

Harmony Amid Human Frailties

by Lewis T. Corlett

It is possible to experience Christian perfection while battling human frailties, and God is still interested in helping those who are struggling with nervousness and depression.

Topics: "Christian Perfection", "Human Frailty"

Description

Lewis T. Corlett preaches about the battle over perfectionism, emphasizing the struggle between the idea of perfection and the imperfections of ethics and practice. He discusses the Wesleyan definition of sin and the development of Christian perfection based on it. Corlett addresses believers' questions about trusting God in their limitations and blunders, highlighting the need for a clear understanding of God's operations and personal responsibility for human frailties to live a victorious life in Christian perfection.

Transcript

Probably the greatest battle over perfectionism lies in the field of blunders, errors, faults, and mistakes. People cannot harmonize the idea of perfection and completion with the glaring imperfections of ethics and practice. They look for absolute perfection, which is not claimed by sensible, thinking people who believe in and advocate Christian perfection. This same group judges the proponents of Christian perfection according to its definition of sin, which is: "Sin is a deviation or lack of conformity to the perfect law of God." The Wesleyan definition of sin is "a voluntary transgression of God's law," and it is this basis or interpretation of sin upon which all the doctrine of Christian perfection is developed. Many believers of second-blessing holiness have questions in their minds as to how far they can trust God to help them in their limitations and blunders. Some have even gone so far as to cast away their confidence, for they expected God to do more than He had promised. A clear understanding of the extent of God's operations and the measure of personal responsibility for human frailties will enable the believer to live a more victorious life in the experience of Christian perfection.

God's standard is holiness of heart and life. In the experience of regeneration, He clears up the past by forgiving the penitent of past sins, and gives proper motivation by imparting divine love to the heart of the seeker. "The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us." [1] In sanctification, God, through the Holy Spirit, cleanses the heart from inbred sin, and fills to the full or perfects in His love. These are separate, distinct experiences wrought in an instant of time. Right motives and high principles are implanted but they must be worked out, in, and by the believer. Holiness of life is a process whereby the love of God in the heart is brought to bear upon all attitudes, actions, and relations.

The ideal for the Christian is to increase in the nurture and knowledge of God with the view of one day reaching heaven and entering into the ideal perfection of glorification. Paul states this very clearly in the third chapter of Philippians. "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you." [2]

While living in the enjoyment of the experience of Christian perfection, the believer is also living in a world of imperfection. This has been caused, first, by the fact that God created man a finite being. God did not intend that the man should know all things. If he could, then he would be absolute in knowledge. He is finite-restricted in his knowledge, and limited in judgment because of this limitation. This is true also of power. God made man a relative sovereign. He is limited in his ability and reserve. Thus man is restricted in his possibilities of achievement. Otherwise, he would be omnipotent, as God is. This definitely has a bearing on his performance of duties and acts.

Also man's world of imperfection has been brought about by the fall of man and the sin of the race. All parts of God's creation have been affected by the entrance of sin. Nature has felt the effects of sin. In the beginning there were no storms, cyclones, and earthquakes; neither were there destructive insects and blights. All of these are caused by sin and contribute to the imperfections that man must battle with. So man's own make-up shows forth the effects of both finiteness and sin. God made man both relative and finite, limited in both ability and knowledge. God alone is unlimited and all-wise. Man thus has partial knowledge, limited insight and physical powers. Also, man's powers are affected and circumscribed by the effects of sin on his nature and organisms. This causes man to have faulty memory and warped judgment, which at times produce hasty decisions on many things. Many mistakes are made because of these conditions in man's constitution.

Man is also living in a world of variety. This is seen in the marvelous and almost endless colors and designs in nature, and other parts of creation. Man enjoys these, but it is the variety of personality that is to be considered primarily in this discussion. No two persons are exactly alike. While at first glance there may be a great similarity, yet on closer inspection the dissimilarities are more prominent. Personality is definitely affected by racial, climatic, and economic backgrounds. Different races have different traits which are outstanding in the majority of the members of the race. There are characteristics of nationalities which are outstanding in some personalities. Within the race and nation there is also an endless variety of manifestation of peculiarities of disposition and nature. Persons living in certain climates have personality reactions which are different from those in others. Those living in the warmer climates naturally move and act more slowly than those in cooler atmosphere. People living in the cyclone area react differently to a storm cloud from those in sections where such storms have not occurred.

Character reactions also differ due to the economic background and surroundings. Thus, as a general rule, people who have been reared in industrial areas are usually more systematic and punctual than those who have lived in the rural areas, where the work is more seasonal. There may be exceptions, but as a rule personality is affected by the habits and activities developed from all of these backgrounds.

Personality also differs in reaction according to the individuality of the person. No two children of any family are exactly alike. Their viewpoints differ, their abilities to grasp situations differ, their appetites and tastes vary until many parents are at a loss to know how to handle all under one roof. Some identical twins seem to react as one individual, but on a closer continued observation differences are noticed. People

react differently under the same circumstances and produce an endless variety of conclusions and situations. This may at times be trying on account of the eccentricities of some, yet on the whole this glorious variety is refreshing.

Man also differs because he is living in a sphere of progressive knowledge. The baby is born without any factual knowledge. The child learns gradually. Some advance in knowledge more rapidly than others; some travel more widely and have a greater variety of contacts than others. All activities, concepts, and ideals will vary according to the degree of knowledge possessed by the individual. So people will differ in conclusions reached on the same matter; diversified interpretations will be made from the same incident or event, and a variety of ideals will be raised according to the individual viewpoint and knowledge.

Man is living in a world of suffering. Both the bodies and minds have been affected by the fall, and most people have had some type of sickness or disease. Many times this has affected the mental and spiritual reactions. The more prolonged the illness, the stronger the reaction will be on the individual in all phases of thought and activity.

Man was placed in the world by God, and there was one federal head of the race, Adam. From generation to generation man has developed into a multitude of persons having different habits, characteristics, and viewpoints. These have been influenced by their racial, economic, and climatic backgrounds, augmented by the traits of personalities inherited and the degree of knowledge possessed. Also there is a variety according to the depths of suffering which they have come through. And in all of these man has been limited by the fact that he is finite and strongly influenced by the depravity that he has inherited through the fall.

Can heart holiness operate in the midst of these conditions and limitations? Can man enjoy Christian perfection while battling these frailties and human restrictions?

By experience and observation it has been proved over and over that man can enjoy the fullest blessing of a second work of grace while handicapped and buffeted by all that has been mentioned. God works primarily and chiefly on and in the heart, the moral nature of mankind. In the first work of grace, God forgives, blots out all transgressions, and makes the person a new creature in Christ Jesus. In the second work of grace, He cleanses from carnality and perfects the spirit or heart life in divine love. The standard of life is raised, and right motives are given to enable the believer to carry out this standard of righteousness.

The practice of these principles and ideals by the professor of Christian perfection will often be faulty, yet the person will be blameless. Wrong decisions and conclusions will be made because of partial knowledge. Past training, poor memory, prejudice, and warped judgments will all affect the outward life and the inner attitudes of the one enjoying a heart experience of perfect love. The manner and method of life will be regulated by the degree of knowledge possessed, or according to the amount of light the individual has at the moment. Thus the outward life of all professing the experience of Christian perfection will not be the same. The activities and attitudes of the individual will vary according to the increase of knowledge or light. Blunders, errors in judgment, and wrong conclusions will be reached; yet the sanctified person will be blameless since the motive was clean and pure but operated through limited, handicapped powers and viewpoints. Mistakes will be made, but they will not be culpable; blunders will come, but the believer will be blameless. The zealous service will be imperfect and faulty and may, at times, demand a confession and apology; yet the heart remains pure and holy before God.

The reactions to God's operations will also vary according to the peculiarities and traits of the individual. The racial traits may predominate; peculiar characteristics of past training may govern the reaction because holiness does not change the individuality. It will refine and polish it, but not make it basically different from what it was. There will be a refreshing variety in service and viewpoint because each one is free in his service to God. All will not shout, but some will; all will not weep, but some will manifest their emotional reaction in this manner; some will say "Amen," while others give assent by the silent nod of the head to a heart reception of God's message. Christians will not act in the same manner, but each in his own way will react to the leadership and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Many good Christians have been brought into bondage along these lines. Some sanctified persons have insisted that everyone had to act in a certain way or style to prove he had the blessing. Generally it was a demand of one individual upon another for the same type of demonstration that came natural to him. God has not so limited man, but rather prefers to see man express his appreciation and joy through the characteristics of his own individuality. Uniformity hinders the Spirit, but unity magnifies the power and character of God.

Holiness and Physical Ailments

Paul, writing to the Corinthians, stated that "we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us." [3] A sick body does not prevent a person from becoming holy in heart. Some in the various ages of world history have taught that all sickness was caused by the personal sin of the one afflicted. This is not true. All sickness is the result of the effect of sin on the race, but it does not in any wise indicate that the sick person is a sinner. The Book of Job is the outstanding book of the Bible to prove that sickness, affliction, and adversity are all perfectly compatible with the best blessing of God. The disciples asked Jesus concerning a blind man, "Master, who did sin, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him." [4] Paul had his experience with the thorn in the flesh and prayed for God to remove it, but God did not see best to do so. "And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." [5] Christians of all ages have verified this manner of operation by God. Some of the most saintly have been afflicted most of their lives. An experience of Christian perfection can be lived successfully by persons who are sick and afflicted.

Holiness and Nerves

The strain and stress of this age are creating many new problems. Many good people are the victims of depressive moods. Sanctified persons are perplexed because God does not seem to deliver them from the problems they have. Many good Christians go to the altar, only to get in greater confusion, because they have not broken with God. The answer to many of these types of problems lies in the physical and mental rather than in the spiritual. "For we have this treasure in earthen vessels." [6]

This is a nervous generation. The tension, strain, and uncertainty have overtaxed the nervous systems of many. People are sick and do not know what their trouble is. Medical doctors have more and more cases where the patient is sick, yet has nothing wrong organically. They respond to harmless medicine sometimes, for it relieves the mind. These people are sick nervously and mentally. One characteristic of extreme nervousness is periodic moods of depression. This naturally creates a sensitive attitude and reaction. People who are not nervous cannot understand this peculiar trend of a nervous person. At times, individuals who have been sanctified for years, and have had a devoted walk with the Lord, will speak and act as if they were controlled and motivated by carnality. They will speak sharply and act impatiently and

then feel hurt if reminded of what was said or done. Some even go so far as to deny ever saying what they are accused of, and wonder why loved ones so misunderstand as to accuse them falsely. This condition, so similar to that of one possessed of carnality, is caused by an abnormal physical reaction from a highly nervous condition. Extreme nervousness puts an individual in such a tense, high-strung condition that it is impossible to react normally. The mental status is closely akin to that of one mentally unbalanced. The mind is so tense that often what is said and done does not register in the memory and consequently cannot be recalled. The writer has experienced this personally in times of nervous prostration and also has observed it in others; yet he knew that both he and the ones observed had not sinned nor broken with God.

When this sensitive condition is accompanied by a depressive mood, the Christian is liable to take the attitude that God is displeased with him. Some have even gone so far as to believe that they have committed the unpardonable sin, and are only waiting death to go to eternal damnation. Friends and pastors are puzzled and baffled to know how to counsel and what to do with such a person. Some unwisely have concluded that personal sin has caused this condition and insist on the individual's going to an altar to pray through. When this is done, altar workers find themselves puzzled; for the seeker cannot locate any specific act of disobedience or attitude or rebellion against God. Repeated trips to the altar have only added to the distress of the seeker. Sometimes a person goes so far as to necessitate confinement in an institution as a neurotic or psychopathic case. This is not an indication that the individual is insane, but rather that he needs special treatment for nervous mental disorders. Doctors and psychiatrists treated hundreds of returning soldier boys in similar mental condition and restored them to a normal mental state.

One example is the case of a returned missionary who had a serious nervous collapse. In her moods of depression and self-condemnation she came to the conclusion that God had left her and she stated so publicly. She believed that she had crossed the dead line and that there was no hope for her. She was under the doctor's care and receiving medical treatment. In time her system was built up, the nervous tension was relieved, and then, without having to pray for herself, or having anyone else pray for her, she found herself in the same spiritual victory she had had before the nervous collapse.

Why cannot God help one in this distress? Is it because He is not interested or because of the attitude and condition of the person? The reactions toward Him on the part of the sick person are quite similar to that manifested toward the fellow man. The tenseness caused by nervousness makes it very difficult for the person to hear the voice of God and respond to what He tries to do. The nervous person is quick to condemn himself and to feel uneasy about his spiritual condition. Also if the believer has judged spiritual health by emotional ecstasies, the depression of mind makes him believe that God has left him and cares no more for him. God is still interested and trying to help, but the person is unconsciously blocking the help God tries to give.

What can be done about it?

First, people should think of God as a tender Heavenly Father who cares for those who try to please Him. An earthly parent would not leave a sick child to its distress and woe. God, with greater tenderness and love, will not forsake His children who become sick physically or mentally. The writer has inquired in various parts of the country and has yet to find a case of a believer who was faithful to God while in health who backslid while sick and unable to perform the regular duties of Christian life. On the other hand, many cases have been found where God tenderly sustained during the hours of helplessness. Cases where the

person has gone so far as to believe that the dead line has been crossed have been found to be in good spiritual condition when normal physical or mental health was restored. God will not forsake His children in the hour of their need, regardless of what their feelings may be. His nature of perfection requires that He will exert every effort He can to aid them, even when they do not recognize His operations.

Second, people should be as kind and sympathetic as possible to the sick person. If there is no organic trouble, doctors work on four propositions to help the individual involved. They examine for possible organic cause; they try to improve the appetite, so the patient will take nourishment; they give medicine to help the person to sleep; and then attempt to find something to assist the patient in reorganizing his thinking toward an objective outside of himself. It takes time for the patient to react properly to these because of the tenseness of the nervous and mental state. As physical strength increases, more normal health results, which assists the individual in relaxing to the point where he can react favorably to the doctor's treatment. A sympathetic attitude by those close to the sick one will be of great benefit in hastening the process.

Third, the believer who is in this nervous state should endeavor to develop an optimistic viewpoint in life. The prophet Isaiah exhorted the people of his day to do this when he said: "Who is among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness, and hath no light? let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God." [7] The child of God should magnify the Lord and His blessings rather than his troubles and feelings. Paul admonished the people of God to give thanks in all things and to rejoice evermore. The promises of God are just as certain for the disabled Christian as for the one who is physically able to trust. The prophet wrote: "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee; when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee." [8] Paul wrote: "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body." [9] The Christian is not promised a life free from disappointment, sorrows, depressions, and seeming defeats; but he is promised grace and the abiding presence of the Spirit to be with him at all times. Observation and investigation have caused me to reach the conclusion that the child of God who is doing his reasonable best in obedience and service to God before he becomes an invalid does not backslide during the time of illness or nervous collapse. Earthly parents do not cast off a child from the family because it is ill, but rather they give the suffering one more attention than before. Will not God, as a wise Heavenly Father, do more to help His suffering children? He will. God will most certainly take care of His disabled children.

Holiness And Moods

Many good people have suffered because they thought that a person professing Christian perfection would be in a joyful mood all the time. They were disappointed when they experienced heaviness or depressive moods. It will be helpful to consider a few facts about moods as related to Christian perfection or holiness. All people are subject to moods. No person is in the same mood all the time. The Scripture plainly states: "Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ." [10] This clearly teaches that God allows events and incidents to come into the believer's life which will cause various moods. Sickness, temptations, and attitudes all have a tendency to change

the mood of the individual. No Christian is in the same mood all the time. It is not human to expect this. Some people are more in bondage to moods than others. There will be a tendency for such individuals to go into the slough of despondency or mount to the height of ecstasy according to whether their experience is agreeable or disagreeable. Others are more balanced in reaction to their moods and do not swing to extremes so easily. Sanctification does not materially change the moods of man. They are regulated more by the attitudes of the individual than by the motive of the heart. Man can learn to discipline his moods so that he will not be torn between the extremes. God commands His children to do this. "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (for the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ." [11] Thus the pure in heart are exhorted to discipline the mental processes and moods and bring them into harmony and unity with heart motives, perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord, and to build mental processes so that the mind will be less subject to moods of heaviness and depression and more under the control of faith and optimism. If this discipline is exercised, constructive habits will be formed and will serve as a balance to personality in times of extreme nervousness or collapse.

Man'S Responsibility In The Midst Of Limitations And Frailties

There is a discipline of man's human abilities and powers which is necessary for the believer to carry out. Too many professing to be sanctified have expected God to make all the changes in life and nature. There is a definite responsibility each child of God must exercise. God cleanses the heart, but He commands the believer thus: "Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." [12] God will purify man's motives, but man is under obligation to keep the motive pure and holy. Jude admonishes the saints to "keep yourselves in the love of God." The believer through his purposes and plans can and must keep himself in the place and disposition where the blood of Christ can keep his heart free from sinful tendencies and propensities.

Suppressing normal appetites so they will not become abnormal in their cravings will help the believer offset the frailties of his nature. Appetites and passions allowed to become abnormal open the way for indulgences and gratifications in an irregular and uncertain manner. This breaks down resistance and will make the child of God more vulnerable in the time of temptation. This makes it easier for the individual to indulge in excesses which lead to outbroken sin. Christians should discipline themselves so as to make all of their actions and attitudes adorn the doctrine of God. This is true in regard to appetites for religious things as well as the physical. Some Christians look for certain things in a service to manifest the presence of God, and if they do not find them they think the service is devoid of spiritual blessing. Others wait for the declaration of emphasis on some nonessential by the preacher before they will accept him as God's messenger. These have allowed their spiritual appetites to become abnormal and unconsciously have blocked the way for God to bestow His truths and blessings except in their narrow channels. They need to discipline themselves so as to be receptive to God's truth regardless of how or when it comes. This applies also to mental habits and attitudes. The believer must not allow himself to fall into any rut which will make it difficult to see God's working in a broader way.

Another means of overcoming the frailties and limitations of the human side of life is to keep submissive and susceptible to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Each child of God has the glorious privilege of being guided by the Spirit. In fact, He goes far beyond what would be expected in His endeavor to help each believer in his problems and battles. He wants to guide into all truth. He is faithful and will check and rebuke the believer if he is becoming careless and neglectful in the performance of duty. He will direct the

Christian sometimes to rectify some of the blunders and mistakes made through human limitations and frailties. Sometimes He will prompt one to make confessions to those who were wronged. He will lead at all times to greater knowledge, for Christian experience is not compatible with voluntary ignorance. The child of God, out of a pure heart, desires to gain greater knowledge, so that he can avoid carelessly making errors and mistakes. The believer can escape many dangers and find great comfort and security by maintaining a sensitive attitude to the guidance of the Spirit.

Many, if not most, of the problems of the sanctified have to do with other good people who are also professors of the experience of heart holiness. They expect so much of one another that it is difficult to be charitable when one seems to come short. A great help in overcoming this tendency is to develop a strong charitable spirit toward others. Do not expect others to do exactly as you do. Allow the Spirit of God to guide them as He has directed you. Give others the benefit of the doubt, and make allowance for the possibility that their hearts may be pure but handicapped in manifestation and outworkings by limitations unknown to other people. This brings the believer into the place where he can come under the blessing of the beatitude, "Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy." [13] The rich reward of a charitable attitude to others is that there is a deeper appreciation for God and others developed in the heart and life of the believer.

Christians need to remind themselves constantly of the need of keeping their minds and hearts centered on Christ. This often requires an act and walk of faith in the midst of spiritual darkness, uncertainty, and perplexing circumstances. God is always the same; His promises are always true; so the Christian should never have to question the reality of God. Many in these circumstances do question whether He is present to help or not. The Holy Spirit takes up His abode in the believer's heart when he becomes a child of God, and will remain there as long as the contract between God and the person is maintained. There will be times when His presence is not evidenced by any striking operation. In hours like that the believer must remember that heart holiness is a living relationship and partnership with the divine, and that there must be an attitude of confidence between both members of the partnership. This is exercising faith. As the believer does this, the consciousness of the Divine Presence becomes more real and constant. It becomes easier to rest on the promise of God and abide the divine time for things to clear up. God longs for His children to be constant in their confidence in Him, regardless of what seems to be. "For if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: for so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." [14] Regardless of personal feeling or outward darkness, the child of God should continue on the path he saw God going the last time He manifested himself, and soon the conscious fellowship will be enjoyed once more.

An experience of Christian perfection can operate successfully in relation to all frailties and limitations of humanity. A person can be perfect in heart while biased in mind, warped in judgment, harassed by nerves, and handicapped by physical suffering. Revelation, experience, and observation prove that God is consistent with His nature of perfection in permitting His children to experience these changes. He will keep the heart perfect in love if the believer will hold on and walk by faith. He will and does provide strength and grace to give victory to each one in spite of trials, troubles, temptations, nerves, moods, and devils.

1 Romans 5:5

2 Philippians 3:12, 15

3 II Corinthians 4:7

4 John 9:2, 3

5 II Corinthians 12:9

6 II Corinthians 4:7

7 Isaiah 50:10

8 Isaiah 43:2

9 II Corinthians 4:7-10

10 I Peter 1:6, 7

11 II Corinthians 10:3-5

12 II Corinthians 7:1

13 Matthew 5:7

14 II Peter 1:10, 11

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