

Source and Means of Harmonizing Life

by Lewis T. Corlett

The sermon emphasizes the importance of setting a standard of perfection and provides a clear definition of Christian perfection, highlighting the need for faith in Christ, regeneration by the Holy Spirit, and unremitting effort to approximate perfection.

Topics: "Christian Perfection", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

Lewis T. Corlett preaches about the importance of striving for perfection in God's eyes, emphasizing that man's success, welfare, and happiness are intertwined with the pursuit of perfection. He highlights how society's rejection of 'perfectionism' has led to despair and a loss of spiritual depth, urging a return to the ideal of Christian perfection rooted in love and communion with God. Corlett explains that man's potential can only be fully realized through a continuous pursuit of perfection, as commanded by God, and that this pursuit is made possible through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Transcript

Man is a powerful personality. It is not possible to forecast the heights to which he can attain. Likewise a prediction cannot be made accurately of the depths to which he may plunge. Man can live in harmony and peace or he can exist in misery and woe. He is so created that his success, welfare, happiness, and usefulness are bound up inseparably with the ideal of perfection. His attitude and concept of this will decide his present nature, his future prospects, and his final destiny. Man cannot live near the reach of his possibilities unless he has a definite idea of perfection and an ideal of perfection toward which he is striving.

Yet in the light of this, man tries to evade his responsibility to the ideal of perfection and then wonders why society, politics, and civilization the world over, and he himself, are staggering and tottering on the brink of despair. People, especially in ecclesiastical circles, have scoffed and ridiculed the idea of "perfectionism" and allowed man to choose lower ideals which have led to the present despair. George F. Thomas said: "The ideal of perfection has been discredited in the eyes of many, not only by the sentimental optimism and the self-righteousness of some of its defenders, but also by the legalistic conception of it as literal obedience to the 'commandments' of God in the Old Testament and the 'precepts' of Christ in the New. Puritanism was at times guilty of this legalistic view of goodness and Protestant groups have been influenced by it in their insistence upon abstinence from many acts. The answer to this misconception is that Christian perfection should be defined in terms of a religious rather than a legalistic; morality. It is

rooted in the religious experience of communion with God in faith and love. This religious experience gives rise spontaneously to an outgoing love of neighbor. Thus, the essence of Christian perfection is not literal obedience to revealed commandments in external conduct, but pure and unselfish love manifesting itself in ways suitable to the ever-new and ever-changing situations of human life.

"The need for a recovery of this ideal of personality is shown by even a cursory survey of the moral and cultural standards of contemporary life. The loss of the ideal of Christian perfection as the crown of a Spirit-possessed life is symbolized by the virtual disappearance of the term 'saint' from our vocabulary. The result has been a serious weakening of the spiritual life in all its phases. The dominant ideal of character in recent generations has been that of the congenial, sociable, adjusted person who pleases everybody but lacks moral principles and spiritual depth. In a similar fashion, the loss of the passion for perfection has much to do with the shallowness of our culture. A deep love of philosophic wisdom and of beauty (as distinguished from mere sensuous charm) is almost as rare as a deep love of God and love of goodness. As a result, the vital energies of our people are far too largely spent upon sexual excitement, economic acquisition, and meaningless activities. The degradation of personality can be overcome only by the process we have just described: reconciliation with God through faith, regeneration of the self by His in-dwelling Spirit, and unremitting effort to approximate more nearly the goal of perfect goodness in love."

[1]

Mr. Flew states a similar truth showing the necessity of a high standard for man. "There is a spiritual law, discernible in the supreme creative achievements of art or literature, that nothing enduring is brought forth save by one whose aim is illimitable and whose standard is perfection." [2]

This is described clearly by Joseph H. Smith: "Man's mind is so constituted as to demand perfection, and this is most emphatically so in things of which he believes God is the author.

"Yes, even in arts and sciences, of his own he has a perfect mark by which, for instance, he grades students up to 100 per cent. He rates commercial products according to certain fixed standards of purity, weight, and measure; and awards premiums at the fairs and expositions accordingly. And most particularly is this true as to man's (and woman's) mind with regard to social and domestic relations of life. Here nothing short of a complete devotion and a perfect fidelity will satisfy the requirements of expectation. And in ethics it is the same; for not approximate but absolute truthfulness and honesty are the standard by which men judge their fellows and decry all graft and deception in public and business life.

"Men's hearts need and cry for a perfect solace and satisfaction. And when these hearts turn to Christ, is it not true that we all, either from instinct or intuition or a measure of inspiration, expect to find such a perfect satisfaction and salvation in Him?

"We think this is universally so. The hearts of all true believers in Christ are born to long for and look for just what we shall trace in Paul as perfection. Anything less than a perfect alignment with God's will does not meet our expectation in Christ, nor satisfy what we feel is Christ's expectation of us." [3]

Man is dangerous to himself from two aspects unless he has a standard of perfection continually held before him. First, he faces the handicap of limited knowledge and power. He is conscious that he cannot know all things or accomplish everything; so there is within him a tendency to take the path of least resistance and be satisfied with less than his potential development. Also with this he is beset with a tendency within himself to center all things in himself and to endeavor to satisfy the cravings of a carnal self. This carnality, which is a corruption of the basic powers and urges of the self life, causes man to be

content to live on a low level of life and cater to destructive elements. The only way man can successfully be delivered from and have victory over these tendencies is to have a standard and requirement of perfection held before him that will both condemn him for his lack of conformity and show him the way whereby he can be delivered from these evils.

Thus the command of God, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect," [4] was not an arbitrary statement of a tyrannical ruler. Rather it was the expression of the infinite wisdom of a Heavenly Father stating an absolute necessity for the human part of His creation. This command denotes the standard demanded and the character of the standard. Man was made by God, and He knew both his limitations and his possibilities. He knew that man as a personality could only be challenged to his highest possibilities by another personality, greater and better than himself. So because there was no one higher, or greater, or holier than himself God gave himself as the standard. Peter expresses a similar truth under divine inspiration when he wrote: "As obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance: but as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy." [5] Here is given to man the special moral quality absolutely essential to useful perfection. Man was made to be holy, to show forth the glory of God. Isaiah states, "This people have I formed for myself; they shall shew forth my praise." [6] Thus God brings man face to face with the absolute purity of the holiness of an Almighty Being. The highest standard given to encourage and enable man to progress toward his possible best is grounded in the character of God. God is the essence of peace and harmony. All the characteristics of His standard point and lead the individual to a pathway which directs him to the personal possession of joy and peace.

It will be well at this point of the discussion to give some definitions of what is meant and included in Christian perfection. Mr. Wesley said: "Christian perfection, therefore, does not imply (as some men have imagined) an exemption either from ignorance, or mistake, or infirmities, or temptations. Indeed, it is only another term for holiness. They are two names for the same thing. Thus everyone that is holy is, in the Scriptural sense, perfect. Yet we may observe that neither in this respect is there any absolute perfection on earth. There is no perfection of degrees, as it is termed, none which does not admit of continual increase. So that how much soever any man has attained, or in 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." He summarizes the meaning with: "By perfection I mean the humble, gentle, patient love of God and our neighbor, ruling our tempers, words, and actions." [7]

Dr. D. S. Corlett gives the following definition and explanation of the term perfect as used in the Scripture: "The word 'perfect' is used in the Scriptures with at least three different meanings. First, there is the perfection of the moral or spiritual relationship with God, or perfect love (Matt. 5:48; I John 4:17, 18). Second, there is the perfection of maturity -- come to age or full grown: 'we speak wisdom among them that are perfect' (I Cor. 2:6); and 'Till we all come . . . unto a perfect man' (Eph. 4:13). Third, there is a resurrection or eternal perfection: 'If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead. Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect' (Phil. 3:11, 12). It is to be noted that, while Paul was pressing toward this resurrection perfection and said he was not perfect in that sense, he testified that he and others of these Philippian Christians were enjoying a perfection of some kind. 'Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded' (Phil. 3:15). He was not perfect in the resurrection or eternal sense, but he was perfect in his spiritual relation to God.

"The third meaning of perfection -- resurrection or eternal perfection -- is the eternal goal of the Christian; the first meaning or perfect love is now the gracious privilege of the Christian in the experience of entire

sanctification by faith in Christ; and the second meaning or maturity in grace is the goal of progress for the Christian as he continues in the life of holiness.

"This spiritual wholeness or perfection brings a stability to life which contributes greatly to development in the life of holiness. The Apostle Paul prayed for the Thessalonian Christians: 'To the end he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God' (I Thess. 3:13). The Roman Christians were exhorted to enter into a grace by faith 'wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God' (Rom. 5:2).

"This life of perfection and progress is not 'a flawless life' but, as someone has suggested, 'It is an adequate life.' Everything is there that is essential to stability and progress. It is, moreover, a blameless life. God has so set us free from indwelling sin in our hearts that we may have a heart perfect in love toward God and man and we can be preserved 'blameless' (I Thess. 5:23). But we shall never be 'faultless' before God until we stand in glory before His throne 'with exceeding joy' (Jude 24). (Henry Brockett in Scriptural Freedom from Sin, page 42.) It is not absolute or infallible perfection. Absolute perfection I never contended for. A sinless perfection, such as enables a person to fulfill the whole law, and so needs not the merits of Christ; I acknowledge no such perfection; I do now, and always did, protest against it' (John Wesley). It is the perfection of the moral or spiritual relationship with God, a spiritual wholeness or perfection of love." [8]

Joseph H. Smith explains this meaning in a further quotation: "The Bible does unmistakably present such a perfection. Observe, we say such a perfection. And let us keep in mind that in any of the other lines of perfection to which we have alluded there is a distinct limit as to what it is that is perfect; and there is also a margin allowing for many other imperfections outside that limit. Thus, for instance, the boy who makes one hundred per cent, or a perfect mark in his mathematics, may still be a physical cripple, unable to walk. The wife whose perfection of love to her one and only husband is never questioned and can be proved in twenty different ways may nevertheless be an altogether unskilled seamstress or an inexperienced and an imperfect housekeeper. Christian perfection is like hers in that it is a perfection of the heart, though making no claim to perfection of physical or mental state, nor of temporal circumstances or conditions, but rather a perfect acceptance of an adaptation to the probation that is involved in the imperfections of our lot. Thus, in a word, Christian perfection is limited to a perfection of that which Christianity contemplates for man while on earth and in the body." [9]

Christian perfection can be briefly stated as that state of the heart in which the child of God can and does love God with a whole heart fervently and his neighbor as himself. The terms "Christian perfection," "holiness," and "sanctification" will be used interchangeably in these discussions, as they are synonyms describing the same work of grace.

The setting up of a standard does not always generate hope. Personally, for someone to set up a high standard of performance in music and then state that I must measure up to it would leave me in despair and hopelessness. For when musical talents were distributed I seem to have been overlooked. Likewise to give a standard of perfection as a requirement to members of a fallen race would only serve to produce greater despair unless three things were provided: first, an unlimited, unrestricted source of power for every man who desires to reach the standard of perfection; second, an accessible source of power to a sinless, hopeless, helpless people; third, specific directions for each person that he may know how to locate the source of power, how to partake of its healing balm, and how to live according to the requirements of the standard. God did not change His standard just in order to take care of a man who was unable to meet it; but He made a flawless provision whereby all these things could be included, and at

the same time revealed the harmony of His operations as related to the perfection of His own being and the requirement of perfection in the human race.

First, consider the necessity of the provision of the unlimited, unrestricted source of power to reach the standard of perfection. Hope must not be generated only to be thwarted. As the light of hope arises in the heart of man, he must see that there is an abundant source of all that he needs to meet the requirements of the standard. "Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding. He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint." [10] As stated before, the central objective of the standard is the Personality of an unlimited, almighty God; so the boundaries and extent of the supply to meet the standard are as limitless as the character of the omniscient, almighty God. There is a fathomless source of supply within the character of God which encourages each person to come boldly to the throne of grace and there find mercy and help in every time of need. God does not require anything of man that is either impossible or inconsistent with His intrinsic character and revealed plan. The source of supply to meet the standard of perfection is unlimited, immeasurable, and unrestricted. God himself is the source and supply. He has the unlimited provision for man to reach the standard that He requires.

Second, to be consistent with His own character and with His standard this source of power must be made accessible to a helpless and hopeless people. God made man to live in the atmosphere of holiness. Man was not satisfied to live in this atmosphere but chose to please his own self-indulgent cravings rather than to obey God. Thus he became not only deprived of the presence of God as the source of power that would keep him holy, but he also became depraved in every part of his being. Not one faculty, or power, or organ of man's whole constitution was unaffected by this deprivation of the presence of the almighty Spirit of God. Thus man was bound by sin -- the results of his own choice, the effects of his own decision -- and he was unable to approach God. God's standard of perfection not only shows the way and the means and the power to deliver man from sin, but also in its power of cleanliness and purity raises a barrier that holds back those who are unclean. The only way that sin can be seen in its heinousness is as compared with the holiness and perfection of God. The reason that this generation has such a vague conception of the power of God is that it has such a meager concept of God's character, holiness, and perfection. But God in His mercy was not willing that man should be left in the bondage of sin, even though he had plunged himself there by his own choice. God knew that He had within Him the power that would deliver man, but He could not do it arbitrarily but had to do it in harmony and in consistency with His character and standard. "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; to declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just; and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus." [11]

So, knowing that man could not lift himself to the position where he could change his character to conform to the standard He had made, God made a plan whereby this source of power could be made accessible to the sinful, captive people. "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned: (for until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression, who is the figure of him that was to come. But not

as the offence, so also is the free gift. For if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many. " [12]

God could not ignore the sin and rebellion of His creation; neither could He treat it lightly and forgive arbitrarily the disobedience of His law. God in His mercy yearned to help fallen man. Man's character made him uncomfortable in God's presence and he tried to hide following the first sin, and he is still trying to conceal his acts from an all-seeing God. God's law gave the penalty of death; it was the separation and condemnation by God to a disobedient and rebellious people. Man could not draw near, so God must bridge the chasm between a righteous God and an offending race. But He must do this in a manner consistent with His character and with His law. "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" [13] He gave His own Son. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." [14] Also, the Scriptures state that "Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish." [15]

Calvary was God's method of meeting the situation. Truly it is a dark, repulsive picture, but it was a necessity if God were to help man. He could not violate His law, so He provided a sacrifice which would meet the penalty of the law. He could not excuse mankind, but He condemned him in a greater manner by revealing sin in the light of divine perfection. He could not condone sin, but He condemned it in the anguish of the Cross. God poured out His love in His Son; and, as He died upon the cross of Calvary, Jesus Christ came to give His life a ransom for many. Jesus died that man's sin might be atoned for, that a broken law might be met in divine justice, and that mercy could be provided for every one of Adam's race who would desire to have deliverance from sin. Jesus Christ not only died but also rose from the dead to break the power of man's worst enemy, but He did it in entire conformity to the Father's standard of perfection.

There was not one time in the process of provision for atonement in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ but that the full standard of God's requirement of perfection concerning the operation of His law was upheld and met in order for man to be delivered. Thus God has provided the way through His Son whereby each individual can draw near to God and find a ready access unto the throne of grace. It is the privilege of each person to have the atoning blood of Jesus Christ applied to the heart, so that the personality may be delivered from the power and the captivity of sin.

God not only sent His Son to provide the means and the way whereby man could have an approach to God, but He also sent His Spirit into the world to make individuals conscious of the provision of this accessibility. This is God's method of making truth specific and personal, and includes a twofold revelation whereby man is left without excuse at the tribunal of God. He has coupled this twofold revelation with His standard of perfection. First, it is the Spirit dealing with the individual consciousness; and, second, there are the specific directions in the written Word of the Holy Scriptures. The Spirit patiently works with an individual to aid in bringing a consciousness of God to his mind. It is not the wrath and judgment of God that lead men to repentance; rather, it is the goodness of God. The Spirit of God comes to remind men of their condition; for He convicts, He draws, He enlightens, and He reveals Calvary to each unregenerate soul. "And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they believe not on me; of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more; of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged." [16]

Then in response to repentance He makes the individual a new creature. He clears the path, He regenerates, He justifies. God, personally, in the Spirit, reminds men that the source of power is available and accessible; but it is always done in the light of the standard of perfection. When the Spirit deals with a heart in convicting power, there is a complete revelation of everything that is wrong in the past life. It is a perfect conviction. When He comes to ask man to face that past life, He commands a complete repentance, a perfect repentance. When He comes to the matter of regeneration, it is not a partial forgiveness; it is a complete forgiveness. It is a matter of a full touch of God upon the individual life.

The possible source of power and the method of making the source available are not sufficient to leave man with an excuse before the requirements of God's perfection unless man is made conscious of these things. Specific directions must be given whereby each person may have the details of knowledge necessary to obey. The Bible, the written or revealed Word, is not definite in every realm of knowledge; it is not complete for each phase of life. But it is full, complete, and unanswerable regarding directions for turning from sin and accepting Jesus Christ as personal Saviour and Redeemer. Many books have been written on the plan of redemption and the way of salvation; yet the full detail is given in one verse: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." [17] Truly this is as simple as could be made and is so easily understood that "wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein." The same simplicity accompanies each step of God's requirement for meeting His standard of perfection. When He says, "Be ye holy; for I am holy," [18] He also states: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." [19] Lest some would be confused regarding this, He prompted Paul to write: "For this is the will of God, even your sanctification," [20] and, "Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate." [21] Also, He gives the method to follow: "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." [22] No matter how meager may be the knowledge of other things in God's written Word, these are so simple, clear, and definite that it is possible for each and every person hungering for the fullness of God to follow these directions and be made perfect in love in entire sanctification.

The same is true in the directions for Christian living in a walk of faith in fellowship with God after being saved and sanctified. This truth will be discussed fully in a later chapter. The revealed Word of God is complete and perfect, and is so simple and dynamic that the message can be translated into every language without losing its power of guidance.

Another vital factor in man's constituent make-up is his potential faculties that can be aroused in anticipation of better things. To be complete and also in accordance with His own perfection, God's plan must include a better hope for man. This He did in the revelation of a heaven as the home and final resting place for His children. Man longs for something better than he now sees in this sinful world. God meets this desire in the promise of an abundant entrance into heaven to be with Him forever. But this promise of hope and certainty of heaven are bound up with His standard of perfection. The description of heaven given in the Bible tells of a place where sin, sorrow, suffering, and death will never enter. It is a place of light, joy, purity, holiness, and perfection. To encourage man in this expectation the Bible is definite that Christ is coming for His own. "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am,

there ye may be also." [23]

God's requirement is that man must be holy and perfect in love toward Him and toward man. This is not all for which God has made provision in His challenge to mankind. He knew that His children would be restless and that they would be uncertain unless there was a definite objective for them to follow. Man likes to do something, especially for those whom he loves. He likes to follow directions to useful accomplishments; so God, in organizing His Church and in arranging the plan of salvation for man, has arranged that man must work in order to do that which would be pleasing to Him. So as God commissioned the believers to go out unto all the world and preach the gospel to every creature, He also commissioned them to do it in the light of the standard of God's perfection. Man, as God's messenger, cannot preach just anything; he must follow the harmony of God's operation in His perfect planning. Throughout history as the Church has emphasized and magnified God's plan in requiring perfection of His followers, that Church has prospered. In the eras in which that message has been minimized, sin has been excused, and holiness has not been demanded or required, the Church has fallen to low levels that bring dark spots in history. God's standard of perfection is His program for His people.

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4 Matthew 5:48

5 I Peter 1:14-16

6 Isaiah 43:21

7 Wood, J. A., *Christian Perfection as Taught by John Wesley*, The Christian Witness Co., Chicago, Boston, Printed Book Copyright 1931, pp. 23, 26

8 Corlett, D. S., *The Meaning of Holiness*, Printed Book Copyright 1944, Beacon Hill Press

9 Smith, op. cit.

10 Isaiah 40:28-31

11 Romans 3:23-26

12 Romans 5: 12-15

13 Romans 8:32

14 John 3:16

15 Ephesians 5:25-27

16 John 16:8-11

17 | John 1:9

18 | Peter 1:16

19 Romans 12:1, 2

20 | Thessalonians 4:3

21 Hebrews 13:12

22 | John 1:7

23 John 14:1-3

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