

Hebrews 6:1-12

Going On Unto Perfection

Let us go on unto perfection... v. 1

Perfection can be thought of in scripture in three different ways. There is positional perfection which is something that need not and indeed cannot be improved upon. By virtue of our union to Christ we are perfect based on the perfect merit of Christ's life and death. His righteousness is ours and His righteousness cannot be improved upon – it's a perfect righteousness. We've seen already from 5:9 that Christ became perfect – i.e. He became a perfect Savior by virtue of the obedience of His life and death and is therefore the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey Him.

Then there is what we may call relative perfection. This kind of perfection refers to our spiritual progress. We grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ. We gain spiritual maturity as our understanding increases and as our experience of Christ becomes fuller and richer. This kind of perfection is never fully attained in our life-times but it is something that a believer constantly strives for. Paul makes reference to this relative perfection in Phil. 3:12 where he writes *Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.*

And then there's ultimate perfection which will be realized at the resurrection of the dead when we'll be, according to our shorter catechism, openly acknowledged and acquitted before God's judgment bar and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God forever. Only in glory will our experience rise to meet our position of perfection. We'll be forever free not only from the guilt and defilement of sin but from the very presence of sin as well.

The first kind of perfection, our positional perfection is something that we reckon upon by faith. The last kind of perfection, ultimate perfection, is something that we groan for within and anticipate by faith when redemption is consummated. It is this aspect of faith that is referred to as our hope. It's this relative perfection that is in view in our text and this is what concerns us during the days of our earthly pilgrimage.

We learned in our last study that the Hebrew Christians were lacking in their strivings toward this relative perfection. Not only were they not making progress in their spiritual lives but they had digressed to the point that they needed to be reprov'd. So we read in 5:12 *For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which [be] the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat.*

Paul is not content, however, to simply reprove the Hebrew Christians. Following his own prescription to Timothy to reprove, rebuke, and exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine (2Tim. 4:2), beginning now in Heb. 6 Paul exhorts the Hebrew Christians. Look at v. 1 *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.

There's a practical lesson to be learned from Paul's method here. This lesson can be applied to preachers or teachers or parents who teach their children. And the lesson is simply this – it's not enough to reprove or rebuke. It's not enough to discipline children only in terms of what they can't do. They must be instructed and encouraged to do what they can and should do.

I've never forgotten the way this was illustrated by one of my professors when I was a student. In a classroom setting he pointed out that it would be impossible to remove all the air from the room by trying to suck all the air out of the room. Eventually the walls would collapse if such a thing were tried. On the other hand, the air could be removed from the room if, instead of trying to suck all the air out of the room, you instead filled the room with water. I think it's a fitting illustration for preachers and teachers and parents. I'm afraid all too often the focus is only on what a child can't do. And if that becomes the only mode of discipline then inevitably at some point there will be an internal collapse of sorts within the child's soul.

In chp. 6, then, Paul is beginning to fill the room with water, as it were. We find the positive exhortation in v. 1 to *go on unto perfection*. This is not to say that the chapter is entirely positive. A very solemn warning is sounded by Paul beginning in v. 4 – a warning that has been the occasion of confusion among Christians down through the ages. Look at the warning given in 6:4-6 *For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.*

This exhortation to go on unto perfection, then, is not merely good advice given by Paul. The warning that accompanies the exhortation serves to magnify the importance of overcoming spiritual infancy and growing up spiritually. And so I would like to focus on this exhortation today. Simply put:

We Must Go On Unto Perfection

And in the remaining moments I would like to present to you a few thoughts on how this is done. How, then, do we go on unto perfection? Consider with me first of all that if we would go on unto perfection:

I. We Must Strive from the Right Foundation

This is the foundation that Paul mentions in vv. 1,2. It is this foundation that must not be laid again but in the case of the Hebrew Christians needed to be reinforced or set down again. Look at vv. 1,2: *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, Of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. We should note in v. 1 that when Paul says *leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ etc.* he's not suggesting that we depart from these principles but only that we build off these principles. 1Co 3:11 *For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.*

When our sanctification is viewed from any other perspective than from the gospel of Christ, then we shift off the foundation completely. We build on the sand instead of build on solid rock and as Paul goes on to say in 1Cor. 3 the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. And that which is built on the right foundation goes up in smoke, as it were. There are those you could say that escape hell by the skin of their teeth being saved so as by fire if he's saved at all. And I add the phrase *if he's saved at all* based on what we read here in Heb. 6.

We must, then, make sure that we're on the right foundation. In his commentary on Hebrews William Gouge refers to the 6 principles that are contained in vv. 1,2. He calls these 2 verses the catechism of the apostolic church. Let me give you his listing and the brief comments he provides on each of these 6 principles.

1. Repentance from dead works: which manifests the natural man's misery. We are studying this doctrine in our Confession of faith and it's worth mentioning here that repentance from sin or repentance unto life as it's called in Acts 11:18 is one of the fundamentals of the faith. Salvation cannot be viewed apart from it. Indeed the question would naturally arise – salvation from what? – if we disregard the doctrine of repentance.
2. Faith towards God: which declares the way of freeing man from misery, and bringing him to happiness. And I'm sure that Gouge would view this point as being inclusive of the first thing mentioned in these verses which is the doctrine of Christ.
3. The doctrine of baptisms: which points at the outward means of working faith and repentance, and of revealing and sealing up unto us God's mercy, which are the word, and sacraments. It's interesting to note here the plural use of the term *baptisms*. There are a number of reasons suggested as to why the term would be used in the plural. The one that makes the most sense to me is the explanation that the term refers to the several set times when baptisms were administered. Gouge suggests that the plural use of the term also functions as a literary device which means that the term is used to include all the sacraments or all the means of grace – baptism and the Lord's supper as well as the word of God and prayer.
4. Laying on of hands – which hints at the order and discipline of the church. Of all the principles here listed this is the one that is probably the most under attack today. The church is despised and neglected and treated as something that is unnecessary or at best optional. It's sad, I suppose, that the decline and compromises of so many churches has contributed to this sorry state but that's no excuse for Christians to throw out the baby with the bath water, as it were. The church when functioning as it

should be something that is essential to the Christian's life and the Christian's family. Ironically, the church is often viewed by many today as a competing interest with the family when it ought to be viewed as something that is indispensable for the family.

5. The resurrection from the dead which refers to our bodily resurrection. *If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable* Paul writes in 1Cor. 15:19. Our religion certainly equips us for living our lives in this sin-cursed world but any religion that can't take you beyond this world is a religion that in the end certainly leaves you in misery.
6. And eternal judgment which leads to everlasting life or everlasting death.

These 6 principles, then, according to Gouge appear as stones in a singular foundation – repentance, faith, the sacraments, the church, the resurrection and eternal judgment. Underlying all these things is the phrase I referenced in our last study which encompasses them all which is the doctrine of Christ. We repent in order to turn to Him. We believe in Him. We identify with Him in baptism. We remember Him in the Lord's supper. The church is where we present ourselves to Him. In the resurrection we'll be perfectly conformed to Him and He is the One who sits on the throne of judgment before whom every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

These are the basics or the fundamentals, if you will, of the faith. And we don't leave these basics but we build on them. Our lives are effected and transformed by them. And this foundation must be so firmly planted in our minds and hearts that we should never have to lay such a foundation again.

If the foundations be destroyed the psalmist asks in Psalm 11:3 *what can the righteous do?* There is no salvation apart from the right foundation. There is no growth in grace apart from the right foundation. There is no experience of the joy and peace and strength of salvation apart from the right foundation. It's no wonder that the devil aims his attacks at the foundation of the Christian's faith. For if he can lure us away or distort these basics that contribute to the foundation then he can rob the Christian of all that should be his. And if the Christian aligns himself with the devil to contribute to the destruction of the foundation then that Christian has certainly apostatized from the faith and the description of vv. 4-6 apply to him.

May we have these matters firmly established then in our minds and in our hearts. We cannot begin to go on unto perfection apart from the right foundation. May we have such a handle on them that it will never need to be said of us that we need to be re-taught these basics. And may we as parents make sure that we labor to establish our children in this catechism of the basics, as it were.

The first thing that is required, then, for going on to perfection is to make sure the foundation is laid. Would you consider next that if we are to go on perfection:

II. We Must Know What We're Aiming For

Our text says that we're to go on unto perfection. Our aim, then, is perfection. I elaborated in my introduction the different uses of the concept of perfection. There's positional perfection, there's relative perfection, and there's ultimate perfection. There is no point in our seeking to advance in positional perfection for something that is already perfect cannot be improved. When it comes to advancing in relative perfection, however, it becomes necessary that we view advancing from the vantage point of cultivating stronger faith in our position in Christ. There is, to be sure, a challenge to our faith in this regard. There is a need to take our stand here and to withstand the attacks of the devil.

How can we reckon ourselves to be perfect when we know in our experience that we're not perfect? We know ourselves to be sinful. We know that even as Christians we don't yet measure up to the standards of God's law and we still transgress that law many times.

It is at this point in particular that we are called upon for gospel obedience. You remember the text in 5:9 referring to Christ *And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him.* The obedience He rendered was perfect and our obedience manifests itself in our affirming His perfection and not our own. We serve a perfect Savior who lived and died in perfect conformity to the precepts and penalty of God's law. Our obedience calls for us to believe in His perfection and then to believe that we are joined to Him. You could say, therefore, that our aim in striving for perfection is Christ Himself and not just as our example but as our Covenant Head and substitute.

Our going on unto perfection, therefore, is something that springs from the foundation of our position in Christ. As Paul puts it in Rom. 6:11 *Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.* You begin to see, I hope, that going on unto perfection presupposes the foundation. But going on unto perfection does not include having to reset the foundation. *Let us go on unto perfection* our text reads *not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God etc.*

Paul is treating the matter of advancing in perfection negatively first. He's instructing us, how not to do it in other words. If you keep having to reset the foundation then you're failing to make progress toward perfection. If you are reckoning upon the foundational truths of the gospel then you ought to be gaining the motivation to go on unto perfection. And in aiming for our relative perfection we discover in the New Testament that we aim for a number of things. I mentioned these a couple of weeks ago when we met around the Lord's table. Let me mention them again and add to the list a couple of things.

Going on unto perfection means that we aim to be complete and perfect in all the will of God. Col 4:12 *Epaphras, who is [one] of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.* We certainly learn from this verse not only what we're aiming for but we also learn how we contribute to each other reaching our aim. Here is a good way for us all as Christians to pray for each other – *that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.* And I think all the will of God encompasses His revealed will as well as His personal

will for our lives. We need to know and follow His will in regard to our service to Him. So that I labor as a preacher, or an engineer, or a landscaper, or a truck driver, or a housewife because I know that it's His will for me so to do. Let's go on unto perfection, then, in knowing and doing the will of God.

Going on unto perfection also means that we aim to be perfect in love. This was our theme around the Lord's table a couple of weeks ago. 1Jo 4:12 *No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us.* 1Jo 4:17 *Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world.*

Going on unto perfection, then, means knowing His love perfected in us. The pursuit of perfection encompasses knowing in increasing measure the breadth and length and depth and height of the love of Christ. This in turn encompasses being filled with all the fullness of God. I think one could argue that even when we attain ultimate perfection there will still be room to be ever increasing in our apprehension of the love of Christ. May we make great strides forward in our apprehension of His love even now.

We also aim for perfection with regard to our holiness. 2Co 7:1 *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.* This verse demonstrates to us the connection between advancing to perfection and the foundation for perfection. We're to perfect holiness *in the fear of God*. It is as we learn to reverence God and Christ that we go on unto perfection in holiness. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom – that's foundational. That's why I say that we find the connection here between our advancement and the foundation of our faith.

James tells us in his epistle in 1:4 that we're to *let patience have [her] perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.* And in the previous verse James tells us that it is the trying of your faith that worketh patience. This is perhaps one of the most difficult areas that we're called upon to go on unto perfection.

And this too must spring from the foundation of Christ. There is a purpose in grace behind my trials. I'm on the path to conformity to Christ's sufferings as well as the path to fellowship with Him in sufferings through my trials. What am I enduring that He hasn't endured? Your sufferings through your identification with Him become a badge of honor for you before Him. The Apostles certainly viewed their trials this way. And so we read in Ac 5:41 *And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.*

When we see, then, a purpose of grace in our trials and we know that our trials spring from a loving heavenly Father then we'll be enabled to heed the exhortation of James when he says in James 1:2 *My brethren, count it all joy when ye fail into divers temptations (trials); Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.*

So we're to aim for perfection with regard to being perfect and complete in all the will of God. We're to aim for perfection in love as Christ's love is perfected in us through our increasing apprehension of His love for us. We're to aim for perfection in holiness – perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord. And we're to aim for perfection in our patience – letting patience have her perfect work, that we may be perfect and entire.

There is yet one more area in which we must go on unto perfection. Near the end of this epistle to the Hebrews we read a benediction in 13:20,21 *Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

Perfection in every good work – that's the aim now. And the danger we must guard ourselves against is the danger of thinking that there's intrinsic merit to our works. When we fall prey to that notion then we've shifted off the foundation again. Earlier in Heb 13 Paul writes in v. 10 *We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle.*

I believe the altar we have is the altar of Christ Himself. And the way this ties into our perfection in good works is that we offer our works on the altar of Christ. In other words I plead His merit over every endeavor that I do for Him and then I strive to do the best I can do for Him. And our works attain perfection when they are offered on the altar of Christ and they should in a relative sense increase in their quality because of my confidence in them being graciously accepted by God on account of Christ.

And so we see the way that we're to go on unto perfection. The foundation must be solidly laid in such a fashion that we don't need to constantly reset it. May the doctrine of Christ be so firmly embedded in our hearts that we learn how to think and speak and act from the perspective of who Christ is and what He's done for us. And may we from that foundation go on unto perfection in God's will, and in His love, and in holiness and patience and every good work striving to live in the power of thanksgiving especially to the One who *by one offering hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified* (10:14).