

## PERFECTING HOLINESS.

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“ Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”—2 COR. vii. 1.

WE have lately been dwelling on our Lord's enforcement of a perfect conversion at the outset of the Christian course : marking that the only time He impressed on any individual the requirement of perfectness had chiefly reference to the beginning of religion, though not excluding the ulterior perfectness to which the earlier would lead. Now here we have a solitary exhortation of the apostle Paul, urging us all to the pursuit and attainment of perfect holiness. As the Saviour required of the young ruler that he should go away and renounce all and come back, thus “perfecting his conversion,” so St. Paul requires of all who are converted that they keep before them a very high standard of excellence, and so aim at it that they may be always “perfecting their holiness.” The expression is a peculiar one : nothing precisely similar occurs elsewhere. We shall therefore do well to fix our thoughts upon it, as it illustrates and is illustrated by the whole context, making it the keynote. In the light of that context it will appear that this “perfecting,” or “accomplishing,” refers to a lofty standard of holiness which is

imposed on us by our relation to God and His temple, which His promises encourage us to attain, and which must be the object of our own pursuit. May the Divine Spirit open us to His own will!

## I.

That Christians are a temple of God gives their religion here its highest character. There can be no more impressive view of the estate of believers than that which regards them as the spiritual and mystical dwelling-place of God, the Triune God. It will be observed that the apostle lays this down as the glorious distinction of the Christian dispensation. He quotes an ancient prophecy which he represents as now fulfilled: "I will dwell in them and walk in them; and they shall be My people and I will be their God." This is too often regarded as merely a figurative allusion to the ancient sanctuary which, though abolished, still transmitted its special lessons and illustrations to latter times. But the New Testament adopts a higher tone than that. St. Paul says elsewhere, in a passage which theologially defines the relations of Christianity to the earlier system, that "we are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit." Again and again in these Corinthian epistles he had given the same teaching. St. Peter, to whose eyes the Lord opened the first vision of the spiritual edifice, says that we, "as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices:" with a beautiful confusion of figures making Christian believers themselves the stones of the temple,

themselves the spiritual worshippers on its pavement, and themselves the sacrifice they offer. In the face of these and other similar testimonies we must be careful not to deal too lightly with such solemn representations. There is a company of people upon earth who are to the living God a temple for the manifestation of His presence. Among that people He dwells. Whereas their ancient forefathers went up occasionally to the sanctuary, they are the sanctuary itself; or, if worshippers in it, they are dwellers also, and never go out from it day nor night. It is not the place on which they occasionally stand that is holy ground: they live and move and have their being in the holy place.

We feel at once what a character of unspeakable dignity and solemnity this impresses on the Christian life: in fact, carrying the thought of duty and responsibility and obligation at once to the highest pitch. No view of the relation we bear to God and religion can go beyond it, as respects either this world or the world to come. But its supreme importance here is that it concerns not the world to come but the world that now is. However wonderful it may seem, the standard of the religious life is placed as high as the dignity of the Divine presence in His temple. We think of God in His holy habitation, into which nothing enters that defiles; and of the sublime hyperbole of the prophet that He chargeth His angels with folly and that the heavens are not clean in His sight. We think of the dreadful sanctity of the ancient temple, thrice dreadful in the inmost place where God dwelt amidst thick darkness. We think of all those lofty descrip-

tions of the state in which the Supreme is revealed to His creatures who never sinned or who are washed from all traces of their sin. And we cannot help asking ourselves with wonder and awe what must be the condition of those who are so near to the Holy Presence. But while we are musing, the apostle tells us here that we must not think of them but of ourselves. The tone and spirit of this whole exhortation is: How holy should we be in all manner of conversation and godliness amongst whom God already dwells, as in a temple! Let us before we proceed catch that tone and spirit. It is sometimes of great importance to receive a general impression of the grandeur of our calling, and to have an undefinable feeling of it conveyed to the mind. Here is an instance. Without entering into any detail, or asking precisely what the character must be that should be worthy of the temple of God, we feel how glorious is the height of holiness which such a vocation demands.

Still without entering into detail, we must dwell on the simple fact that whatsoever belongs to the temple of God is consecrated to Him. "Holiness to the Lord" is written largely on the whole, and minutely on every individual thing, within the walls, from the threshold to the holiest. The word holiness means in this connection absolute separation and devotion to God. In that sublime idea there is no greater or less, no complete and incomplete, no distinction of partial and perfect. "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof:" this is true in a sense we all understand. But we all understand in what a different and higher sense it is true that

the temple is the Lord's and the fulness thereof. The altar rules everything there ; and it sanctifies to God whatsoever toucheth it. Here, brethren, is the final standard of what we call Christian perfection : a standard which we must fix our minds upon and receive into our inmost being. We must for a time forget everything that we have learnt, or which we may hear St. Paul elsewhere enforcing, about progressive sanctification ; and contemplate steadily the great truth, the indubitable truth, that if we are part of the temple of God we must be entirely His. That is the peremptory law of all religion. That is the holiness which we are bidden to perfect : a holiness which gives to God literally and perfectly all that is ours because it is already His and acknowledged to be His in the temple.

But perfect consecration to God of course implies perfect separation from the world and its evil. The temple is the sphere of all that is right and pure ; and all that is not right and pure is "without." There is no more remarkable exhibition of sanctity in the sense of separation from all that is unholy than we have in this context. It must not be thought that the relation of the Corinthians to heathenism and heathen family fellowships is referred to : this may have given occasion to the remarkable accumulation of appeals which we find here ; but the appeals or apostrophes soon become general and absolutely universal. Five terms are selected, each of which gives a distinct expression to one aspect of severance from evil, and all of them together give a perfect expression of the total severance of Christians from the world. It is not simply that

they are exhorted to abandon it: that will come; but at first the apostle orders his words in such a way as to express only the wonderful ideal or standard of perfect abandonment which living in God's temple imports. We can only glance at his "five words." They are so arranged as to lead up by several great contrasts to the perfect one between the temple and the world. This last is, as we have seen, the consummation of all contrasts: within the temple and without are terms which divide all things between them. "What agreement hath a temple of God with idols?" Following the five terms backward, the next is, "What part hath he that believeth with an infidel?" Here the apostle is not so much referring to the distinction between the present and final doom as to the all-important truth that faith in the gospel of Christ places its possessor in a new world of moral obligations. Between him and the unbeliever there is a great gulf which divides him at all points from fellowship of spirit with those who know not Christ. And it is not only that there is no actual or visible harmony; there is the very opposite; for "what concord hath Christ with Belial?" It was impossible for the apostle to express his thoughts more vigorously: it is as if he would make the Christian one with Christ, and Christ one with him, in the everlasting opposition to the god of this world, who is here marked out by his vilest name. The series of contrasts was commenced by two of a more abstract character: "What communion hath light with darkness?" and "What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness?" lay down

the standard of Christian excellence with reference rather to its final results. According to the one it is perfect right, as measured by the law of God; according to the other it is perfect purity as measured by the Divine nature, which is light.

But this last suggests the word which St. Paul selects and uses here to express both consecration to God in His temple and separation from the world without. That word is holiness, which always in man combines the two. St. Paul speaks first of "perfecting holiness in the fear of God;" and this we must first interpret in the light of the high standard which has been here set up. The word signifies the exterior state of the soul as conformed to the nature of that God who is in the light: it is not consecration, which is external and effected by the Spirit of sanctification, setting apart the soul for God, but interior purity as the habitual state of the regenerate spirit one with Him. It is the perfect moral restoration of the nature expressed in language appropriate to the temple. Had not the apostle been speaking of that particular relation of believers to their God he might have used other language, such as "perfecting righteousness," or "perfecting the imitation of the Son:" the former representing perfection as in the presence of the law, the other representing perfection as in the estate of sonship. The term "holiness" is the only one suitable to the temple; and expresses the entire inward conformity of the spirit with the holy nature of God Himself.

## II.

This wonderful passage, which sets perfection so impressively before us as a divine requirement, has another striking peculiarity : it glides insensibly from the will of God to the promise of God, and in such a way as to make it plain that nothing is demanded of us for which the covenant of grace does not make provision. Looking carefully at the text we see that the promise has two aspects. It might appear at first as if it were limited to one distinct promise that God will be a Father to us, and make us His sons and daughters, if we separate ourselves from the world and consecrate ourselves to Him. But a second glance will show that the apostle thinks of the very relation in which we stand to the God of the temple as itself involving a gracious promise. He might have said : " Seeing then that we occupy so high and holy a place in the divine temple and family, what manner of persons ought we to be in all holy conversation and godliness ! Let us be in earnest to cleanse ourselves from all defilement and perfect holiness in the fear of God." Instead of that he says, " Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved : " meaning that our high relation is an incentive to perfect holiness. That is to say : the temple makes provision for the holiness ; and the filial relation makes that holiness attractive and affectionate.

As to the former, it is most important to remember that every privilege, prerogative or dignity to which we are called in the Gospel, not only brings with it but is itself an express promise of provision for our



meeting its requirements. The ancient temple demanded holiness; whatever entered it must by that fact lose its commonness and be the Lord's in a sense in which it was not His outside. But we know that the whole system of worship provided for the rendering all things sacred that were found there. The sacrificial blood negatively removed the stain as imputed, and the altar positively consecrated to God whatsoever was laid upon it. If we apply this to the Christian temple we see that the promise is literally co-extensive with the requirement. If we are bidden to cleanse ourselves from all defilement of the flesh and spirit, that reminds us at once of the blood of Jesus, the Son of God, which cleanseth and is always cleansing the consciences of the worshippers, so that the Omniscient Eye discerns no spot on those whose faith is in the atoning High Priest. We are bidden to be as separate from the world and as entirely the Lord's as if anything outside not His did not exist. And that reminds us of the Spirit of holiness who entirely separates from the world what He brings into the temple and sanctifies all that He brings into the temple wholly to God.

It has been said that the sudden change in the language, from the phraseology of the temple to that of the household, tends to make the promise more affectionate and attractive. The appeal certainly makes a sudden descent from the awful obligation to the God of the temple to the tender obligation of children to a Father. But we must remember that we are now dealing only with the promise. It is not that the obligation itself is softened. It is hard to say which is its more impressive form: indeed we ought not

to distinguish, any more than St. Peter does when he says, "If ye call on the Father, who without respect of persons judgeth according to every man's work, pass the time of your sojourning here in fear;" and, speaking to us as to "obedient children," says again, "As He which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy." This apostle makes the temple obligation and the family obligation the same; and refers to the same "precious blood" as cleansing from violations of both. But, all this being true, the promise on which St. Paul lays so much stress seems in some undefinable but most real manner to bring home to our hearts the claims of holiness. It certainly does so, if we connect it with our Lord Jesus and His relations to us, both in the temple and in the family. In the temple He is the High Priest, makes intercession for us as our Righteous Advocate; and sends down to the skirts of His garments, that is, to the very humblest Christian, the unction of a perfect consecration. That is unutterably solemn; and has in it the promise of finished holiness. But we all must feel that the faultless holiness of the First-born of God and man, to Whom the promise of the text first referred, and in Whom we become the children of the Lord God Almighty, and Who is the supreme pattern of all human excellence, has in itself an attraction and a power and an argument beyond all others. It is into His image that we are to be changed from glory to glory; and there is no higher standard of excellence than to walk "as He walked in the world." When we regard ourselves as in the temple, the awful

sanctity of the place overwhelms us, until we think that the "unction from the Holy One," our High Priest, fills the courts and that we may receive it. When we think of this temple as our Father's house, and see at His table the Elder Brother, the Father's "One beloved son," who shows us in our own nature in which we were born what consummate holiness is without the sin with which we were born, our hearts are moved within us, and we put our hands into His that "virtue may come forth from Him" and heal us and make us holy.

But, whether the claims of God in the temple or the claims of the Father in the house are considered, it is most certain that the promises are co-extensive with the claims, and assure us on the part of the Spirit of Grace that we may "perfect holiness." That is evidently the motive and the meaning of the whole passage. "Having these promises," the apostle seems to say, "we may be bold to present ourselves before God in His holy temple without stain of defilement, unspotted from the world, and altogether as it becomes the worshippers of such a God in such a temple to appear." We cannot read the passage carefully without finding in it ample encouragement for the highest hopes of a finished holiness in the present life. The temple spoken of is not the eternal temple of the glorified church, but the temple of the church that now is. The word chosen to express the removal of all defilement is put into a tense that binds it to the present time: whatever the cleansing may be—whether the Spirit's application of the sacrificial blood or our own use of the means to put away sin itself—it is some-

thing that is to be done and effectually done in this world. It is literally, "let us have thoroughly cleansed ourselves." Once more, the defilement from which we are to be effectually cleansed is of "the flesh and spirit:" a description and division appropriate only to the present life. We all understand what the apostle means by the classification: the filthiness of the flesh, or the sin which makes the body its instrument; and the filthiness of the spirit, or the sin which is independent of the body. Both are alike vile before God, as seen in His temple; and from both a perfect deliverance is promised through Him who "was manifested to take away sin." Lastly, the phrase that closes all, "perfecting holiness," demands not only to interpret but also to be interpreted by the "promises." If all the pollution of sin is to be taken away negatively, then positively the design of the indwelling of God in His temple, which is to hallow it absolutely, may be said to be something that His people are always in process of accomplishing or "perfecting."

### III.

Were the subject left thus, we should miss much of the emphasis of this large word of the apostle, for which he demands so large an acceptance. The strength of the exhortation is the encouragement it affords to our own personal endeavours in the perfecting of holiness.

It might appear indeed as if the words were carefully chosen to impress upon our minds the absolute necessity of our co-operation with Divine

grace. There is something strange in the idea of our "cleansing" ourselves, and from "all" defilement, and "perfecting holiness." These are precisely the terms which belong to the Holy Ghost; and of which He in fact might be supposed to be jealous. It might have seemed more appropriate that the apostle should say: "Having these promises, let us abandon our sensual and spiritual lusts, and seek more and more of the grace of the sanctifying Spirit." That indeed is the real meaning of his words. The "promises" explain the apparent contradiction. What we do in the power of God is no other than the work of God within us, Who fulfils His own promises through our instrumentality; and what the power of God accomplishes through our energies exerted in faith is counted by Him our own act. If we cleanse ourselves, that is, if we make it our study to put away from our practice all carnal offence and strive against anything in the spirit that is contrary to the mind of Christ, God by the Holy Ghost will cleanse us. But not without our constant and most earnest co-operation. The "perfecting of holiness" regarded as our own act is still more striking: indeed it can hardly be understood at all save on the principle that St. Paul is assigning the Divine function to human agency in order to impress more deeply the importance of our own endeavours.

We have all along assumed without saying it that this perfection of holiness is an individual attainment. But it is necessary to be explicit on this matter, lest the thought should arise in some minds that the apostle is after all intent only on enforcing

the obligation of purity in the church as such and as separated from the society of this world. Undoubtedly that was in his mind, as the tenor of both the Corinthian epistles shows. But it will be obvious to every one that there can be no corporate holiness which is not the result of the communion of many individual saints. If it is said—and sometimes it has been said—that the figure of a temple in which God dwells is appropriate only to the body of believers, and that “perfecting holiness” describes the growing conformity of the church to the will of Christ, our reply must be that the figure is in these very epistles expressly assigned to the individual. Indeed, the injunction to cleanse ourselves “from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit” seems at once and of necessity to point to St. Paul’s question, “Know ye not that your body is a temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you?” If the spirit is the innermost shrine of the living God, the body is the outer court of the sanctuary in which God dwells. As no sensual lust must pollute the divine temple of the body, so no more refined passion must pollute the divine temple of the spirit. What a noble view of life does this give us!

And let us not fail to mark the tone of resolute and fervent confidence with which the apostle proposes to us the highest ambition. It is the language of a calm and resolute spirit who would infuse his own tranquil energy into all who hear him: the great confidence of one who feels no doubt that those who “have” the promises—there is much emphasis on the “have”—may attain to a spotless spirit in an undefiled body. Mark how his address

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here changes. Before it was "O ye Corinthians!" Now it is "dearly beloved." The thought of perfect holiness—the common object of hope to him and to them — has warmed and melted his heart. Brethren, we must strive to catch that enthusiasm. We must determine to be what we are called to be, "perfectly holy." Whatever we have to do or to renounce, whatever the cost may be, however often we have failed, even though most of life seems to have gone in fruitless striving, still we must make perfection our motto. We need not vex our minds by inquiring too solicitously what is the precise point of the perfection to be reached. Suffice for us that we are bidden to set our minds upon the attainment of a state in which the Omniscient God in His holy temple shall mark no remaining flaw in our spirit, no remaining stain of sensuality in our flesh. Now there is no nobler sentiment that can be encouraged in our hearts than the vehement, ardent, and passionate desire to be perfectly holy; saving indeed that calm, peaceful, confident reliance on the sufficiency of the Divine grace which expects it without vehemence or passion. In either case, however, the whole soul must be set upon perfect deliverance from stain and perfect likeness to God.

· There can be no doubt that the words of the apostle allow a certain distinction in this matter. The removal of defilement he certainly presents as a state to be attained and persisted in. There ought to be no question about that. Words could not have been used which more perfectly express the thought of a complete removal of all that might offend the eyes of Him who cannot behold sin with allowance.

Once more it must be repeated that this does not refer to the merciful blotting out of the guilt of our pollution : that of course is perfect, by the very theory of our presentation on the altar. The personal cleansing from all defilement of flesh and spirit which is accomplished by the Spirit, blessing our own endeavours, is what is here taught ; and that is represented to our hope as a cleansing from all filthiness. But with the perfecting of holiness it is otherwise. That is spoken of as always going on, a perfecting that knows no limit. It is a constant, continuous, fulfilment of all the claims of holiness. That necessarily knows no perfection so long as the offerer has his own soul, his own time, his own faculties, his own substance, to offer. He is always maintaining his separation from a sinful world, always confirming his consecration and enlarging the circle of its range : in both these senses, perfecting his holiness. Moreover, we are perfecting or accomplishing the design of our consecration to God so long as we are securing it against the touch of possible defilement. Hence the addition "in the fear of God," which denotes the spirit of profound and ever deepening awe. Assuredly it is not meant that the believer is to be oppressed with terror of the divine holiness : St. John would rise against this, whose "perfect love casteth out fear." But it must never be forgotten that the obligation of sanctity goes on until the end : it can never be said to be "perfected" until the consecration of spirit and soul and body is consummated on the final altar of death. Hence the precise force of the text is this : "Having been delivered from all defilement of flesh and spirit, you shall be made



every whit whole in the sight of God ; and, in that blessed consciousness, every day perfect your holiness as in His holy presence, until the end come and your holiness shall be no longer in the course of perfecting but perfected for ever." But that will be in the eternal temple.

We must not forget, in conclusion, that these last words "in the fear of God" were intended by the apostle to encourage many who, like most of us, were conscious of being far from a perfected holiness. In the very act of setting up this very high standard, St. Paul sends out a strong exhortation to those who were still too much infected, as we are, by the spirit of the world. There is something very impressive in the style of his quotation from the ancient scripture, applying it to his present readers as a promise to them, as if they were yet to begin the pursuit of perfect holiness. "Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing, and I will receive you ; and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and my daughters, saith the Lord Almighty." Surely that exhortation is adapted to an imperfect state ; and is full of encouragement to every one of us. Let us come out from the world this day and separate ourselves more fully than ever we have been separated from its defilements : let us enter the house of God where we shall find Him ready to receive us as a Father, and into the temple which is still the same house, where we shall find Him a sanctifying Spirit. And from this time let us fix our thought and hope on "perfecting holiness in the fear of God" : to Whom be glory for ever. Amen.

## THE PERFECT EXEMPLAR.

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“And ye know that He was manifested to take away our sins ; and in Him is no sin.”

**H**ERE at the close of the New Testament the Spirit of revelation who is the Spirit of Jesus gives us the secret of Christian perfection: not so much in His description of perfected love, and of the new birth that cannot sin, as in the perfect Image of the sinless Saviour, who shows us what sinlessness is in that very nature of ours which He made His own, and says to us : “ Be as I am, for I am as ye are.” At the very end of the volume of the book, now unrolled to its last line, there rises before us the Form of One like a son of man who is the Son of God, with His two attributes of purity and righteousness. This is the last vision on which our eye is suffered to rest, more glorious and precious to us than the apocalyptic visions which had gone before. While we are beholding it and gazing up into the heaven where that image of human perfection now is, we hear the voice not of two angels but of the apostle John, one of ourselves, saying : “ in Him is no sin ! ” “ He was manifested to take away our sins ! ” And what his silent meaning is we soon hear : “ As He is so are we in this world.” It is the most ennobling, the most inspiring thought that can enter