

# "Let Us Go On Unto Perfection" Hebrews 6:1

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Several facts in the Christian life are quite self-evident. First, the initial experience of the new birth does not do for the believer all that needs to be done in his life. Second, there should be continual growth from the time of the new birth until one is translated into glory. Third, some Christians seem to advance much more rapidly than others. Fourth, others seem to get into a stalemate and make little or no progress at all. Fifth, there is a goal or plane (clearly enunciated in the Scriptures) toward which Christians are exhorted to go.

We are going to use the word perfection to describe this higher life. It is true that the word itself can be defined in numerous ways. It is wrong for us to be arbitrary in our definition. It is well that we seek as near as possible the scriptural idea of perfection. As used here in Hebrews, it carries the idea of maturity or "full growth." This maturity, however, is not that of old age or the end of life. Rather it is the reaching of the point where one is now ready to serve. The tree has now grown to the point where it can bear fruit. The house has now been completed and is ready for occupancy.

The term was used in the Old Testament when God said to Abraham, "Walk thou before me and be thou perfect" (Gen. 17:1). Various kings of the Old Testament are referred to as being perfect before God. In the New Testament the apostle Paul wrote, "Let as many as be perfect be thus minded" (Phil. 3:15). Or in James 1:4, "But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing," Jesus commanded His disciples, "Be ye therefore perfect even as your Father which is in Heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48).

A careful analysis of these passages would assure one that this perfection is not that which lies out beyond our human existence, but is one that is possible within the framework of our earthly life. God does not expect us to be as perfect as angels are, nor as perfect as Adam was before the Fall. Neither does

He expect us to be as perfect as we will be after the resurrection. Nor do these Scriptures imply that the perfection toward which we are to strive is to be the same as God's absolute perfection. The only sense in which we can be perfect as our heavenly Father would be in a heart of love for God and for our fellow men.

Before there can be the perfection of holy love in our hearts there must, of course, be the beginning of that love. Before there can be the continuation of holiness, and progress toward perfection, there must be a starting point. The endeavors to be holy and perfect without the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit is impossible. The picture in Romans 7 is evidence for this. In this sense holiness begins at the point of new birth of the believer.

The author of the epistle to the Hebrews exhorts the hearers to leave the principles of the doctrines of Christ and go on to perfection. He names these first principles as repentance, faith, and sacraments. He recognizes that there is a beginning, a time for babyhood. One must learn to eat and to walk. There is a time when the beginner is dependent upon teachers and needs to be taught these first principles.

However, this writer is most disturbed because there are those who, after going through these initial stages, continue to depend upon their teachers. At a time when they ought to be teachers themselves, they are still having to be taught. The foundation must be laid, and one cannot build upon the foundation until after the foundation is erected. But to stop there and not to go on to the erection of the full building creates a disturbing problem.

One can also see here in Hebrews, chapter 6, that the author, in urging the readers to go on to perfection, immediately warns them of the danger of apostasy. He writes that it is impossible to renew to repentance those who fall away after they have known the way. Apparently he sees that in the failure to go on to perfection the danger of falling away is increased. Believers then need to be urged on to perfection as a protection to the experience which they have already gained.

That the work of sanctification is begun when one is regenerated is clear in the Scriptures. Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, stated that they were sanctified, and yet admitted that they were babes in Christ. Necessarily this would have to be an initial sanctification. Regeneration is a climactic work,

culminating a work of the Spirit in the heart of the sinner through conviction and repentance. For some, this work is more sudden than for others. But there has been a time of special operation of the Holy Spirit upon their heart and the enlightenment of their mind through the power of the Word. A person is gradually brought to the light, begins to repent of his sin, turns himself away from evil, and then arrives at the place of full faith in Jesus Christ. When this moment arrives, his sins are forgiven and his heart is changed. New life is placed within him. The work of regeneration itself is a perfect work. He is brought to life; he has passed from death unto life. In this sense perfection has begun.

However, in the cleansing act that occurs at regeneration, there is no completion. For instance, a person is made holy but he is not entirely holy. A person is made pure in a certain sense, but still there are impurities within him. A sin principle within him has been dealt a death blow but still remains in the heart of the believer. The power of sin has been broken. This sin does not reign but it does remain.

When the believer is convicted of this sin which still remains in his heart, there is a sense of guiltiness. It is not the same kind of guilt that came when one recognized himself a guilty sinner and pled for forgiveness for his sins. But it is the kind of guilt that makes one feel a sense of condemnation before God. It is an experience that is expressed in Galatians 5:17, where the "flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other." Or it might be expressed as Paul does in Romans 7, where he cries out, "Oh wretched man that I am: Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" There are those who suppose that there is no sanctification at all until there is a full sanctification in the full cleansing from the heart. But this supposition could not be true in the light of the Scriptures. In Thessalonians, Paul recognized the love and victory and even sanctification of the Thessalonian believers, and yet in the close of the first epistle prays that they shall be sanctified wholly.

It is so easy for people to confuse sanctification with justification. When one begins to see the lack of sanctification in his own life he is tempted to question whether he is entirely justified. The Catholic idea of penance and indulgences seems to convey the idea that one is justified more and more as he is

more and more sanctified. One of the great fears of the Reformers was that the great doctrine of justification by faith would be lost in any special emphasis upon sanctification. An over-emphasis upon the doctrine of justification by faith may tend to minimize the holy life, or an over-emphasis upon the holy life may tend to minimize justification by faith. These two need not be incompatible.

One of the clearest passages illustrating this point is found in I Corinthians 3. Here the apostle makes very clear that the readers were people that were carnal, not spiritual, and yet they were babes in Christ. Paul makes clear that they have been builded upon the foundation of Jesus Christ. He raises no question whatsoever concerning their vital justification or forgiveness in the Lord.

He does, however, warn them concerning the kind of a building they erect upon the foundation. He indicates that some build out of wood, hay, and stubble, and others build out of gold, silver, and precious stones. He suggests that their works will be tried with fire. The fire will burn up those works that are not of the proper material. He concludes that, though a man's work is burned up with fire, he shall be saved, "yet so as by fire." In all the failure that goes along with the unsanctified life, Paul does not seem to question the free justification that is theirs through the blood of the covenant.

The point that must be made clear here is that believers, who have come to know their Lord Jesus Christ, have been born again and initially sanctified. Holiness has begun, holy love has been placed in the heart of the believer; but, since there is still faulty material within them and the old nature still remains, the persons are not entirely sanctified. It is to these persons that we now address ourselves in pointing out the need to go on to perfection.

Often the question is raised, Is sanctification gradual or instantaneous? It is easy to get the idea among those who teach the two instantaneous works of grace that there are two climactic moments in the Christian's life--the one moment when he is justified and regenerated, and the other moment when he is sanctified by the power of the Holy Spirit. Many times the impression is left that the period between these two experiences is merely one of waiting, or at worst backsliding and being renewed, until one comes to the light of holiness and is sanctified wholly.

A careful study of the Scriptures, as well as writers such as Wesley and Fletcher and other holiness writers, convinces one that there is a progressive experience between these two gracious works of grace. May one rightly call this progress gradual sanctification? John Wesley and John Fletcher had no difficulty doing this. They believed and taught that equal emphasis should be given to both the gradual and the instantaneous aspects of sanctification. John Wesley wrote,

All experience as well as Scripture, show this salvation to be both instantaneous and gradual. It begins the moment we are justified, in the holy, humble, gentle, patient love of God and man. It gradually increases from that moment, as 'a grain of mustard seed, which, at first, is the least of all seeds,' but afterwards puts forth large branches, and becomes a great tree; till, in another instant, the heart is cleansed from all sin, and filled with the pure love to God and man. But even that love increases more and more, till we 'grow up in all things unto Him that is our Head;' till we attain 'the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.'<sup>1</sup>

In this quotation it is evident that for Wesley gradual sanctification occurs both before and after entire sanctification. This aspect of sanctification would be the growth of the graces implanted when one is born again. The grace and the love increase in the heart of the believer throughout the entirety of his Christian life.

It would seem also in Wesley that there would be the idea of cleansing in sanctification, as well as growth. The gradual increase of love would necessitate the decrease of the hindrances. Usually Wesley describes this gradual cleansing by the figure of death. One may be dying for quite some time before he actually is dead. This gradual dying would be gradual sanctification.

J. A. Wood, a Methodist writer of the last half of the nineteenth century, made a careful distinction between purity and maturity. For him, purity was holiness and was attained in

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1. *The Works of John Wesley*. Authorized edition published by the Wesleyan Conference. London, 1872 (photo offset edition; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), VI, 509.

the experience of entire sanctification. This purity would be the negative aspect of holiness as noted in the above idea of death to sin. Maturity was the growing of the graces planted in regeneration. As long as one's heart is impure, growth is hindered, but when sin is destroyed in the believer, then growth is freer and much more rapid.<sup>2</sup>

Wood quoted Dr. Hibbard as denying that there is a "gradual growing out of sin." There is a growth in grace, but such growth is not in itself a removal of sin. One can grow in grace, do good works and reach a degree of maturity without being pure at heart. Purity is the result of an act of God in the heart of the believer.<sup>3</sup> Purity is attained, not gradually but instantly by faith. Maturity comes to one after many years of growth and culture. Wesley did not make this same distinction. Where Wood emphasized the instantaneous character of cleansing as in a moment, Wesley was more insistent on a gradual cleansing from the beginning of sanctification at regeneration to its completion in entire sanctification. Wesley saw an increase in purity as well as in maturity between the two works of grace. For him there is a gradual death to sin, as well as a growth of the graces in the heart.

One can quote quite at length from Reformed or Calvinist writers on the subject of gradual sanctification. Luther believed that the believer is healed to a certain degree throughout his Christian life, but not fully healed until death. B. B. Warfield, a Calvinist, who opposed perfectionism strongly, taught an incomplete elimination of the sin principle in this life. He claimed that the Scriptures did provide for the "eradication" of sin, not just a "counteraction" of it. To cleanse the stream is to cleanse the fountain. But he saw no complete cleansing in this life, only a continual act which is completed "hereafter."<sup>4</sup> Calvin taught that sin is destroyed in the believer by continual process, but such cleansing is not complete before death.

On gradual sanctification, Wesley appeared to follow the Reformed teaching. On this subject he had little controversy

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2. J. A. Wood, *Purity and Maturity* (Boston: Christian Witness Co., 1899), pp. 186-189.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 145-147.

4. Benjamin B. Warfield, *Studies in Perfectionism* 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931), II, 582, 583.

with his opponents. Real disagreement arose over his teaching of entire sanctification, or Christian perfection, as attainable here and now. In our present-day holiness movement the tendency is to follow Wesley where he taught the instantaneous experience of entire sanctification, but to neglect his emphasis on the gradual sanctification.

It is also quite interesting to notice the emphasis of John Fletcher on this subject of gradual sanctification. He felt that the Scriptures did not limit the work of sanctification to either the gradual or the instantaneous. The following quotation indicates the trend of his thinking.

Should you ask, how many baptisms, or effusions of the sanctifying spirit are necessary to cleanse a believer from all sin, and to kindle his soul into perfect love; I reply, that the effect of a sanctifying truth depending upon the ardour of the faith with which the truth is embraced and upon the power of the Spirit with which it is applied, I should betray a want of modesty if I brought the operations of the Holy Ghost, and the energy of faith, under a rule which is not expressly laid down in the Scriptures. If you ask your physician how many doses of physic you must take before all the crudities of your stomach can be carried off, and your appetite perfectly restored; he would probably answer you, that this depends on the nature of those crudities, the strength of the medicine, and the manner in which your constitution will allow it to operate; and that in general you must repeat the dose as you can bear, till the remedy has fully answered the desired end. I return a similar answer: if one powerful baptism of the Spirit 'seal you unto the day of redemption, and cleanse you from all filthiness,' so much the better, If two or more be necessary, the Lord can repeat them.<sup>5</sup>

Fletcher had no hesitancy in quoting John Wesley that pride, anger, self-will and a heart bent to backsliding will be felt in the believer until they have "gradually mortified these." With Wesley, Fletcher strongly believed that in the outpouring of the

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5. John Fletcher, *The Works* (New York: B. Waugh and T. Mason, 1835), II, 632-633.

Holy Spirit one could be instantaneously sanctified but he did not believe that this instantaneous work would always occur at any moment that one might please to seek for it. He believed that the conditions for such an experience must be met before it would occur. He wrote:

On the other hand, to deny that imperfect believers may and do gradually grow in grace, and of course that the remains of their sins may, and do gradually decay, is as absurd as to deny that God waters the earth by daily dews, as well as by thunder showers: it is as ridiculous as to assert that nobody is carried off by lingering disorders, but that all men die suddenly or a few hours after they are taken ill. <sup>6</sup>

My purpose in quoting at length from these two great writers on Christian Perfection is to show that they had no hesitancy at all in using the term gradual sanctification. Neither of these men felt that there was any inconsistency in using both the terms gradual and instantaneous sanctification. It is also clear in their writings that this gradualness was applied both to the cleansing, or negative aspect of sanctification, as well as to the growth, or the positive side of sanctification. They were men who closely followed the Scriptures and felt that they had based their teaching upon the Word of God.

Let it be clearly understood that this is not an argument for gradual sanctification as an either/or. What we are trying to do is to establish the fact that between the experience of regeneration and the crisis experience of entire sanctification there is a period of progress and gradual sanctification in the life of the believer. All gradual sanctification must culminate in entire sanctification. Even Calvinists and Catholics believe this to be true. The Catholic teaching would of course make the gradual sanctification to culminate into entire sanctification at the end of purgatory. The Calvinists would have the gradual sanctification occurring during life culminate in entire sanctification at the instant of death. The Wesleyan contention would be that this gradual sanctification may and should culminate in entire sanctification by faith at some point in this life.

John L. Peters contends that this distinction between gradual and instantaneous sanctification was lost in the holiness movement at the time of the controversy of the last half of the nine-

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6. *Ibid.*, 638.

teenth century between the promoters of holiness and the opponents of holiness within the Methodist Church. This controversy resulted in the holiness churches maintaining the teaching of instantaneous sanctification while the idea of gradual sanctification has been maintained more or less within the Methodist Church.<sup>7</sup> It would undoubtedly be to our advantage if we could recover the truth of gradual sanctification, and it would certainly strengthen our teaching on instantaneous sanctification if it could be more greatly emphasized in the work of leading people into the experience of entire holiness. In fact, Wesley taught that "whoever would advance the gradual change in believers should strongly insist on the instantaneous."<sup>8</sup>

Believing as we do that a believer may by the grace of God come into an experience of entire cleansing, it is vitally important that we know the process by which this experience may be attained. If it is our command to go on to perfection, then we want to know how we may "go on." It would appear from our text in Hebrews that some people are able to go on to perfection much more rapidly than others. Otherwise, how could some become teachers to teach those who had not yet arrived at the place where they could be teachers? John Fletcher makes this point equally clear in his insistence that some may be able to reach the experience of holiness much more quickly than others. In all, it must be insisted that a person should strive for Christian perfection with all his heart and soul in order to find.<sup>9</sup>

Might it be possible that we have made the entrance into the second grace appear so easy that many people who have sought and claimed the blessing have failed to arrive? I am only suggesting that many who profess the experience do not seem to have the power and glory and victory that sanctified lives ought to possess. It certainly would be possible for a person to assume that he had reached the second blessing without really knowing the true blessing of heart rest. For those who are really interested in finding this blessing of entire sanctification, I would like to suggest some of the following means by which we enter into this rest.

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7. John L. Peters, *Christian Perfection and American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957), pp. 192, 193.

8. Wesley, *op. cit.*, VIII, 328, 329.

9. Fletcher, *op. cit.*, II, 639.

1. It is necessary first that one see his own condition. Without knowing the pollution and uncleanness of the heart, and without a keen and clear awareness of the old nature that still remains in the heart, it would be next to impossible for a person to see and believe in the cleansing fountain.

2. When this condition is clearly seen, then the believer will begin to abhor himself and recognize the uncleanness that is still present in him. He will see his own selfishness, his own pride, envy, jealousy, and anger. He will cry out in the anguish of his own soul for deliverance from this evil.

3. One could easily question whether God ever sanctified wholly any person who does not want this grace more than he wants anything else in life. And when one does want this grace with all his heart, he will then use every means of grace possible to attain it. He will endeavor by that grace to put off the old nature and to put on the new nature. He will cast aside the idols that lie in his heart, and will earnestly seek for the enthronement of Christ and the Holy Spirit. If entire sanctification is a complete mortification of self and a denial of one's own selfish nature, then it stands to reason that any attainment of the grace could come only after a very serious and earnest seeking for this grace. Momentary sentiments of love, consecration, or emotion can never truly substitute for the real death that comes to self when the heart is made holy.

4. The believer in search for holiness should cultivate the graces that have already been placed in his heart. Paul in writing to the Thessalonian Church commended their love, but asked them to let it increase more and more. Faith, peace, and joy should become stronger. The believer should endeavor by every way possible to let these graces emerge into his outward life. Often it is in the effort to let these emerge from his heart that a person soon recognizes the real hindrance to that growth. When this hindrance is seen, then one can begin to cry out for deliverance from it.

5. If God does not immediately come with the fulfillment of the promise of entire sanctification to the heart, one should not become discouraged. He should continue to press on toward perfection. There must be the putting down of every idol and the casting out of every foe. A person should cleanse himself from "all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." He should keep pressing on even though

it may appear that God has forgotten him. He should go on until the light breaks through and God comes and meets his heart.

6. The emphasis we have given here might imply that a person would gain his entire sanctification by works, but this is not the intention. The believer must be kept aware of the fact that there is something that he cannot do. He can bring himself to the Cross; he can mortify the deeds of the body; he can help to cast out his idols; he can abhor himself; but with all the effort that he puts forth to bring about his entire sanctification, he must finally come to the realization that with all the grace given to him when he was born again, he cannot fully and completely cast out the old man. Until God speaks the second time, sin will continue to remain in the heart. But when that person is enabled by God's grace to lay claim to his heritage in Christ, and his faith takes hold of that promise, then God speaks and the promise is fulfilled in the heart and the full cleansing occurs.

Could the blessing have come sooner? Certainly there is no question as to God's power to cleanse the heart at any time that He pleases. But it pleases God for us to come to the place of readiness and where, when He does the work, all glory shall be given to Him. We close with this further quotation from John Wesley.

*Thou* therefore look for it every moment! Look for it in the way above described; in all those *good works* whereunto thou art 'created anew in Christ Jesus.' There is then no danger: you can be no worse, if you are no better, for that expectation. Were you to be disappointed of your hope, still you lose nothing. But you shall not be disappointed with your hope: It will come, and will not tarry. Look for it then every day, every hour, every moment! Why not this hour, this moment?<sup>10</sup>

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10. Wesley, *op. cit.*, VI, 53.