

# Evangelical Perfection

by Thomas Cook

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*Thomas Cook's sermon on 'Evangelical Perfection' explores the biblical understanding of perfection as achievable through love and spiritual growth in the life of a believer.*

**Scripture:** Genesis 17:1, Deuteronomy 30:6, Matthew 5:48, Mark 1:17, Ephesians 4:13, Philippians 3:12, Philippians 3:15, 2 Timothy 3:17, Hebrews 13:20, 1 John 4:18

**Topics:** "Christian Perfection", "Sanctification"

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## Description

Thomas Cook preaches on the Scriptural terms 'holiness,' 'perfect love,' and 'perfection,' explaining that they all refer to the same state of grace. He emphasizes that perfect love represents the moral atmosphere in which a sanctified Christian lives, while perfection signifies spiritual completeness achieved when all internal struggles are overcome. Cook discusses the importance of understanding the term 'perfect' in a spiritual context, as it is frequently used in the Bible to describe human character under the influence of grace. He clarifies that while absolute perfection belongs only to God, evangelical perfection is attainable in the present life through continuous growth and development in love and service to God.

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## Transcript

The Scriptural terms "holiness," "perfect love," "perfection," may be used synonymously, because they all point to the same state of grace. John Fletcher says: "We frequently use, as St. John, the phrase "perfect love" instead of perfection; understanding by it the pure love of God shed abroad in the hearts of established believers by the Holy Ghost, which is abundantly given unto them under the fullness of the Christian dispensation." But while these terms may be used indiscriminately in speaking of full salvation, each one indicates some essential characteristic and emphasizes some different aspect of the truth. Perfect love is expressive of the spirit and temper, or the moral atmosphere in which the entirely sanctified Christian lives. Perfection signifies that spiritual completeness or wholeness into which the soul enters when the last inward foe is conquered, and the last distracting force harmonized with the mighty love of Christ, every crevice of the nature filled with love, and every energy employed in the delightful service of our adorable Saviour. This implies not only complete deliverance from all spiritual pollution, but the possession of the unmixed graces of faith, humility, resignation, patience, meekness, self-denial, and all other graces of the Spirit.

No word has been the occasion of so much stumbling and controversy among Christians as this word "perfect." But the term is a spiritual one and is used more frequently in the Bible than any other single term

to set forth Christian experience. It occurs one hundred and thirty-eight times in the Scriptures, and in more than fifty of these instances it refers to human character under the operation of grace. Early in Divine revelation, we find Jehovah saying to Abraham, "Walk before Me, and be thou perfect," and to Moses, "Thou shalt be perfect with the Lord." Forty-five times the Israelites are commanded to bring sacrifices without blemish, and every time the word should have been translated perfect. By such impressive symbols, God would teach that the heart of the offerer must be perfect before Him. Opening the New Testament, we find the word "perfect" dropping from the lips of Christ, and from the pen of St. Paul, seventeen times as descriptive of fitness for the kingdom of God; while the cognate noun perfection is twice used, and the verb to perfect fourteen times. Instead of finding fault with a word which the Spirit of inspiration sees fit to use with such persistency from the Book of Genesis to the Epistles of St. John, should we not rather endeavor to arrive at its true Scriptural meaning?

That the term needs to be guarded against fanaticism and superstition we do not deny. We are not to regard it in an absolute sense, nor without due discrimination. Absolute perfection, which is the combination of all conceivable excellences in the highest degree, belongs only to God, and to that perfection no mortal or seraph can ever attain. Between the highest degree of human perfection and the perfection of God, there must ever be all the difference which there is between the finite and the infinite.

Holy as Thou, O Lord, is none.

Nor can we in this present life attain the perfection of the celestial world. The love of a glorified saint will burn with an intensity, and his service be performed with a precision and rectitude impossible on earth. In the third chapter of the Epistle to the Philippians, St. Paul seems to breathe hot and cold with the same breath to those who do not read carefully. First, he declares that he is not perfect (Phil. iii. 12), and then immediately afterwards speaks of himself and others as being perfect (Phil. iii. 15). But there is really no contradiction, because two different kinds of perfection are spoken of. He was referring to the perfection of the glorified state when he said, "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect." Bengel says, "Crowned with a garland of victory, his course completed." This is evident from the context. "I count all things but loss, if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead." None who examine the chapter closely and without prejudice will dispute that the apostle speaks here of a perfection which will follow the resurrection of the righteous dead. To this St. Paul aspired: "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." Not until then will our brightest ideals of perfection be realized. But the words, "Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded," obviously refer to a perfection which, in another and intelligible sense, is possible in this life, and to which he had already attained.

We must distinguish also between evangelical perfection, which we believe to be a present possibility, and the perfection of full and completed growth. Often in the New Testament the word perfect is used in reference to those who are no longer babes but "fathers" in Christ. The graces of the new life have attained a certain ripeness and maturity, so that there is a strong and well-developed manhood. To attain this perfection requires time. It is the result of sedulous cultivation of the heart, patient study of God's Word, earnest attention to all means of grace, and close walking with God. Unto this perfection of degree, of development, of full growth, of final attainment, the exhortation is always, "Let us go on." There is no finality, no point beyond which we may not move. Such perfection may be approximated but never reached; "it is an eternal approximation towards an unrealizable ideal." "That your love may abound yet more and more," will always be an appropriate prayer. There is no *ne plus ultra* in Christian experience.

The Greeks had two words which we translate "perfect" One meant to make fully ready, the other meant to complete or finish. The former applies to a person or thing which is quite fitted and thoroughly furnished for its purpose: "Made perfect in every good work to do His will," The second is used to express perfection in the sense of completeness, which results from growth and experience: "Till we are 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 fullness of Christ."

By evangelical perfection we mean perfection in the first of these uses of the word. Its principal ideas are adaption and endowment. Those who are Christianly perfect are fully fitted and equipped for the service of God and the Church in one department or another, as is most suitable to the gifts and graces of each individual. (2 Tim. iii. 17; Eph. iv. 11, 12; Heb. xiii. 20, 21.) One form of the word is used by Matthew and Mark when they state that Jesus found the sons of Zebedee mending or perfecting their nets, which suggests that in order to be fully qualified for Christian service, all the rents which sin has made in our spiritual nature must be repaired. There must be spiritual wholeness, the powers of the soul must no longer be reduced in tone or hindered in their development by remaining evil. Whatever is contrary to love must be cleansed away, and all the graces of the Spirit being present, the believer is then fully filled or equipped for service and progress. Many Christians are not much used of God because they are not thus furnished or adjusted for the activities and ministrations of spiritual life. A man might as well try to work or to run with a dislocated limb as a Christian expect to be able to do best work or make rapid progress without this preliminary perfecting. Perfection, in the sense of mending or repairing, is only and always used with a view to perfect action. Christianity knows nothing of a holiness that does not manifest itself in outward obedience to God and active service to man.

We subscribe to every word of John Fletcher's definition of a Christian perfection: "The pure love of God shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Ghost given unto us, to cleanse us and keep us clean from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, and to enable us to fulfill the law of Christ, according to the talents we are entrusted with, and the circumstances in which we are placed in the world."

Richard Hooker, in speaking of perfection, says: "We count those things perfect which want nothing for the end where unto they were instituted." In other words, if a thing answers the end for which it was designed, it is perfect. A weighing-machine constructed to weigh a hundredweight is perfect if it weighs a hundredweight exactly. Because such a machine will not weigh a ton, do we find fault with it, and say it is not perfect? To do so would be very unjust, because the maker only designed it to weigh a hundredweight. In like manner we may be perfect in the sense of answering the end for which God made us, but for any other purpose far removed from perfection. Many who object to Christian perfection want the machine to weigh more than God intended. In many respects we may be very imperfect, but if we love God with all the capacity we actually possess, we are Christianly perfect according to the Scriptures. "Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment." We are no more expected to be perfect as God is, or as the angels are, or as Adam was, than a machine constructed to weigh a hundredweight is expected to be able to weigh a ton.

Evangelical perfection embraces two things:-

- (1) A perfection of love proportioned to the Powers of each individual;
- (2) A steady progress in love harmonizing with our circumstances and our increasing capacity and ability.

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength." There is no statute in the Bible which sets up or requires any other standard. "Love is the fulfilling of the law." God requires nothing more; He could demand nothing less. Love is to be complete to the extent of the present capacity of the person possessing it. We are not required to love God with an archangel's powers, nor with the strength of a Rutherford, a Fletcher, or a Bramwell. With all thy heart, is the command. Our love-power may be very limited, but so long as it is fully employed in loving God, we fulfill the Divine requirement just the same as those who have the larger capacities. A thimble may be as full as a bucket. To love God with more than all our heart -- beyond our power or capacity -- would be impossible; and to love Him less than to the full measure of our power to love, would be short of His requirement. "He that does as well as he can, does well: angels can do no better, and God requires no more.

But we are asked, "How can that which is perfect admit of increase?" A circle of twenty-four inches diameter is a perfect circle, and so is one of twelve inches in diameter. Both are perfect circles, but one is larger than the other. A perfect child, a perfect lamb, a perfect sapling, are susceptible of growth, so always the perfect Christian will be. It is true he cannot love God with more than all his heart -- beyond his power or capacity -- that would be an absurdity; but the capacities of the soul are expansive and progressive, and love in measure can and will increase, as capacity increases, to an unlimited extent. Love-power develops by its exercise just as an intellectual power does. A vessel cannot be more than full, but we may have a larger vessel. It is because ours may be an ever-expanding capacity that an ever-increasing love is possible.

Some teach that Christian perfection may be approximated, but never reached -- a sort of constant advance towards a point we can never gain. But we are not commanded simply to aspire after it,

#### WE ARE REQUIRED TO POSSESS IT

And the experience is to be a present one. Grammarians tell us that all commands are in the present tense. As Dr. Steele puts it, "if they cover the future they include the indivisible now." We all understand the command, "Repent ye!" to mean repent just now, because the future is all uncertain. And exactly in like manner "Be ye holy" requires present holiness. "Be ye perfect" enjoins perfection today. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart," means nothing at all if it does not mean that our love is to be made perfect now.

Let no person stagger at this immediateness. God always gives power to comply with His requirements. Duties are privileges, and all commands are equivalent to promises. The man with the withered hand in the synagogue knew well enough that the command, "Stretch forth thine hand," meant that Christ would give ability to obey. And just as sure may we be that the command to love God now with a perfect love, implies that He will give us power to do what He requires us to do. To maintain otherwise is to charge God with mocking us with a command we are utterly unable to perform. What God requires now must be possible now; and if we will but claim as a present privilege what He reveals as a present duty, we shall immediately prove that "the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it!" And what is this word of promise, but "the Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live"? (Deut. xxx. 6 and 14.)

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