

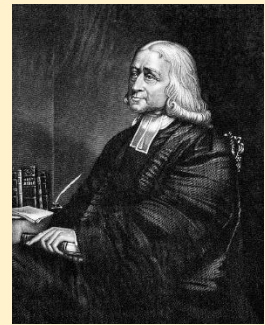
Study Guide #8: Perfectionism and Perfection of Character

Introduction

The topic of sanctification has had more than its share of extremism associated with it in Christian history. The extremist versions have usually led to various shades of perfectionist teachings. In this Study Guide we examine the major versions of perfectionism in the light of Scripture and also discuss the very Biblical concept of Christian perfection of character.

Question #1: Does the Holiness movement have anything to do with extreme sanctification views?

Answer: The Holiness movement arose in the 19th century as a result of English clergyman John Wesley (d. 1791) and the Second Great Awakening (1795-1830) revival movement in America. Wesley and prominent American clergyman Charles G. Finney taught the doctrine called *entire sanctification*. This doctrine was based on the so-called *second blessing* of the Holy Spirit. Like most Christians, these leaders said that the Holy Spirit comes into a person about the time of his baptism. Then they taught that later He comes a second time in a more *complete* or *entire* sense—resulting in a state of perfection or near perfection. This doctrine contributed significantly to the popular 19th-century notion among American Christians that believers would eventually bring about a perfect millennium of peace and prosperity on the earth. Following that millennium, Jesus would return in glory to establish His literal kingdom on earth—a view known as post-millennialism (that Jesus would return after [post] the millennium). [NOTE: Indirectly, Pentecostalism also resulted from this movement, albeit later in the 19th century.]



John Wesley

Question #2: Why is Entire Sanctification an extreme view?

Answer: Chiefly because it ignores the realities of the sinful nature in all people. *First*, even the believer's good works don't constitute perfection because they are tainted with sin from the sinful nature and are thus like "**filthy rags**" (Isaiah 64:6, NKJV). *Second*, the sinful nature makes even outward perfect performance impossible because it makes us more prone to mistakes, which are still sins. While the *power* of sin to enslave us can and should be gone (Romans 6:12, 14, 18, 22), the *presence* of sin (as an inward principle) remains in the believer and prevents him from reaching the level of perfect performance. See Explorer II, Study Guides #3-#5 for a more complete discussion of the nature of sin and the effect of the sinful nature on a person. John Wesley should be applauded for emphasizing the need for more holiness among Christians. But his theological solution went too far in the other extreme—something that we humans are prone to do when we react against something that itself is an extreme problem.

Question #3: What is Passive Sanctification?

Answer: Passive sanctification often focuses on the plant growth metaphor for Christian living. It's the belief that since plants don't have to try to grow, neither do believers *work* to grow. Instead, spiritual growth is completely natural as long as one is feeding his spiritual nature and continuing to allow the Holy Spirit to work in his life. In fact, the only effort this idea says the Christian needs to make is make certain that the Holy Spirit is in charge of your life, because as long as He is, *He* will do the obeying *for* you and *in* you. Furthermore, He will not make any mistakes because He is God. In this way, passive sanctification emphasizes that sanctification is also by faith (like justification) and that it leads to Christian perfection.

Question #4: How should we respond to Passive Sanctification?

Answer: Passive sanctification is often defended partly by quoting Galatians 2:20: **“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me”** (NKJV). This text is understood to mean that Christ now lives His perfect life *in* us and *for* us. But the real point of this text is that the believer lives a holy life by faith in focusing on the cross of Jesus as His greatest demonstration of love for us. That is *how* Jesus lives in us. As we saw in Explorer II, Study Guide #7, progressive sanctification is by faith in the sense that at the moment of temptation we step out in faith that God's power will be there to give us spiritual success. Unlike *justification* by faith, which is faith exercised in a *finished* declaration of our righteousness because of *Jesus'* perfect righteousness being *imputed* to us (see Study Guide #5), sanctification is by an active, cooperative faith in an ongoing process (see Explorer II, Study Guide #7).



Puppeteer and
Puppet

Passive sanctification is fundamentally flawed in that it does injustice to God's character in making Him essentially our puppeteer who pulls our strings inside us to get us to obey. In making the Holy Spirit the one who actually does the obeying *for* and *in* us, this view reduces our free will and confuses the work of God *for* us with His work *in* us. Moreover, it's also a recipe for failure since one who believes this false teaching will tend to wait for the Holy Spirit to *cause* him to obey rather than stepping out in faith and actually obeying himself. The bottom line is that progressive sanctification is not a spectator sport. It involves a work of ongoing, active cooperation between the believer and God.

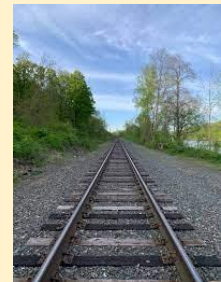
Question #5: Is justification only for past sins and sanctification for present sins?

Answer: Apparently, in order to reflect the Bible's teaching that salvation is a 3-fold process of (1) having been saved (past tense), (2) are being saved (present tense), and (3) will be saved (future tense), *some* well-meaning conservative Christians have relegated justification to the covering of past sins (past tense), progressive sanctification as dealing with the current Christian life (present tense), and glorification as pertaining to the 2nd Coming of Jesus (future tense).

It's true that the Scriptures speak of salvation as concerning these 3 basic tenses. See (1) Ephesians 2:5, 8; II Timothy 1:9; and Titus 3:5 for it as past tense; (2) I Corinthians 1:18; 15:2, and II Corinthians 2:15 for it as present tense; and (3) Acts 15:11; Romans 5:9; I Corinthians 3:15 and 5:5 for it as future tense. However, we have already established that progressive sanctification is inadequate to deal with current sins because of the sinful nature, which contaminates even our good works so as to make them sinful *if* it weren't for the *imputed* righteousness of Jesus. This means that justification is like an umbrella used by a person walking in the rain. It covers the Christian while he is walking the road of sanctification. Moreover, this false view relegates Jesus as our Savior only for our *past* sins and makes the Holy Spirit our Savior for our *present* Christian walk.

Question #6: What then is the proper relationship between justification and sanctification?

Answer: Let's answer this question by reviewing the non-Protestant view that we discussed in Study Guide #5. Briefly, this view is that God must *make* a person perfectly righteous before He can declare that person righteous (which is justification), or otherwise He would be a liar. In this way, this view teaches that justification is a process of making the believer *inherently* righteous, which is actually close to the work of sanctification. In other words, the non-Protestant theology here confuses justification and sanctification—the work of God *for* us with His work *in* us. But justification and progressive sanctification are like the 2 rails of a railroad track. They are distinctly *different* rails, but they always must go *together* in order to make it a railroad track. This principle is called “unity with distinction.” We must always remember that justification is the *Root* of our salvation; and progressive sanctification is the *Fruit* of our salvation!



Railroad Track

Question #7: I have heard that the last generation of the saved will have to live a short time without a Mediator. Doesn't that imply that they will then have to have reached the level of sinless perfection in order to be saved?

Answer: It's true that the last generation of the saved—those alive to see the 2nd Coming of Jesus—will live a short time without Jesus mediating His righteousness on their behalf. This truth is based on Revelation 15:5-8, which states that just before the Seven Last Plagues are poured out on the earth, “**no one was able to enter the temple**” (v. 8, NKJV). This is figurative language, of course, because the only way we enter the temple in *heaven* (v. 5) is through Jesus, who is there mediating His perfect righteousness on our behalf (Hebrews 6:19-20; 7:25; 8:1-2). Spiritual Babylon, the great enemy of Jesus and His people at the end-time, is destroyed in the 7th Plague (Revelation 16:19), which is immediately followed by the 2nd Coming of Jesus (Revelation 19). Therefore, Jesus' mediation as our High Priest will end shortly before His return in glory. The idea in the question is that if God's people committed any act of sin during this time, they would be eternally lost since Jesus wouldn't be in the heavenly temple to plead His righteousness.

This view that the living saved at that time must be sinless in order to stand without a Mediator before God again fails to understand the nature of sin's depth. The sinful nature itself, which remains until glorification at the actual 2nd Coming of Jesus (Philippians 3:20-21), contaminates even our obedience so that it's not

acceptable unless purified by the *imputed* righteousness of Jesus. See Study Guides #3 and #4. Therefore, perfect outward performance—even assuming that were possible with a sinful nature—doesn't make Jesus' righteousness *unnecessary*. The simple truth is that God's people will no longer need a Mediator because all the decisions have been made and God will have already *sealed* His people for Him (Revelation 7:3 in the context of Revelation 6:14-17). It's over!

This false teaching of some supposed sinless perfection of the last-day saints has produced enormous spiritual damage in believers who have accepted it, because they instinctively know they will never reach that spiritual state this side of heaven. What makes that brief (but unspecified) time period frightening is that the Holy Spirit will have been completely withdrawn from the wicked because they have all seared their consciences by then and will be incapable of changing their loyalty away from Satan. And without the Spirit to mitigate against some of the wickedness, evil will become unimaginably horrendous in scope. Nevertheless, God's people will by then have been *sealed*, which guarantees their protection by Him.

Question #8: Does all this mean that even a Christian cannot stop sinning?

Answer: Implied in this question is another question: Does the Christian have an excuse for sinning? Absolutely not! To say that we have an excuse for sinning is to say that there's a good reason for committing sin—which is also to justify sinning. This the Christian should never say or think. *All* sins can be overcome, for the apostle Paul declared that **“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”** (Philippians 4:13, NKJV). To say otherwise is to say that Jesus isn't powerful enough to enable us to overcome sin.



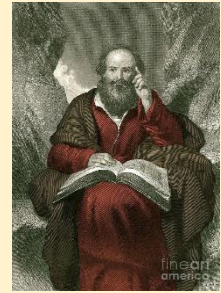
Alcoholism

At the same time, we should recognize that the definition, or results, for overcoming sins often depends upon the nature of the sin. When *some* sins are overcome, such as willfully harming your own body through the use of tobacco or alcohol, the habit and its practice has ended. On the other hand, sins of temperament, such as loss of one's temper, are often overcome in the sense of no longer controlling or characterizing the person, but perhaps at a moment of unawareness, it happens suddenly without a conscious decision on the part of the individual. What all this means is that the only way to attain to sinless perfection is through the *imputed* righteousness of Jesus—the righteousness He lived as our Substitute and gives us credit for when we have faith in Him. And that's the gospel!

Question #9: What is the fundamental problem with perfectionist theology?

Answer: The most basic problem with Christian perfectionists is the failure to understand the true nature of sin. As explained in Explorer II, Study Guide #3, the principle of sin (our sinful nature) is that which is rotten in our core and the cause of our sinful impulses. We don't have to consciously yield to those impulses if we keep our sinful nature starved and our spiritual nature fed and step out in faith that God's power to overcome will be there at our moment of need (see Explorer II, Study Guide #7). But it's always present until the 2nd Coming of Jesus, and it contaminates even our obedience, worship, etc. and prevents the conscious awareness from being there 100 percent of the time.

But more than simply being wrong theology, its logical conclusion is to eventually produce one of two other extremes among most believers: (1) they will eventually become discouraged and hopeless when they never realize sinless perfection in this life, or (2) they will become deluded into thinking that they have already arrived at the state of sinless perfection. In either case, the wrong theology often leads to a very wrong Christian experience. What every believer needs is the *Isaiah Experience*. When the prophet Isaiah saw the full glory of the Lord in vision (Isaiah 6:1-4), his reaction was to exclaim, **“Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips...”** (Isaiah 6:5, NKJV). Although surely a good man from a human point of view, when Isaiah saw the glory of God, he instantly recognized his inherent sinfulness. If a believer sees God’s glory (through focusing on a study of the life of Jesus, primarily), he will recognize his inherent sinfulness, and all talk of perfectionism and sinless perfection would forever cease.



Isaiah the Prophet

Question #10: Is there a *genuine* doctrine of perfection taught in the Bible?

Answer: Actually, there is. What overwhelmingly constitutes perfectionism in Christian circles is *behavior*-oriented—the alleged ceasing of acts of sinning. That’s the wrong focus for all the reasons we have shared in the last few Study Guides. Review Explorer II, Study Guide #3, Question #12 for a discussion of the unpardonable sin. This is the sin of having walked in Satan’s spiritual direction for so long that the person has passed the point of no return where the Holy Spirit cannot do anything to change the person’s loyalty away from Satan. Such a person has *seared* his own conscience, which means he cannot repent. In other words, he has closed his own probation and is eternally lost, even if he doesn’t know it. This experience constitutes powerful evidence that it must also be possible for a person to walk so far in Jesus’ spiritual direction that eventually he passes the point of no return where Satan cannot do anything to change the person’s loyalty to Jesus. Such a person too has thus closed his own probation even though he won’t know it. In other words, his character has become fixed permanently on Jesus’ side in the great controversy that began in heaven with an angel who turned himself into the Devil (see Explorer II, Study Guide #2). Such a spiritual condition may properly be called “perfection of character.” It’s not perfection of one’s nature or even behavior, although behavior will be positively affected. Instead, perfection of character is *loyalty*-oriented rather than *behavior*-oriented. And if you don’t see the huge difference between those two orientations, then please review Explorer II, Study Guides #2-#8.

[NOTE: The general close of probation just before the heavenly temple is closed up (Revelation 15:5-8) is actually an *announcement* that everyone capable of making a decision has closed his own probation in one spiritual camp or the other. It’s *not* like a teacher giving a timed test that finally says time’s up and everyone needs to put their pencils down.]