

A Stumbling Stone

by William Edwin Boardman

The experience of full salvation is what matters, not the theory or name of perfectionism.

Scripture: Isaiah 62:11, Romans 3:23, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Ephesians 3:19, Philippians 3:12, Philippians 4:7, Hebrews 12:1, James 4:7, 1 Peter 5:7, 1 John 1:8

Topics: "Salvation By Faith", "Christian Perfectionism"

Description

William Edwin Boardman preaches about the stumbling stone of perfectionism that hinders many from fully pursuing the experience of salvation by faith. He emphasizes the separation between the theory of perfectionism and the actual experience of full salvation, using illustrations to show that they have no necessary connection. Boardman encourages believers to focus on trusting in Jesus as their Savior from sin, rather than getting caught up in the debate over perfectionism, in order to reach higher heights and deeper depths of knowledge and love for Christ.

Transcript

A STUMBLING STONE.

"GATHER OUT THE STONES." -- Isaiah lxii: 11.

When a ponderous train of cars is under way, rushing, roaring, thundering along at the rate of thirty miles an hour, it may indeed be thrown from the track by a trifling thing, a block or a stone, and dashed to atoms; but it can be brought safely to a stand-still only by reversing the engine and applying all the power of the brakes. But when standing all still, silent, motionless, a mere pebble before a single wheel will defy all the mighty force of the locomotive to move the train a hair. Just so when fully convinced of the reality and value of the experience exemplified, and fairly on the stretch for it, though there is danger even then of being switched track, or thrown from it by some malicious obstruction placed in the way by our wily adversary; yet no light matter could stop the earnest inquirer from the successful pursuit of the great object in view. Not so, however, in the outset. Then a mere trifle, a misapprehension, a doubt, a fear, a name, one word, may be the pebble on the track, and prevent a single step being taken.

"Perfectionism!" This one word, perfectionism, has kept and is now keeping thousands from examining into the matter at all. It is high time this stumbling stone was gathered out of the way. It may indeed become a beacon light to show the mariner in his heavenward voyage the hidden rock where noble souls have struck in days gone by, and so warn him of its peril, and induce him to give it a wide berth as he

passes safely on -- but it has no place by right in the way. There is not the least necessary connection between the experience described and perfectionism. It is true that some have connected the two things, but they are entirely distinct and widely different from each other. The experience is a fact, and as a fact it has been exemplified in the instances we have referred to, and thousands besides, in which the theory of perfectionism had not so much as a thought given to it, or if a thought or a word, it was a word of denial, as in the cases of Luther and D'Aubigne. Perfectionism on the other hand is a theory -- a notion or system of notions -- which may have place in the head, either with or without the experience in the heart. Doubtless there have been many who have accepted the theory of perfectionism, and also come into the experience of full salvation by faith -- but there are many also who have taken up the idea of perfectionism, and held it strenuously without having come into the experience at all. The two things, therefore, have no necessary connection whatever, or the examples given, must go for nothing.

Two illustrations may serve to make this entirely clear. In a little book, which at the time excited some attention and induced an answer from the late venerable Leonard Woods, D. D., "Mahan on Christian Perfection," the author, in a narrative near the close of the book very naively informs us, that first at Oberlin, at a time when there was deep and increasing religious interest, he himself and Mr. Finney, became deeply impressed with the necessity of greater holiness of heart, and after a period of intense anxiety and earnest struggling, first one, then the other came out into the light, to see that the Lord Jesus Christ must be, and was their sanctification, as already they had before received him as their justification.

They began then to preach the full gospel as they then for the first apprehended it. Power attended the preaching. Many were impressed in like manner, and many in like manner came into the light of this second conversion. So the matter went on for six months, while as yet there was no adoption of either the theory or the name of perfectionism. Six whole months it was a nameless experience, or at most called second conversion. After a while, like the Israelites in the wilderness, when the bread of heaven was given them in the dew of the morning, they began to say one to another, "Manna? manna? What is it? What is it?" Then, as the author informs us, there was quite a shock given them -- a thrill of revolt, when one asked in one of their meetings, "Is this Christian perfection?" They hushed the question -- but tagged it. A thousand pities that they had not dropped it! But no. By and by, when college vacation came, they two, Mr. M. and Mr. F. took the question to New York with them -- as yet three months after the experience received -- an open question to be discussed and decided. While in New York, after long deliberation, they accepted and adopted the name Christian perfection, or entire sanctification, and elaborated their own peculiar theory according to their own peculiar philosophy and theology; and with this returned to Oberlin to make it the head quarters and stronghold of the system we have named the Oberlinian.

Now this fact proves one thing beyond the possibility of successful controversy, viz: that in their own ease, the experience they described and the theory they imbibed are and were separate and distinct, having no necessary connection whatever with each other.

Another, a very different case, will serve to make separation wider and plainer still. One, who in these pages shall be nameless, though known to the writer, became deeply interested in the subject from reading the memoirs of eminent Christians, James Brainerd Taylor, first of all. By and by he came to associate the terms of the Wesleyans and the ideas of the Oberlinians, with the experience narrated by Taylor. At first it was a hard matter for him to gain his own consent to accept these terms and ideas, and still harder to be willing to acknowledge it. But he did it. The experience he believed to be true, and saw to be excellent. His heart yearned for it. He was not satisfied with what he felt in himself and saw in others. He was sure there was something better within hopeful reach in the gospel. And, alas for him,

perfectionism was thrown square in his way. He must accept it and acknowledge it -- so he verily thought -- or fail of the blessedness he saw in prospect and longed to enjoy.

As God in mercy would have it, this obstacle did not stop him as it has stopped thousands -- stopped them, to use a paradox -- before they had started. He urged his way onward. The struggle was long and severe. His was the blessedness at last, however, to overcome. He conquered. He fought his way to the tree of life in the midst of the paradise of God, and gained the hidden manna, and the white stone with the new name, known only to himself. But now came instantly an entire change of view about the whole matter of perfection. In the experience, his own utter vileness was shown him, just as Isaiah saw his in the vision of the Lord on his throne; and like Daniel in his vision of the glorious Redeemer in his amber purity and sunlight holiness, he felt his very comeliness turned in-to corruption. While at the same time he saw the fulness of God's glorious grace, and felt that Jesus would be with him evermore, to keep him and work in him by the Holy Spirit his own holy will. And then came instantly the question, "Is this the perfection I have been seeking?" The answer was irresistibly "No." He had been seeking and expecting to be wholly sanctified in a moment by Divine power, and made fully conscious that he was absolutely and entirely holy. But, instead of that, he had his eyes opened to see his utter unholiness and to see that Christ must answer wholly for him, and clothe him altogether with his own (Christ's own) righteousness, and keep him by his own mighty power through faith, and change him as by the spirit of the Lord from glory to glory into his own image. He rose therefore from his knees, not to profess himself perfect, by any means, but to say and to feel that Christ was all in all to him, while he was nothing but sin in- himself.

At once and forever he dropped the theory of perfectionism, and the terms, also, as misnomers of the experience, while from that day on-ward until now he has rejoiced in full salvation, through full trust in Jesus.

Here then we have two illustrations that the theory of perfection, and the fact of the experience in question have no necessary connection. In the first, the experience was gained first while the theory was unthought of, and indeed shocking at the time, and adopted only after months of delay and speculation.

And in the second, the theory was adopted first, months before the experience was gained, and then thrown aside as at variance with the experience in the moment when that was gained.

Another and still different illustration may not be without use.

This whole subject, experience and theory together had been forced upon the attention of one who had been then three years or more a cheerful, decided, happy Christian. It was disagreeable to her, not because she was not anxious to gain all that such an one as she might reasonably hope for. Already she had found more in religion, than in all the round of the gay world most fully tried, and really enjoyed by her. The nectar of love sipped from the lily of the valley, and from the rose of Sharon, had been too sweet to her to be turned from with disgust, or disrelish even. But heresy! the fear of heresy! or of fanaticism, or extravagance! She shrank from the approach of anything threatening in the least to drive her into ultraism. She could not bear the thought of separating between herself and the Christian world, in which she had found such sweet and happy fellowship. Every book upon this subject was avoided. All conversation about it carefully eschewed. At last however, in a leisure, and yet a sacred hour, one Sabbath morning, when kept from the house of prayer by slight illness, her eye fell upon the story of another's experience of this second conversion, or as he called it, Christian perfection. The narrative was simple, sincere, and truthful. She saw it to be true and real, and she saw it to be as blessed as true, and as necessary as blessed. In

that hour her resolution was taken. She gave up her fears. Resolved nobly to take the truth, and take with it whatever of loss or cross it might bring. The struggle was severe but short. The Lord graciously led her to believe in Jesus most fully, and she found rest. Peace as a river, joy in its sweet fulness, love inexpressible flowed in from Christ the fountain, and she was beyond measure happy. Her conversion had been bright, but not brighter than this her second conversion. At once the desire that all might know of this the Christian's precious privilege, rose like the waters of a spring newly opened, filling her heart to the brim, and ready to overflow. She sought opportunity to make the matter known. But now arose a practical difficulty. What should she say she had experienced? A few friends were to meet socially, a parlor gathering, to talk by the way, of what the Lord had done for them in bringing them hitherto in their pilgrimage. She became perplexed, really distressed with the question, "what shall I tell them?" "Shall I tell them I have experienced entire sanctification? I never felt my unholiness more or so much. Shall I say I have been made perfect? That would indeed prove me perverse, for I never saw my imperfection so clearly, or felt it so deeply. I see Christ a perfect Saviour, and he is mine, and all I want; but I am a perfect sinner, needing a perfect Saviour indeed. I cannot say I am perfect. What then shall I say? For I must witness for Jesus. I must try and get others to trust fully in him."

In her perplexity she appealed for advice to a friend, who wisely counselled her that she had nothing at all to do with the question of perfection, least of all to profess herself to be perfect. She had only to tell what a sinner she herself was, and what a Saviour she had found.

This gave her relief at once and forever And although now for many years she has been a constant, faithful, earnest, successful witness for Jesus, testifying the things, and none other than the things he has done for her, she has never felt herself under any necessity to profess Christian perfection, nor yet has she felt her joys and comforts, or her usefulness one jot the less for steering clear of that profession, but greater. She has the liberty as well as the fulness of the blessings of the gospel.

The purpose of these illustrations is not controversy, with those who hold the Oberlinian or the Wesleyan views of this matter, but simply to take up a stumbling stone out of the way of the many thousands in Christendom, who are deterred by it from gaining the higher heights, and deeper depths of the knowledge and love of Jesus, as a Saviour from sin. If it were not for this, the question of perfectionism might sleep forever, without one word of awakening from the writer. And now his object will be fully gained, if in these brief remarks and few illustrations, the fact shall be clearly and fully made known, that none need fear the necessity running into perfectionism, in pressing for all fulness of the riches of the grace of God.

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