

St. Paul Magnifies the Meaning of Perfection

by Daniel Steele

The sermon explores the meaning of perfection in the New Testament, emphasizing its connection to love, glorification, and transformation.

Scripture: Romans 8:17, 2 Corinthians 13:9, Ephesians 4:12, Colossians 3:14, 2 Timothy 3:17

Topics: "Christian Perfection", "Sanctification"

Description

Daniel Steele preaches about the pursuit of sanctified and perfected character as expressed in the New Testament, emphasizing the central role of love in achieving Christian perfection and the unity it brings to virtues. The ultimate goal is to glorify God through the transformation of human spirits back to the image of their Creator. The sermon delves into the rare Greek word 'teleiotes' for perfectness, found in Colossians 3:14, and 'katartisis' for perfection in 2 Corinthians 13:9, highlighting the completeness and symmetry of Christian character. The message urges believers to press on towards perfection, not as an unattainable ideal but as a continuous journey of growth in holiness and spiritual knowledge.

Transcript

In prosecuting our purpose to exhibit those words invented by the apostles, especially by Paul, to convey down the ages the fullness of that grace which came on the day of Pentecost -- and came to stay, glory be to the Giver -- we now examine the new terms expressive of sanctified and perfected character. The immediate aim of the gospel is the transformation of man's depraved moral nature; the ultimate end is to glorify God in this transfiguration of human spirits restored to the image of their Creator.

The word teleiotes, perfectness, occurs but rarely, not only in profane, but also in Biblical Greek. It first appears in the New Testament after the outpouring of the Spirit. It is used only twice.

Col. 3: 14. "And above all these things put on love which is the bond of perfectness." -- R. V. Meyer's translation is very instructive -- "in addition to all this, however, put on love by which Christian perfection is knit." His idea of Paul's meaning is that "Love is to be put on like an upper garment, embracing all, because love brings it about, that the moral perfection is established in its organic unity as an integral whole." The substance of this exegesis is that all the individual virtues are first brought to perfection by love, and then these separate factors are united by love into a symmetrical whole. How love accomplishes this is beautifully shown in Paul's immortal eulogium of this perfect architect of Christian character in 1 Cor. 13, where love is spoken of first, as the central sun, and all the other virtues are rays, radiating therefrom. But in Col. 3:14, to our surprise, it is mentioned last. This was a rhetorical necessity, because of

the figure in verse 12, of putting on the virtues as different articles of apparel, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering or patience, and a forgiving spirit. Love, from its very nature, in so far as it includes in principle the collective virtues, necessarily has assigned to it, in the making of the Christian's perfect toilet, the place of the upper garment. He is then fit to mingle in the society of archangels, and in this court-dress be presented to King Jesus himself. May neither the reader nor the writer of these words, through lack of this garment, "be ashamed before him at his coming." How natural the precept that follows the description of a saint faultlessly arrayed in the wardrobe of a complete righteousness. "Let the peace of Christ" (R. V.), that holy satisfaction of mind wrought by Christ through the Spirit, the blessed inner rest and delicious repose, "arbitrate in your hearts." It is very gratifying to find John Wesley, the heroic defender of Christian perfection in a darker age, so perfectly vindicated by Meyer, pronounced by Dr. Schaff, "the ablest exegete of his age." He even uses the very phrase, "Christian perfection," for which Wesley was almost snowed under by hostile pamphlets written by his clerical brethren of the Anglican Church. The world moves, thank God.

Heb. 6:1, "Therefore let us cease to speak of the first principles of Christ, and press on unto perfection." -R. V. This is the only other passage where this Greek word for perfection is found. It is here represented not as something realized by the lapse of time, or by unconscious growth, and, least of all, attainable only at death. We are exhorted to press on against wind and tide, till we reach this "land of corn and wine and oil," and take up our abode. For the Greek preposition "unto" here embraces both motion to a place and rest in it, and cannot mean an aim at an unattainable ideal. Delitzsch insists that the verb "press on" is used very appropriately here with *epi* (unto), of the mark or object aimed at: it combines with the notion of an impulse from without with that of eager and onward pressing haste. To De Wette, who says that perfection here signifies merely a fully developed line of teaching, Delitzsch replies, that "it refers to life as well as to knowledge; to both word and action." Advanced doctrines are valuable only as they open the way for progress in holiness. Here perfection "refers especially to the fullness of spiritual knowledge manifesting itself in a Christian profession as the antithesis of babyhood," spoken of in Heb. 5:13. "Every one that partaketh of milk is without experience of the word of righteousness; for he is a babe." This can be no other than the profession of Christian manhood, "a perfect man unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ"; i.e., in which one receives the fullness of Christ, the completeness of what he has to impart, a state of grace in which Paul not only was, but one in which he confidently expected to continue. "And I know that when I come unto you, I shall come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ." -- Rom. 15:29, R. V. Says Dr. Whedon, "When Heb. 6:1 is adduced as an exhortation to advancing to a perfected Christian character, it is no misquotation. It is the noun form of the Greek adjective rendered full age in the chapter 5:14, and signifies adulthood."

1 Pet. 1:13 is very inadequately translated in the A. V.; Dean Alford and the R. V., margin, give the correct rendering: "Hope perfectly for the grace that is being brought unto you in the revelation of Jesus Christ." The word *teleiose*, "perfectly," is found in the New Testament only here. It is very rare in classic Greek. Hence the widely different versions of this word in this text; as, "to the end," "perfectly sober," and "hope perfectly." The last is the true rendering. Why did Peter employ this unusual phrase? Because there was none which could so fully express his idea of that complete deliverance from doubt which he experienced on the day of Pentecost, and which every believer may today experience who by faith receives a personal pentecost. He will henceforth hope without doubt or dejection, with full devotion of soul. So hope, that nothing more in the line of assurance can be desired. The grace which is the object of this perfect hope is being brought to us now, for the present tense is used. "There is," says Bengel, "but one revelation, which takes place through the whole time of the New Testament, by the two appearances of Christ." Thus, also,

Luther, Steiger, and others. The bestowment of grace at the second advent is not according to the analogy of faith, and is foreign to the diction of Christ and his apostles. They never hint any activity of grace when the Judge stands at the door. The Holy Spirit, the organ of God's grace, is never named in connection with the day of judgment. 2 Cor. 13:9 contains another once-written word, *katartisis* "perfection": more exactly, "perfecting" as in the R. V. "Your complete furnishing, perfection in Christian morality." -- Meyer. "Complete symmetry of Christian character." -- Whedon. "Perfection generally in all good things." -- Alford. This is the burden of Paul's prayer for the church members in Corinth. Paul had too good sense to spend his breath in praying for what was impracticable in this life and for what would come to them as a matter of course in the hour of death.

Eph. 4:12, "For the perfecting of the saints." Here is another once-used word, *katartismos*, "perfection." It has nearly the same meaning as the last word we have discussed, signifying, however, that perfection is an act rather than a process.

Says Bishop Ellicott, "The nature of this definite perfecting is explained in verse 13," "Till we all attain unto the unity of the faith and of the perfect knowledge of the Son of God. " -- Dean Alford. Here are not two unities, but one; faith merging into certain knowledge of Christ revealed to the spiritual perception, as Paul testifies in Gal. 1:16, "When it pleased God to reveal his Son in me." The clear inward revelation of the Son of God is the first effect of entire sanctification, as distinct vision is a sequence of purging the eye of its film. Perfect vision argues perfect purity. Rom. 8:29 and Phil. 3:21 disclose the model on which our moral characters as well as our glorified bodies are to be fashioned, in a word not found anywhere else in Greek literature. This word is *summorphos*. There is no English equivalent. The word "copy" comes nearest to it. The Latin *fac-simile* comes still nearer.

We are each of us to be a kind of living, speaking, and working photograph of Jesus Christ. That we may be conformed to the image of the Son of God is the grand aim of all the acts of God in calling the sinner, in; justifying and sanctifying the believer, and finally in glorifying him, soul and body, who perseveres in his loyalty to Christ. All whom the omniscient eye foresees as persevering believers has God predestinated to bear the image of his Son, that the Son of God by eternal generation may stand at last with the host of sons by the Spirit of adoption, "a row of glorified brothers, with Jesus at the head."

"How can it be, thou heavenly King,

That thou shouldst us to glory bring?

Make slaves the partners of thy throne,

Decked with a never-fading crown?"

-- C. Wesley

Rom. 8:17. In harmony with this inspiring and ennobling thought, St. Paul has used a word not found except in the Epistles. This is *sungkloeronomos*, "joint-heir." A personal equality, based on equality of possession, is thus designated. As all American citizens are equal in rights before the law, so all God's sons, including him who bears the unique title of Only Begotten, are equally entitled to the Father's regards. They are "joint-heirs with Christ" in the fact of sonship, though not in the degree of love.

2 Tim. 3:17. *Artios* is in the New Testament a once-used word. It signifies perfect in qualification for service, rather than in internal virtues or attributes of character. "That the man of God" -- a Christian, not a

professional title -- "may be COMPLETE, furnished completely to every good work" (R. V.), by his ability to use the sword of the Spirit, the inspired Scriptures. Every believer should not only know the word of God for his own spiritual health and growth, but he should be skilled in its use for the salvation of others. There should always be two petitions in his prayers -- "Lord, bless me, and make me a blessing."

The ordinary words for "perfect" and "perfection," common to the Gospels and Epistles, I have omitted, because they are not "New Bottles."

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