

The Three Levels of Perfection in the Christian Experience

Character Perfection—Now or in the future?

1. There are statements by Ellen White which, when taken at face value, seem to suggest that the perfection of the character is something that is attainable TODAY, if we do the right things—

- Perfection of character is attained through **exercise of the faculties of the mind, in times of supreme test, by obedience to every requirement of God's law**. Men in positions of trust are to be instrumentalities in the hands of God for promoting His glory; and **in performing their duties with the utmost faithfulness** they may attain perfection of character.— Manuscript 85, 1906. **MM 168**
- He teaches them that the perfection of character He requires can only be attained by **becoming familiar with His Word**. The psalmist declares, “The entrance of thy word giveth light; it giveth understanding to the simple” **3BC 1143**
- The completeness of Christian character is attained **when the impulse to help and bless others springs constantly from within**—when the sunshine of heaven fills the heart and is revealed in the countenance. **COL 384**
- Before the believer is held out the wonderful possibility of being like Christ, obedient to all the principles of the law. . . Man's obedience can be made perfect only by the incense of Christ's righteousness, which fills with divine fragrance every act of obedience. The part of the Christian is **to persevere in overcoming every fault**. Constantly he is to pray to the Saviour to heal the disorders of his sin-sick soul. He has not the wisdom or the strength to overcome; these belong to the Lord, and He bestows them on those who in humiliation and contrition seek Him for help. **AA 532**

2. Hence, it would seem that perfection of the character can be obtained NOW simply by
 - a. “exercising the faculties of the mind, and in times of supreme test by obeying every requirement of God’s Law”
 - b. “performance of duties with the utmost faithfulness”
 - c. “becoming familiar with His word”
 - d. “when the impulse to help and bless others springs constantly from within”
 - e. “persevering in overcoming every fault”
 - f. **Matt 19:21**—Jesus also told the young ruler, that if wishes to be perfect, all he needed to do was to sell his goods give to the poor and follow him.
3. But then there are also statements that suggest the perfection of the character is a future event:
 - a. “in the near future”, “during the “closing scenes of the great day of atonement”

- b. "As the people of God afflict their souls and plead for purity of heart, the command is given, 'Take away their filthy garments, and give them a change of raiment. . .'"
 - c. "The spotless robe of Christ's righteousness is placed upon the tried, tempted, faithful children of God"
 - d. "They are nevermore to be defiled by the corruptions of the world. . ."
 - e. "They are eternally secure from the tempter's devices. . ."
 - f. "Their sins are transferred to the originator of sin (blotting out of sins from the books of record")
4. **If perfection can be attained now by just focusing on the behavior and making the right changes, then what Jesus is trying to accomplish for His followers in the second apartment of the heavenly sanctuary doesn't really matter**
- a. **Jesus' closing ministration in the heavenly sanctuary need not be studied**
 - b. **the repeated calls in the bible and in the Spirit of Prophecy to follow Jesus by faith in His final ministration in the heavenly sanctuary are unnecessary (GC 430, 5T 575, Mar 248)**
 - c. **the call to "afflict the soul" on the Day of Atonement loses its appeal and meaning**
5. **if we teach that perfection is not attained now but in the future, are we not delaying the preparation that we need to be doing now for the final events of earth's history?**
6. **The questions we need to ask ourselves therefore are:**
- a. Is character perfection for the living attainable now or is it something to be obtained "in the near future. . .?" During the "closing scenes of the great day of atonement?"
 - b. Are the statements saying that character perfection is obtained at a future time less inspired than those that say perfection is attainable now?
 - c. Do we find ways to reconcile the set of statements that seem to suggest that we can be perfect in character now with the statements that places it in the future, or do we simply ignore one set of statements in favor of the other?
 - d. "in the near future", "during the "closing scenes of the great day of atonement" during which time "men will be required to render obedience to human edicts in violation of the divine law" (PK 587)
 - e. "As the people of God afflict their souls and plead for purity of heart, the command is given, 'Take away their filthy garments, and give them a change of raiment. . .'"
 - f. "The spotless robe of Christ's righteousness is placed upon the tried, tempted, faithful children of God" (PK 591)

Character Perfection & Sanctification

- 7. The main reason for the apparent confusion over the matter of how and when character perfection is achieved is Ellen White's use of terminology
- 8. She often uses the terms "character perfection" and "Christian perfection" to describe the Christian experience known biblically as—**sanctification**

- "Ample provision has been made that the people of God may attain **perfection of character**. The apostle says, "This is the will of God, even your **sanctification**." Let every

individual draw for himself from the inexhaustible source of all moral and intellectual power, in order that he may work the works of righteousness.” **RH November 30, 1897**

- “. . .while we are to seek earnestly for **perfection of character**, we must remember that **sanctification** is not the work of a moment, but of a lifetime. Said Paul, “I die daily” (1 Corinthians 15:31). Day by day the work of overcoming must go forward. Every day we are to resist temptation, and gain the victory over selfishness in all its forms.” **YRP 353**
- “One brother said that when he listened to the sermon impressing upon them the necessity of purity and **perfection of character**, he felt that he could not be saved; that his case was hopeless. But when it was stated that **sanctification** was not the work of a moment, but of a lifetime, he was encouraged, and determined that day by day he would pray and watch, and search the Scriptures; he would be an overcomer, gaining an experience daily, until he should become strong, and be able to be a blessing to others.” **HS 183**
- Let the church become united in Christ Jesus in working for purity and **perfection of character**. There needs to be a practical daily **sanctification** of the spirit. Before one is prepared for Christ's coming there must be seen in the life the fruits of the Spirit. **RH September 12, 1907**
- “The apostle presents before the believers the ladder of **Christian** perfection, every step of which represents continual advancement in the knowledge of God, and in the climbing of which there is to be no standstill. . . We are saved by climbing round after round, mounting step after step, to the height of Christ's ideal for us. Thus he is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and **sanctification**, and redemption.” **RH September 19, 1912**

9. Ellen White uses character perfection and sanctification interchangeably in many places to show that they are referring to the same Christian experience

| Sanctification | Christian Perfection |
|---|--|
| <p>“The Word of God is our sanctification and righteousness, because it is spiritual food. To study it is to eat the leaves of the tree of life.—Letter 17, 1902. Ev 138.4</p> | <p>“He teaches them that the perfection of character He requires can only be attained by becoming familiar with His Word. The psalmist declares, ‘The entrance of thy word giveth light; it giveth understanding to the simple’” 3BC 1143</p> |
| <p>True sanctification means perfect love, perfect obedience, perfect conformity to the will of God. We are to be sanctified to God through obedience to the truth. AA 565</p> | <p>Obedience through Jesus Christ gives to man perfection of character and a right to that tree of life. 1BC 1088.</p> |

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|---|---|
| <p>“Sanctification is the result of lifelong obedience.” AA 560</p> | <p>Perfection of character is a lifelong work, unattainable by those who are not willing to strive for it in God's appointed way, by slow and toilsome steps. 5T 500</p> |
| <p>“If he makes it his aim to be of that number who shall be presented faultless before the throne of God, he will be continually advancing. The only way to remain steadfast is to progress daily in divine life. Faith will increase if, when brought in conflict with doubts and obstacles, it overcomes them. True sanctification is progressive. YI September 1, 1886</p> | <p>“We need constantly a fresh revelation of Christ, a daily experience that harmonizes with His teachings. High and holy attainments are within our reach. Continual progress in knowledge and virtue is God's purpose for us. . . Every day we may advance in perfection of Christian character. GW 274</p> |
| <p>“Enoch kept the Lord ever before him, and the Inspired Word says that he ‘walked with God.’ He made Christ his constant companion. He was in the world, and performed his duties to the world; but he was ever under the influence of Jesus. He <u>reflected Christ's character</u>, exhibiting the same qualities in goodness, mercy, tender compassion, sympathy, forbearance, meekness, humility, and love. His association with Christ day by day <u>transformed him into the image of Him</u> with whom he was so intimately connected. Day by day he was growing away from his own way into Christ's way, the heavenly, the divine, in his thoughts and feelings.... His was a <u>constant growth</u> and he had <u>fellowship with the Father and the Son</u>. This is genuine sanctification. HP 337</p> | <p>“...notwithstanding the corruption of that degenerate age, Enoch perfected a Christian character. CTr 52</p> <p>“Enoch and Elijah are the correct representatives of what the race might be through faith in Jesus Christ if they chose to be. Satan was greatly disturbed because these noble, holy men stood untainted amid the moral pollution surrounding them, perfected righteous characters, and were accounted worthy for translation to heaven.” 3SM 146</p> |

10. **What is sanctification?** It is the lifelong process of being transformed in character daily through the advancing knowledge of God and through obedience to His Word
11. It is a level of character development that all genuine believers should strive to have now, not in the future!
12. Daniel was an inspired illustration of “true sanctification”

Daniel was a devoted servant of the Most High. His long life was filled up with noble deeds of service for his Master. His purity of character and unwavering fidelity are equaled only by his

humility of heart and his contrition before God. We repeat, The life of Daniel is an inspired illustration of true **sanctification**. SL 52

13. **VERY IMPORTANT:** Christian perfection a.k.a. sanctification, a.k.a. “character “perfection must not be confused with “**SINLESS PERFECTION**”
14. The bible characters described as living sanctified Christian characters, were not **sinlessly perfect!**
 - a. Enoch’s weakness and imperfection

“Enoch was a man of strong and highly cultivated mind and extensive knowledge; he was honored with special revelations from God; yet being in constant communion with Heaven, with a sense of the divine greatness and perfection ever before him, he was one of the humblest of men. The closer the connection with God, the deeper was the sense of **his own weakness and imperfection**. PP 85

- b. Daniel’s weakness and imperfection

“When the prophet Daniel beheld the glory surrounding the heavenly messenger that was sent unto him, he was overwhelmed with a sense of **his own weakness and imperfection**. Describing the effect of the wonderful scene, he says, “‘There remained no strength in me: for my comeliness was turned in me into corruption, and I retained no strength.’ Daniel 10:8.” SC 29

15. Other Bible characters who are said to be **perfect** but were not **sinlessly perfect**
 - a. Job accounted perfect, but repented of sin (**Job 1:6, Job 42:6**)
 - b. Noah was perfect in all his generations but sinned (**Gen 6:9; Gen 9:21**)
 - c. King Asa perfect in all his days but sinned (**2 Chron 15:17; 2 Chron 16:1-11**)
 - d. Paul was not perfect in Christ but not sinlessly perfect (**Phil 3:12-15**)
16. In 1911, Ellen White made a remarkable statement admitting that she too, was still imperfect; in 4 years she would be dead.

“True sanctification means perfect love, perfect obedience, perfect conformity to the will of God. We are to be sanctified to God through obedience to the truth. Our conscience must be purged from dead works to serve the living God. **We are not yet perfect**; but it is our privilege to cut away from the entanglements of self and sin, and advance to perfection. Great possibilities, high and holy attainments, are placed within the reach of all.” AA 565

17. All of these considerations lead to just one conclusion:
18. God’s people who are alive in time of the end (a.k.a. the final generation) may living sanctified lives and accounted perfect (in Christ), but in reality, they remain imperfect and defective up until the “closing scenes of the great day of atonement”
19. Proof of that is found in the following:

Zechariah's vision of Joshua and the Angel applies with peculiar force to the experience of God's people in **the closing scenes of the great day of atonement**. The remnant church will then be brought into great trial and distress. Those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus will feel the ire of the dragon and his hosts. . .As he influenced the heathen nations to destroy Israel, so **in the near future** he will stir up the wicked powers of earth to destroy the people of God. **Men will be required to render obedience to human edicts in violation of the divine law.** PK 587

Those who are true to God will be menaced, denounced, proscribed. They will be “betrayed both by parents, and brethren, and kinsfolks, and friends,” even unto death. Luke 21:16. Their only hope is in the mercy of God; their only defense will be prayer. **PK 588**

The tempter stands by to accuse them, as he stood by to resist Joshua. **He points to their filthy garments, their defective characters.** He presents their weakness and folly, their sins of ingratitude, their unlikeness to Christ, which has dishonored their Redeemer. **PK 588**

As the people of God afflict their souls before Him, pleading for purity of heart, the command is given, “Take away the filthy garments,” and the encouraging words are spoken, “Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment.” Zechariah 3:4. The spotless robe of Christ's righteousness is placed upon the tried, tempted, faithful children of God. The despised remnant are clothed in glorious apparel, nevermore to be defiled by the corruptions of the world. . . Now they are eternally secure from the tempter's devices. Their sins are transferred to the originator of sin. A “fair miter” is set upon their heads. **PK 591**

- a. Satan “points to their filthy garments, their defective characters”— this shows that they are still defective even during the closing scenes of the great day of atonement
- b. They are “pleading for purity of heart”—this also shows that their hearts or characters are not pure up until the very time Jesus gives the command “take away their filthy garments . . .”

Conclusion

20. Mark 4:28—at every level of development, perfection is involved

The germination of the seed represents the beginning of spiritual life, and the development of the plant is a beautiful figure of Christian growth. As in nature, so in grace; there can be no life without growth. The plant must either grow or die. **As its growth is silent and imperceptible, but continuous, so is the development of the Christian life. At every stage of development our life may be perfect;** yet if God's purpose for us is fulfilled, there will be continual advancement. **COL 65**

21. **VERY IMPORTANT:** Character perfection (or sanctification) is to be attained now, but sinless perfection is reserved for the final atonement!

22. **SINLESS PERFECTION** is not attainable now! It is not attained for the living until Jesus makes His final atonement during “the closing scenes of the great day of atonement”
23. **SINLESS PERFECTION** means absolutely no more spots and wrinkles and defects of character, not even the memory of sin is gone! It is permanent perfection (PK 591)

| Christian (Character) Perfection | Sinless Perfection |
|---|---|
| <p>Enoch’s character (HP 337)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “under the influence of Jesus” • “reflected Christ's character” • “exhibiting the same qualities in goodness, mercy, tender compassion, sympathy, forbearance, meekness, humility, and love” • “transformed him into the image of Him with whom he was so intimately connected” • “growing away from his own way into Christ's way” • “the divine, in his thoughts and feelings” • “constant growth” • “fellowship with the Father and the Son” • Weaknesses and imperfection” <p>Daniel’s character (SC 29)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “noble deeds of service for his Master” • “purity of character” • “unwavering fidelity” • “humility of heart and his <u>contrition</u> before God” • “Weakness and imperfection” | <p>The Final generation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “nevermore to be defiled by the corruptions of the world” • “eternally secure from the tempter’s devices” • “sins transferred to the originator of sin” (blotted out) • “When the decree goes forth and the stamp is impressed, their characters will remain spotless for all eternity” (ST 216) • “As the members of Christ's body approach the period of their final conflict they will grow up into him, and will possess symmetrical characters.” ST November 27, 1879, par. 10” • The 144,000, faultless before the throne of God, no guile found in their mouths |

24. This is where we draw the line between the level of perfection of character we can attain now, and the level of character development we will obtain during the final atonement

Conclusion

25. Three states of perfection we can attain by God’s grace
- a. **Christian perfection** or **character perfection** or sanctification—
 - i. our privilege to obtain now by persevering to overcome every fault
 - ii. should not be put off to a future time
 - iii. the preparation needed for the final atonement
 - iv. not a permanent change
 - b. **Sinless** perfection—
 - i. absolutely no more character flaws and

- ii. will no longer cherish nor yield to any sinful desires
 - iii. will not remember any particular sin (3SG 135; GC 620; Jer 50:20)
 - iv. the 144,000 obtain this experience (Rev 14:5)
 - v. permanent
- c. **Nature perfection**—hereditary nature changed in the twinkling of an eye at the second coming of Jesus
- i. No more unholy, sinful desires and urges from fallen flesh
 - ii. Waits until the second coming of Jesus