuse of a sacred profession it must be, for a man sent out in the name of God to save sinners, to value his performances for their abstract learning, their rhetorical elegance, their oratorical power, or popular effect! Let any man clearly apprehend the fearful wrong and deadly evil of sin; let him see that God has given his Son to make its removal from the hearts of men possible, and sent him expressly to proclaim this great salvation, and we are sure he will feel that fidelity to his Master requires that he should frame every sermon with reference to this great end; and he will be satisfied with his effort only in proportion to the power with which he has exposed sin, attacked it in its most insidious forms, paralyzed its influence, and gained the advantage for that holiness without which no man shall see the Lord. What a vast amount of preaching is found, by this rule, to be worse than trifling!

Finally: it is evident, that, in its spirit and aim, the Christian system stands alone. We have numerous organizations for the improvement of society -- for the production of wealth -- for the gratification of ambition -- for the relief of human suffering; but only one for the promotion of holiness. We know of no other that professes to "purify the heart." What strange infatuation, then, it, must be to secularize this system! -- to bring it down from the lofty purposes to which it was consecrated, and appropriate it to the service of worldly glory, and force it to gratify a lust for power. Wherever this has been done, it cannot be deemed strange that "blasting and mildew" have followed in the train. Indeed, nothing is easier now than to explain the slow progress of Christianity, the feebleness of its disciples, and the reproach which has so often fallen upon the church. Would that all Christians might be agreed upon this one thing -- to consider Christianity as set apart to the work of purifying the hearts and lives of men. For all other purposes there are associations enough, while in the range of human thought there is no other that has the slightest claim to adaptation to produce this result. Precisely this is the desideratum of the times; and not until it is supplied shall we see the church shining in her own pure light, and moving on in the greatness of her strength to the conquest of the world. Happy is he who contributes, even in the smallest degree, to this glorious result.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/jesse-t-peck/section-i-the-scripture-argument/>

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