

# Harmony Is Progressive

by Lewis T. Corlett

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*The sermon explores the progressive nature of harmony in God's operations and its impact on achieving Christian perfection through love and continual growth.*

**Scripture:** 1 John 1:7

**Topics:** "Christian Perfection", "Divine Redemption"

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## Description

Lewis T. Corlett preaches about the divine operations of God, emphasizing that His perfection is beyond human comprehension, yet all His works are in harmony with His ideal of perfection. Man's goodness is derived from God, but when he chooses selfishness, he loses the sustaining quality of goodness. However, through God's atonement and redemption, man can experience relative holiness and perfection by maintaining loyalty and obedience to God. Christian perfection is a moment-by-moment experience based on maintaining a personal connection with God, leading to an integrated personality and a life of continuous growth in grace and love.

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## Transcript

No discussion of God's operations can exhaust the subject. Because of His absoluteness in perfection in all things there can be no end of explanation by finite man. Yet regardless of what may be seen, explained, or described, one thing remains certain and definite. All of God's operations are based on His ideal of perfection and are in harmony one with another as related to this ideal. In this ideal the harmony of God's operations in the plan of salvation requires a progressive development in the life of the believer professing the experience of Christian perfection. Also God's ideal of perfection gives an unlimited challenge to each of His children and is the only satisfaction for man's urges, desires, and the yearnings of his inner, restless spirit.

Man's goodness is a derived, dependent quality. God made man thus in the beginning. "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." [1] In this breath of life was included the moral quality necessary for man's holiness and goodness. But it was dependent upon man's choice of loyalty to his Maker. When he chose to indulge the urges of his self-life, for a personal selfish end, he took himself out of the state and position where the Holy Spirit could sustain his quality of goodness. Being thus deprived of the Holy Spirit, the source of goodness and holiness, man became depraved in all of his being. Not that he became as wicked and evil as he might have become, but every part of his constitution was so affected that he could not, even if he desired,

lift himself out his depraved condition. Also, since man possessed no intrinsic good, in and of himself, he could not claim goodness by any merit of his own. The history of the race in general, as far as moral values and example are concerned, is nothing to be admired or bragged about. Man has nothing of merit before God, the source of goodness. Man was helplessly incapable of ever developing a means of regaining his lost heritage. Such a deprived and depraved condition aggravated the unrest and longings of man's inner urges and drives. This produced an internal friction which has given an ever-increasing confusion and chaos of family, local, national, and international conditions.

Any goodness or holiness man enjoys today is the result of a gift from outside himself. It comes alone from God, the source of holiness and perfection. He has the power and nature needed by man, and He made this accessible through the gift and sacrifice of His Son on Calvary. The provision of atonement and redemption is universal, but its personal application and benefits are conditional. Thus, being dependent upon the choice of a finite being for its personal application, a relative state of holiness and perfection is produced. That is, the state of perfection the individual has is dependent upon the individual's loyalty and obedience; it is conditioned upon the individual's attitude, so cannot be either static or permanent. Man, being finite, and suffering the effects of his own wickedness as well as the depravity of the race, must keep in contact with the source of holiness and perfection to sustain the state of perfection in his moral nature. So Christian perfection is a moment-by-moment experience based on maintaining an individual contact with God. "If we walk in the light. . . we have.. " [2] Being a moment-by-moment experience, it must be progressive to be continued. Thus man keeps the moral quality of holiness and perfection in his nature only by maintaining his relative position with God, the Giver of all perfection and holiness.

God is vitally interested that each one of His children possess an integrated personality. By "integration" we mean the natural form of activity. E. M. Ligon defines it thus: "Integration is the condition of personality in which all the emotional attitudes are harmonious and mutually helpful, thus permitting all of our natural energy to be directed to one end." [3] As previously pointed out, man must have a worthy objective outside himself to do this; and when he keeps his relation to God as this end or goal, he is able to keep integrated and to develop a poised personality.

God's ideal of perfection is the only satisfying challenge to man's inner longings and tendencies. Man cannot be static. Mentally, as well as otherwise, he is always on the move. He is either reaching out for more or is relinquishing what he has. He is progressing toward a higher goal or he is retreating from present attainment. Man cannot retain interest in that which he fully comprehends. This is easily illustrated by the attitude people take to books which can be understood in one reading. They are not classified as the best or ones which should be read again. This is more certain in man's relation to things of material worth. The physical objects which enrapture today lose their drawing power tomorrow. Even financial gain loses its attractiveness as the person matures in life. Man must have something out and beyond himself, which he can neither understand nor comprehend fully, to serve as a drawing force to lead his inner nature to the greatest possible development. This is true of Christians as well as non-Christians. This is the basic reason why God holds His standard of perfection always before man. The individual will contemplate and consider something; so God, in His absolute perfection, encourages man in his relative perfection to meditate and think of the deeper and greater potentialities of the believer who is "hid with Christ in God." [4] While God can never be fully comprehended, yet the more His children think of Him, the better they appreciate Him and the greater are their desires for the fullest development in devotion and service to Him. Jesus recognized this when He gave the beatitude, "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled." [5] This includes both the idea of being "filled with all the

fulness of God" [6] in the experience of Christian perfection and the continual outpouring of the Spirit as the hunger and thirst enlarges with the development of Christian character. This is the source and continuance of the establishing phase of the experience of entire sanctification. God is always constant in quality; and as man keeps in the relative position of continual yielding and abandonment to God, the Spirit keeps the believer filled and perfect in love. This sense of stability gives the Christian a certainty of the standard for his personal moral quality and the consciousness of the enjoyment of a nature harmonious with and in unison with the source of the standard.

Another phase of God's operation which is in harmony with His own nature and complete in meeting man's need is the divine method of personal spiritual illumination. God does not give the individual, at the time of conviction, a complete revelation of all the details of life which will be experienced in a walk of faith of from one to seventy or more years. He knows the limitations of the human mind. If He gave so much knowledge at once, it would have almost the same effect on man's personality as if a fireman tried to generate enough steam in the boiler of a locomotive to propel a train five hundred miles.

You know what would happen. The usefulness of the locomotive would be temporarily if not permanently impaired. So it would be if God gave a person full understanding of all that was included and necessary to live a whole life for Him. It would so overwhelm the individual that he would be apt to be discouraged and his usefulness, both to himself and the Lord, would be temporarily or permanently impaired. God regulates the revelation, illumination, or light according to the need of the hour and the ability of the individual to receive it.

Yet there is a beautiful harmony in this aspect of God's method. First, all new light is based upon or added to what was given previously; it is never in conflict with or antagonistic to former directions. Then also, it is given according to the ability of man to apprehend it. God never blinds man with a spectacular display of His effulgent glory. He deals slowly, patiently, and personally. The Spirit of God never gives divine light to the masses. It is always individual in its direction and application.

Thus one person may receive light from a sermon and no other one in the service may get the same illumination. Then the harmony is more clearly seen in that the revelation is always for the person's welfare and progress in the advancement of the kingdom of God. The Spirit always leads the believer toward better things. "The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day." [7] Also in this revelation the believer becomes conscious that what he is receiving is just a taste, a sample or an earnest, of an unlimited reserve of supply.

While he is conscious of the fact that he will never be able to comprehend or receive the fullness of the omnipotent resources, yet there is something about the connection to infinity and the absolute perfection of God which draws man forward and increases his desire for more and more of the fullness of God. This is what Paul meant in his letter to the Philippian church when he wrote: "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.

Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in 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." [8] Paul clearly explains the drawing power of those who "are already perfect" (enjoying Christian perfection) and the certainty for the

progressive revelation of the Spirit to all who desire progress.

God challenges each Christian to release his inner powers and abilities in contemplation of increasing enjoyment of things divine. Jesus said: "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine." [9]

The divine-human experience of Christian perfection is based on love. Love demands cultivation and increase both for enjoyment and continuance. God's program of atonement, redemption, and salvation is based on love, propagated by love, experienced in love, and moves forward to a greater realization of love. Personal salvation is the reciprocation of love from the penitent wooed by love. "We love him, because he first loved us." [10] A study of Christ's teachings will show that His conception of the laws of salvation was that they were founded on the positive dynamic of love and not on negative ethics. When asked: "Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, 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 neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." [11] Jesus taught the same principle in the Sermon on the Mount. E. M. Ligon explains Christ's teaching in a practical manner: "Loving your enemies has been called the impossible commandment. To 'turn the other cheek' is thought by some to be an act of cowardice. 'Returning good for evil' and 'praying for those who spitefully use you' are pretty generally conceded to be far too difficult for most of us. If Jesus' teachings are to be used very much in everyday life, they must not be so far above the normal abilities of ordinary human beings. Is it possible that we have been mistaken in our understanding of what Jesus taught about love? The scientist forms an hypothesis and tests it by finding out whether or not it will explain his data. What hypothesis, in this case, will bring these teachings from the realm of the impossible to principles which can be utilized in the normal development of personality? Such an hypothesis is the central theme of this book. In this hypothesis will be found an understanding of Jesus, which will show His teachings to be psychologically sound. Jesus did not teach brotherly love, He taught Fatherly love.

"Notice what a change this hypothesis makes in the so-called impossible teachings of Jesus, 'Love your enemies.' It has been thought mighty hard to love one's enemies, but think of a father loving an enemy son. No one thinks David was abnormal or unnatural because he still loved Absalom when the son had become his bitterest enemy. That seemed perfectly natural for a father. What father does not have to 'turn the other cheek' to his son hundreds of times? What parents do not pray fervently for children who 'spitefully use them'? How frequently parents 'bless' their children, even when the latter are 'cursing' them! Fathers are constantly 'returning good for evil.' This hypothesis, then, makes these great ethical principles, not other-worldly impossibilities, but perfectly normal behavior.

"Then, look at it from the point of view of psychology. Students of personality are almost unanimously agreed that mental health can exist only as an accompaniment of social interest. Certainly, no social interest is greater than a father for his son. Parental love has long been recognized as the noblest impulse in mankind. Psychology has shown that fear and anger are the great enemies of personality. Parents lose their fear for themselves in the interests of their children. Anger is not the characteristic response of parents toward their children. What emotional attitude, then, could be formed which would be so mentally healthy as this attitude of fatherly love toward others?" [12]

Love must be expressed and cultivated in order to continue. Love is a combination of affection, emotion, nature, and sentiment based upon appreciation and loyalty. True love demands wholehearted loyalty, and unless ways and means are used to manifest the loyalty and express the emotion the intensity of the

affections will diminish. Paul I. Murphy says: "Love is not a finished product that, once it comes, can forever be trusted to keep its strength. Like everything else that is alive, it must be kept growing through exercise or it wastes away." [13] Love expressed always reacts strongly on the lover. One preacher, wishing to illustrate this reaction, said: "When I give my wife a box of candy, I always get more out of it than she does." Even if this admits a double benefit, yet the principle is true that love cannot continue unless it expresses itself. Love knows no limits and it cannot be limited. It must be sincere and entire to be real, and it must increase to preserve itself.

These principles operate in the realm of spiritual love between God and His children. God proves the expression of His love in manifold ways moment by moment. His plan of salvation is so arranged that man can reach a place and state where love can flow unhindered from his inner life. One aspect of the experience of Christian perfection is love. "And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love. We love him, because he first loved us. If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?" [14] But as there is no end to love, except the beginning, the child of God must recognize that this glorious experience is simply God's means for greater development in Christian character and a continuing increase of love. The Scripture speaks of love abounding: "And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment." [15] "That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God." [16]

Writers of religious literature have recognized this progression in Christian living and have urged the believers to press on. John Wesley said: "There is no perfection of degrees, as it is termed, none which does not admit of a continual increase. So that how much soever any man has attained, or what degree soever he is perfect, he hath still need to grow in grace, and daily to advance in the knowledge and love of God his Saviour." [17]

John Fletcher said: "A perfect Christian grows far more than a feeble believer whose growth is still obstructed by the shady thorns of sin, and by the draining suckers of iniquity." [18]

J. A. Wood said: "Christian perfection does not exclude growth in grace. The pure in heart grow faster than any others. We believe in no state of grace excluding progression, either in this world or in heaven, but expect to grow with increasing rapidity forever. It is the same with the soul wholly sanctified as with the merely regenerate: it must progress in order to retain the favor of God and the grace possessed.... Holiness may be perfect and yet progressive. Perfection in quality does not exclude increase in quantity. Beyond entire sanctification there is no increase in purity, as that which is pure cannot be more than pure; but there may be unlimited growth in expansion and quantity. After love is made perfect, it may abound more and more." [19]

E. A. Girvin, in Prince of Israel, quotes Dr. P. F. Bresee as saying: "A sanctified man is at the bottom of the ladder. He is now to learn; to grow; to rise to be divinely enlarged and transformed. The Christ in him is to make new and complete channels in and through every part of his being -- pouring a stream of heaven through his thinking, living, devotement and faith. The divine battery -- His manifest presence -- is to be

enlarged. The truth of God is to be revealed, and poured through the soul and life, with holy fire and divine unction more and more aboundingly. A lack of personal realization that I, myself, must stir myself up, has brought wreck and ruin to many. God will stir him up who stirs himself, until he comes 'unto the measure of the fulness of the stature of Christ.' [20]

D. S. Corlett speaks of holiness as a life of dependence and shows the need for continual obedience, faith, and progress. "The source of all grace, of all life, and of all power is God. Only as the Christian constantly relies upon God can he maintain a satisfactory relation with Him. Holiness is a gift from God, for a holy man is a partaker of God's holiness, and to have holiness continue as a state of life man must depend constantly upon the holy God. Holiness is not a deposit given to man to be kept independent of God; a holy life is maintained moment by moment through active faith and obedience to God. 'For God does not give them a stock of holiness,' says John Wesley, 'but unless they receive a supply every moment nothing but unholiness will remain.' . . . Since this state or condition is a relative, not absolute or ideal, holiness, and since it is manifested through human nature or differing backgrounds, there may be a difference in the manifestation of holiness; but in each case there will be a development toward the mature or perfect man. There will be acquired 'a certain skill in the art of living, in prayer, in the understanding of the Word and a larger faith and more power to resist temptation. There is less practical ignorance of God and His ways of working with man; higher attainment in the moral discernment of conscience is evident' (Curtis in an Epoch in Spiritual Life). There is no limit to the progress possible in this life of holiness." [21]

The possibilities of development in a life perfected in love are almost unlimited. But the child of God should remember that progress in grace can be made only by continual choices for good, by a daily self-discipline and determination to "adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things." [22] The Christian must keep his will continually submissive to the will of God. His choices must be centered more firmly in the pleasure of the Almighty and the affections so enraptured in the qualities and characteristics of the divine Lover that nothing of self and sense will have a drawing power. Greater faith must be exercised in the guidance of the Spirit and firmer reliance be placed in His wisdom. To mature in love man must direct his paths continually in following the footsteps of the Master.

The Christian life is a co-operative life in every phase. It is the enjoyment of a life of partnership with God: "For we are labourers together with God." [23] Man walks in the light; the Spirit sustains and makes him an overcomer. "Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us." [24] Man feebly expresses his desire in prayer, and the Spirit carries it to the Father in proper form and manner. "Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought; but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered." [25] The believer may be puzzled and perplexed regarding some matters as he lives daily for his Lord, but if he holds steady Christ's promise will be fulfilled. "But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you." [26] This aid and guidance are promised and given in all the details of Christian living. They are dependent upon the believer's continued abandonment and obedience: "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin." [27]

The child of God, in the obedient walk, naturally develops a greater appreciation for God, His character, and His ideals. The interest and emphasis pass from His blessings and benefits to His character and appreciation for the privilege of fellowship with Him and of rendering service for Him. Like the one leper out of the ten whom Jesus healed, the Christian turns to the Father again and again to express his thanks

and appreciation. There is no questioning of His methods but, as with the five wise virgins, there is an atmosphere or feeling of expectancy, not only for His second coming, but also for further illumination and clearer directions for useful service in this present world. Paul reveals this sense of deepening appreciation in his writings as he walked with the Lord in all kinds of experiences. He followed unquestionably, and God was so faithful to all of His promises that Paul recorded one of his conclusions about life: "For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal." [28]

This relative perfection is preserved by faith. So as fellowship and confidence increase, faith is strengthened and the consciousness of God becomes more constant. As the Christian obeys God to the best of his ability, God gives grace and glory. Even in times of perplexity and depressive moods there is a consciousness of being located on the foundation of the eternal purposes and provisions of God. Dr. D. S. Corlett describes this life of victory: "It is a life of victory maintained moment by moment through active faith and obedience in Christ, a real victorious life. By the grace of God taking away the inner strain and bringing and maintaining a state of spiritual wholeness, nothing of the outward world need defeat that life. There is a normal manifestation of the Christian graces, for the holy man is like the disciples after Pentecost -- he is not painfully endeavoring to follow Christ; he is giving free and normal expression to a fulness of life and devotion to God with an ease that is captivating and with a joyousness that is contagious." [29]

While the sanctified person is enjoying only a relative perfection, two things must be kept in mind. First, that in this co-operative Christian living the person possessing Christian perfection and walking in all the light he has, never is conscious of a moment when God fails to keep his heart filled with divine love. The promise, "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled," [30] will be verified as long as the appetite is craving and asking for more. There will be an increasing sense of the availability of greater resources of divine grace which can be had to meet every need. The joy of anticipation increases and the child of God sees beyond this veil. The things of heaven and eternity draw ever onward. Death is robbed of its fear, the grave is stripped of its horror, and the glory of the prospect leads ever nearer and nearer to God's ideal of perfection. This is the process of maturity and will continue while the believer lives on earth and also, I believe, forever in heaven.

God's standard is Christian perfection for everybody. His provisions are universal, unlimited, and accessible. His method is superior to the best man has produced. His love, interest, and sympathy lead man forward to his greatest possible development. God has a majestic harmony in all of this, and it is all performed in accord with His ideal of perfection.

1 Genesis 2:7

2 | John 1:7

3 Ligon, E. M., The Psychology of Christian Personality, Printed Book Copyright 1936, The Macmillan Company, p. 14

4 Colossians 3:3

- 5 Matthew 5:6
- 6 Ephesians 3:19
- 7 Proverbs 4:18
- 8 Philippians 3:12-15
- 9 John 7:17
- 10 I John 4:19
- 11 Matthew 22:36-40
- 12 Ligon, op. cit., pp. 22, 23
- 13 Murphy, Paul I., Your Life (Magazine), February, 1948
- 14 I John 4:16-20
- 15 Philippians 1:9
- 16 Ephesians 3:17-19
- 17 From John Wesley's Sermons
- 18 Fletcher, The Last Check
- 19 Wood, J. A., Perfect Love, Printed Book Copyright 1912 by the Christian Witness Co.
- 20 Girvin, E. A., Prince of Israel, Printed Book Copyright 1916, Nazarene Publishing House
- 21 Corlett, D. S., op. cit.
- 22 Titus 2:10
- 23 I Corinthians 3:9
- 24 Romans 8:37
- 25 Romans 8:26
- 26 John 14:26
- 27 I John 1:7
- 28 II Corinthians 4:16-18
- 29 Corlett, op. cit.
- 30 Matthew 5:6

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