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Wesley Center Online

The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 76

On Perfection

"Let us go on to perfection." Heb. 6:1.

The whole sentence runs thus: "Therefore, leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection: Not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God;" which he had just before termed, "the first principles of the oracles of God," and "meat fit for babes," for such as have just tasted that the Lord is gracious.

That the doing of this is a point of the utmost importance the Apostle intimates in the next words: "This will we do, if God permit. For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, and have fallen away, to renew them again unto repentance." As if he had said, If we do not "go on to perfection," we are in the utmost danger of "falling away;" And if we do fall away, it is "impossible" that is, exceeding hard, "to renew them again unto repentance."

In order to make this very important scripture as easy to be understood as possible I shall endeavour,

- I. To show what perfection is;
 - II. To answer some objections to it; and,
 - III. To expostulate a little with the opposers of it.
- I. I will endeavour to show what perfection is.

1. And First, I do not conceive the perfection here spoken of, to be the perfection of angels. As those glorious beings never "left their first estate," never declined from their original perfection, all their native faculties are unimpaired: Their understanding, in particular, is still a lamp of light, their apprehension of all things clear and distinct, and their judgment always true. Hence, though their knowledge is limited, (for they are creatures,) though they are ignorant of innumerable things, yet they are not liable to mistake: Their knowledge is perfect in its kind. And as their affections are all constantly guided by their unerring understanding, so all their actions are suitable thereto; so they do, every moment, not their own will, but the good and acceptable will of God. Therefore it is not possible for man, whose understanding is darkened, to whom mistake is as natural as ignorance; who cannot think at all, but by the mediation of organs which are weakened and depraved, like the other parts of his corruptible body; it is not possible, I say, for men always to think right, to apprehend things distinctly, and to judge truly of them. In consequence hereof, his affections, depending on his understanding, are variously disordered. And his words and actions are influenced, more or less, by the disorder both of his understanding and affections. It follows that no man, while in the body, can possibly attain to angelic perfection.

2. Neither can any man, while he is in a corruptible body, attain to Adamic perfection. Adam, before his fall, was undoubtedly as pure, as free from sin, as even the holy angels. In like manner, his understanding was as clear as theirs, and his affections as regular. In virtue of this, as he always judged right, so he was able always to speak and act right. But since man rebelled against God, the case is widely different with him. He is no longer able to avoid falling into innumerable mistakes;

consequently, he cannot always avoid wrong affections; neither can he always think, speak, and act right. Therefore man, in his present state, can no more attain Adamic than angelic perfection.

3. The highest perfection which man can attain, while the soul dwells in the body, does not exclude ignorance, and error, and a thousand other infirmities. Now, from wrong judgments, wrong words and actions will often necessarily flow: And, in some cases, wrong affections also may spring from the same source. I may judge wrong of you: I may think more or less highly of you than I ought to think; and this mistake in my judgment may not only occasion something wrong in my behaviour, but it may have a still deeper effect; it may occasion something wrong in my affection. From a wrong apprehension, I may love and esteem you either more or less than I ought. Nor can I be freed from a likableness to such a mistake while I remain in a corruptible body. A thousand infirmities, in consequence of this, will attend my spirit, till it returns to God who gave it. And, in numberless instances, it comes short of doing the will of God, as Adam did in paradise. Hence the best of men may say from the heart,

"Every moment, Lord, I need The merit of thy death, for innumerable violations of the Adamic as well as the angelic law." It is well, therefore, for us, that we are not now under these, but under the law of love. "Love is" now "the fulfilling of the law," which is given to fallen man. This is now, with respect to us, "the perfect law." But even against this, through the present weakness of our understanding, we are continually liable to transgress. Therefore every man living needs the blood of atonement, or he could not stand before God.

4. What is then the perfection of which man is capable while he dwells in a corruptible body It is the complying with that kind command, "My son, give me thy heart." It is the "loving the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind." This is the sum of Christian perfection: It is all comprised in that one word, Love. The first branch of it is the love of God: And as he that loves God loves his brother also, it is inseparably connected with the second: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself:" Thou shalt love every man as thy own soul, as Christ loved us. "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets:" These contain the whole of Christian perfection.

5. Another view of this is given us in those words of the great Apostle: "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus." For although this immediately and directly refers to the humility of our Lord, yet it may be taken in a far more extensive sense, so as to include the whole disposition of his mind, all his affections, all his tempers, both toward God and man. Now it is certain that as there was no evil affection in him, so no good affection or temper was wanting. So that "whatsoever things are holy, whatsoever things are lovely," are all included in "the mind that was in Christ Jesus."

6. St. Paul, when writing to the Galatians, places perfection in yet another view. It is the one undivided fruit of the Spirit, which he describes thus: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace; longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, fidelity," (so the word should be translated here,) "meekness, temperance." What a glorious constellation of graces is here! Now, suppose all these to be knit together in one, to be united together in the soul of a believer, this is Christian perfection.

7. Again: He writes to the Christians at Ephesus, of "putting on the new man, which is created after God, in righteousness and true holiness;" and to the Colossians, of "the new man, renewed after the image of him that created him;" plainly referring to the words in Genesis, (Gen. 1:27) "So God created man in his own image." Now, the moral image of God consists (as the Apostle observes) "in righteousness and true holiness." By sin this is totally destroyed. And we never can recover it, till we

are "created anew in Christ Jesus." And this is perfection.

8. St. Peter expresses it in a still different manner, though to the same effect: "As he that hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation." (1 Peter 1:15.) According to this Apostle, then, perfection is another name for universal holiness: Inward and outward righteousness: Holiness of life, arising from holiness of heart.

9. If any expressions can be stronger than these, they are those of St. Paul to the Thessalonians: (1 Thess. 5:23:) "The God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may the whole of you, the spirit, the soul, and the body," (this is the literal translation) "be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

10. We cannot show this sanctification in a more excellent way, than by complying with that exhortation of the Apostle: "I beseech you, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies" (yourselves, your souls and bodies; a part put for the whole, by a common figure of speech) "a living sacrifice unto God;" to whom ye were consecrated many years ago in baptism. When what was then devoted is actually presented to God, then is the man of God perfect.

11. To the same effect St. Peter says, (1 Pet. 2:5,) "Ye are a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." But what sacrifices shall we offer now, seeing the Jewish dispensation is at an end If you have truly presented yourselves to God, you offer up to him continually all your thoughts, and words, and actions, through the Son of his love, as a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.

12. Thus you experience that He whose name is called Jesus does not bear that name in vain: That he does, in fact, "save his people from their sins;" the root as well as the branches. And this salvation from sin, from all sin, is another description of perfection; though indeed it expresses only the least, the lowest branch of it, only the negative part of the great salvation.

II. I proposed, in the Second Place, to answer some objections to this scriptural account of perfection.

1. One common objection to it is, that there is no promise of it in the Word of God. If this were so, we must give it up; we should have no foundation to build upon: For the promises of God are the only sure foundation of our hope. But surely there is a very clear and full promise that we shall all love the Lord our God with all our hearts. So we read, (Deut. 30:6,) "Then will I circumcise thy heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul." Equally express is the word of our Lord, which is no less a promise, though in the form of a command: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind." (Matt. 22:37.) No words can be more strong than these; no promise can be more express. In like manner, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself," is as express a promise as a command.

2. And indeed that general and unlimited promise which runs through the whole gospel dispensation, "I will put my laws in their minds, and write them in their hearts," turns all the commands into promises; and, consequently, that among the rest, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus." The command here is equivalent to a promise, and gives us full reason to expect that he will work in us what he requires of us.

3. With regard to the fruit of the Spirit, the Apostle, in affirming, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy,

peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, fidelity, meekness, temperance," does, in effect, affirm that the Holy Spirit actually works love, and these other tempers, in those that are led by him. So that here also, we have firm ground to tread upon, this scripture likewise being equivalent to a promise, and assuring us that all these shall be wrought in us, provided we are led by the Spirit.

4. And when the Apostle says to the Ephesians, (Eph. 4:21-24,) "Ye have been taught, as the truth is in Jesus," -- to "be renewed in the spirit of your mind," and "to put on the new man, which is created after God" -- that is, after the image of God, -- "in righteousness and true holiness," he leaves us no room to doubt, but God will thus "renew us in the spirit of our mind," and "create us anew" in the image of God, wherein we were at first created: Otherwise it could not be said, that this is "the truth as it is in Jesus."

5. The command of God, given by St. Peter, "Be ye holy, as he that hath called you is holy, in all manner of conversation," [1 Pet. 1:15] implies a promise that we shall be thus holy, if we are not wanting to ourselves. Nothing can be wanting on God's part: As he has called us to holiness, he is undoubtedly willing, as well as able, to work this holiness in us. For he cannot mock his helpless creatures, calling us to receive what he never intends to give. That he does call us thereto is undeniable; therefore he will give it, if we are not disobedient to the heavenly calling.

6. The prayer of St. Paul for the Thessalonians, that God would "sanctify" them throughout, and "that the whole of them, the spirit, the soul, and the body, might be preserved blameless," will undoubtedly be heard in behalf of all the children of God, as well as of those at Thessalonica. Hereby, therefore, all Christians are encouraged to expect the same blessing from "the God of peace;" namely, that they also shall be "sanctified throughout, in spirit, soul, and body;" and that "the whole of them shall be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." [1 Thess. 5:23]

7. But the great question is, whether there is any promise in Scripture, that we shall be saved from sin. Undoubtedly there is. Such is that promise, (Psalm 130:8,) "He shall redeem Israel from all his sins;" exactly answerable to those words of the angel, "He shall save his people from their sins." And surely "he is able to save unto the uttermost them that come unto God through him." Such is that glorious promise given through the Prophet Ezekiel: (Ezek. 36:25-27:) "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: From all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: And I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them." Such (to mention no more) is that pronounced by Zechariah, (Luke 1:73-75,) "The oath which he swore to our father Abraham, that he would grant unto us, being delivered out of the hand of our enemies," (and such, doubtless are all our sins,) "to serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life." The last part of this promise is peculiarly worthy of our observation. Lest any should say, "True, we shall be saved from our sins when we die," that clause is remarkably added, as if on purpose to obviate this pretence, all the days of our life. With what modesty then can anyone affirm, that none shall enjoy this liberty till death

8. "But," say some, "this cannot be the meaning of the words; for the thing is impossible." It is impossible to men: but the things impossible with, men are possible with God. "Nay, but this is impossible in its own nature: For it implies a contradiction, that a man should be saved from all sin while he is in a sinful body."

There is a great deal of force in this objection. And perhaps we allow most of what you contend for. We have already allowed, that while we are in the body we cannot be wholly free from mistake. Notwithstanding all our care, we shall still be liable to judge wrong in many instances. And a mistake in judgment will very frequently occasion a mistake in practice. Nay, a wrong judgment may occasion something in the temper or passions which is not strictly right. It may occasion needless fear, or ill-grounded hope, unreasonable love, or unreasonable aversion. But all this is no way inconsistent with the perfection above described.

9. You say, "Yes, it is inconsistent with the last article: It cannot consist with salvation from sin." I answer, It will perfectly well consist with salvation from sin, according to that definition of sin, (which I apprehend to be the scriptural definition of it,) a voluntary transgression of a known law. "Nay, but all transgressions of the law of God, whether voluntary or involuntary, are sin: For St. John says, `All sin is a transgression of the law.'" True, but he does not say, All transgression of the law is sin. This I deny: Let him prove it that can.

To say the truth, this a mere strife of words. You say none is saved from sin in your sense of the word; but I do not admit of that sense, because the word is never so taken in Scripture. And you cannot deny the possibility of being saved from sin, in my sense of the word. And this is the sense wherein the word sin is over and over taken in Scripture.

"But surely we cannot be saved from sin, while we dwell in a sinful body." A sinful body I pray observe, how deeply ambiguous, how equivocal, this expression is! But there is no authority for it in Scripture: The word sinful body is never found there. And as it is totally unscriptural, so it is palpably absurd. For no body, or matter of any kind, can be sinful: Spirits alone are capable of sin. Pray in what part of the body should sin lodge It cannot lodge in the skin, nor in the muscles, or nerves, or veins, or arteries; it cannot be in the bones, any more than in the hair or nails. Only the soul can be the seat of sin.

10. "But does not St. Paul himself say, `They that are in the flesh cannot please God'" I am afraid the sound of these words has deceived many unwary souls; who have been told, Those words, they that are in the flesh, mean the same as they that are in the body. No; nothing less. The flesh, in this text, no more means the body than it does the soul. Abel, Enoch, Abraham, yea, all that cloud of witnesses recited by St. Paul in the eleventh of the Hebrews, did actually please God while they were in the body, as he himself testifies. The expression, therefore, here means neither more nor less than they that are unbelievers, they that are in their natural state, they that are without God in the world.

11. But let us attend to the reason of the thing. Why cannot the Almighty sanctify the soul while it is in the body Cannot he sanctify you while you are in this house, as well as in the open air Can the walls of brick or stone hinder him No more can these walls of flesh and blood hinder him a moment from sanctifying you throughout. He can just as easily save you from all sin in the body as out of the body.

"But has he promised thus to save us from sin while we are in the body" Undoubtedly he has: For a promise is implied in every commandment of God: Consequently in that, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind." For this and every other commandment is given, not to the dead, but to the living. It is expressed in the words above recited, that we should walk "in holiness before him all the days of our life."

I have dwelt the longer on this, because it is the grand argument of those that oppose salvation from

sin; and also, because it has not been so frequently and so fully answered: Whereas the arguments taken from Scripture have been answered a hundred times over.

12. But a still more plausible objection remains, taken from experience; which is, that there are no living witnesses of this salvation from sin. In answer to this, I allow,

(1.) That there are not many. Even in this sense, there are not many fathers. Such is our hardness of heart, such our slowness to believe what both the Prophets and Apostles have spoke, that there are few, exceeding few, true witnesses of the great salvation.

(2.) I allow that there are false witnesses, who either deceive their own souls, and speak of the things they know not, or "speak lies in hypocrisy." And I have frequently wondered, that we have not more of both sorts. It is nothing strange, that men of warm imaginations should deceive themselves in this matter. Many do the same with regard to justification: They imagine they are justified, and are not. But though many imagine it falsely, yet there are some that are truly justified. And thus, though many imagine they are sanctified, and are not, yet there are some that are really sanctified.

(3.) I allow that some who once enjoyed full salvation have now totally lost it. They once walked in glorious liberty, giving God their whole heart, "rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, and in everything giving thanks." But it is past. They now are shorn of their strength, and become like other men. Perhaps they do not give up their confidence; they still have a sense of his pardoning love. But even this is frequently assaulted by doubts and fears, so that they hold it with a trembling hand.

13. "Nay, this," say some pious and sensible men, "is the very thing which we contend for. We grant, it may please God to make some of his children for a time unspeakably holy and happy. We will not deny, that they may enjoy all the holiness and happiness which you speak of. But it is only for a time: God never designed that it should continue to their lives' end. Consequently, sin is only suspended: It is not destroyed."

This you affirm. But it is a thing of so deep importance, that it cannot be allowed without clear and cogent proof. And where is the proof We know that, in general, "the gifts and calling of God are without repentance." He does not repent of any gifts which he hath bestowed upon the children of men. And how does the contrary appear, with regard to this particular gift of God Why should we imagine, that he will make an exception with respect to the most precious of all his gifts on this side heaven Is he not as able to give it us always, as to give it once as able to give it for fifty years, as for one day And how can it be proved, that he is not willing to continue this his lovingkindness How is this supposition, that he is not willing, consistent with the positive assertion of the Apostle who, after exhorting the Christians at Thessalonica, and in them all Christians in all ages, "to rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks," -- immediately adds, (as if on purpose to answer those who denied, not the power, but the will of God to work this in them,) "For this is the will of God concerning you in Christ Jesus." Nay, and it is remarkable, that, after he had delivered that glorious promise (such it properly is,) in the twenty-third verse, "The very God of peace shall sanctify you wholly: And the whole of you" (so it is in the original,) "the spirit, the soul, and the body, shall be preserved blameless unto the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ;" he adds again, "Faithful is he that hath called you, who also will do it." [1 Thess. 5:23-24] He will not only sanctify you wholly, but will preserve you in that state until he comes to receive you unto himself.

14. Agreeable to this is the plain matter of fact. Several persons have enjoyed this blessing, without

any interruption, for many years. Several enjoy it at this day. And not a few have enjoyed it unto their death, as they have declared with their latest breath; calmly witnessing that God had saved them from all sin till their spirit returned to God.

15. As to the whole head of objections taken from experience, I desire it may be observed farther, either the persons objected to have attained Christian perfection, or they have not. If they have not, whatever objections are brought against them strike wide of the mark. For they are not the persons we are talking of: Therefore, whatever they are or do is beside the question. But if they have attained it, if they answer the description given under the nine preceding articles, no reasonable objection can lie against them. They are superior to all censure; and "every tongue that riseth up against them will they utterly condemn."

16. "But I never saw one," continues the objector, "that answered my idea of perfection." It may be so. And it is probable (as I observed elsewhere) you never will. For your idea includes abundantly too much; even freedom from those infirmities which are not separable from a spirit that is connected with flesh and blood. But if you keep to the account that is given above, and allow for the weakness of human understanding, you may see at this day undeniable instances of genuine, scriptural perfection.

III. 1. It only remains, in the Third place, to expostulate a little with the opposers of this perfection.

Now permit me to ask, Why are you so angry with those who profess to have attained this and so mad (I cannot give it any softer title) against Christian perfection -- against the most glorious gift which God ever gave to the children of men upon earth View it in every one of the preceding points of light, and see what it contains that is either odious or terrible; that is calculated to excite either hatred or fear in any reasonable creature.

What rational objection can you have to the loving the Lord your God with all your heart Why should you have any aversion to it Why should you be afraid of it Would it do you any hurt Would it lessen your happiness, either in this world or the world to come And why should you be unwilling that others should give him their whole heart or that they should love their neighbours as themselves Yea, "as Christ hath loved us" Is this detestable Is it the proper object of hatred Or is it the most amiable thing under the sun Is it proper to move terror Is it not rather desirable in the highest degree

2. Why are you so averse to having in you the whole "mind which was in Christ Jesus" -- all the affections, all the tempers and dispositions, which were in him while he dwelt among men Why should you be afraid of this Would it be any worse for you, were God to work in you this very hour all the mind that was in him If not, why should you hinder others from seeking this blessing or be displeased at those who think they have attained it Is anything more lovely anything more to be desired by every child of man

3. Why are you averse to having the whole "fruit of the Spirit -- "love, joy, peace; longsuffering, meekness, gentleness, fidelity, goodness, temperance" Why should you be afraid of having all these planted in your inmost soul As "against these there is no law," so there cannot be any reasonable objection. Surely nothing is more desirable, than that all these tempers should take deep root in your heart; nay, in the hearts of all that name the name of Christ; yea, of all the inhabitants of the earth.

4. What reason have you to be afraid of, or to entertain any aversion to the being "renewed in the" whole "image of him that created you" Is not this more desirable than anything under heaven Is it not

consummately amiable What can you wish for in comparison of this, either for your own soul, or for those for whom you entertain the strongest and tenderest affection And when you enjoy this, what remains but to be "changed from glory to glory, by the Spirit of the Lord"

5. Why should you be averse to universal holiness, -- the same thing under another name Why should you entertain any prejudice against this, or look upon it with apprehension whether you understand by that term the being inwardly conformed to the whole image and will of God, or an outward behaviour in every point suitable to that conformity. Can you conceive anything more amiable than this anything more desirable Set prejudice aside, and surely you will desire to see it diffused over all the earth.

6. Is perfection (to vary the expression) the being "sanctified throughout in spirit, soul, and body" What lover of God and man can be averse to this, or entertain frightful apprehension of it Is it not, in your best moments, your desire to be all of a piece -- all consistent with yourself -- all faith, all meekness, and all love And suppose you were once possessed of this glorious liberty, would not you wish to continue therein -- to be preserved "blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ"

7. For what cause should you that are children of God be averse to, or afraid of, presenting yourselves, your souls and bodies, as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God -- to God your Creator, your Redeemer, your Sanctifier Can anything be more desirable than this entire self-dedication to him And is it not your wish that all mankind should unite in this "reasonable service" Surely no one can be averse to this, without being an enemy to all mankind.

8. And why should you be afraid of, or averse to, what is naturally implied in this; namely, the offering up all our thoughts, and words, and actions, as a spiritual sacrifice to God, acceptable to him through the blood and intercession of his well-beloved Son. Surely you cannot deny that this is good and profitable to men, as well as pleasing to God. Should you not then devoutly pray that both you and all mankind may thus worship him in spirit and in truth

9. Suffer me to ask one question more. Why should any man of reason and religion be either afraid of, or averse to, salvation from all sin Is not sin the greatest evil on this side hell And if so, does it not naturally follow that an entire deliverance from it is one of the greatest blessings on this side heaven How earnestly then should it be prayed for by all the children of God! By sin I mean a voluntary transgression of a known law. Are you averse to being delivered from this Are you afraid of such a deliverance Do you then love sin, that you are so unwilling to part with it Surely no. You do not love either the devil or his works. You rather wish to be totally delivered from them, to have sin rooted out both of your life and your heart.

10. I have frequently observed, and not without surprise, that the opposers of perfection are more vehement against it when it is placed in this view, than in any other whatsoever. They will allow all you say of the love of God and man; of the mind which was in Christ; of the fruit of the spirit; of the image of God; of universal holiness; of entire self-dedication; of sanctification in spirit, soul, and body; yea, and of the offering up all our thoughts, words, and actions, as a sacrifice to God; -- all this they will allow so we will allow sin, a little sin, to remain in us till death.

11. Pray compare this with that remarkable passage in John Bunyan's "Holy War." "When Immanuel," says he, "had driven Diabolus and all his forces out of the city of Mansoul, Diabolus preferred a petition to Immanuel, that he might have only a small part of the city. When this was rejected, he begged to have only a little room within the walls. But Immanuel answered, "He should have no place

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