

If You Want To Be Perfect, Start Now

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"How many of you believe that you are perfect?" the instructor asked a class in the New Testament survey at a Bible college on the West Coast.

Without hesitation two students raised their hands. They shouldn't have. Immediately the class erupted, pouring a cascade of scorn on the heads of the two "holy ones." The razzing continued the remainder of the class period and beyond. The beleaguered defendants had little chance to defend themselves.

Things like that happen when terms are used which mean different things to different people.

"Perfect" is a good example. Just what does it mean to be perfect? Does it mean freedom from any possibility of mistake or error in judgment? Does it imply the impossibility of sinning? Or does it denote present moral integrity?

Perhaps "perfection" has more than one meaning.

Of course, there must be one kind of perfection which is absolute--no mistake, no deficiency, no fault. It must imply full knowledge of the potential results of every possible course of action, and continuous adherence to the course that is best.

I am sure that the black student from Brooklyn did not have this in mind when he raised his hand in class. Neither did I (I was the other one). Only God can possess this kind of perfection. And He does. Psalm 18:30 says, "As for God, his way is perfect."

There also is a kind of perfection which indicates maturity or full growth (we didn't mean that, either).

Another perfection is what believers have in God's sight through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ.

And very important is perfection of heart--honesty before God, purity of motive, sincerity, singleness of will. This is the result of repentance. It is a necessary condition of saving faith.

Let's look at these perspectives of perfection, starting with the last one.

A Christian can make a lot of mistakes in ignorance and still have a perfect heart. He (or she) might blunder where he doesn't know better. But where he has the light, there he walks. He loves God with all his heart, mind and soul, and his neighbor as himself. Thus he is consciously fulfilling all God requires. It's really all he can do. He is aware of an abiding choice to obey totally and without hesitation. His heart is in tune with God and at rest in Christ.

If his conscience becomes clouded by disobedience, he feels it deeply. With a contrite heart he confesses his sin to his Advocate, Jesus Christ. By faith his fellowship is restored. Psalm 37:37 speaks of him when it says, "Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright; for the end of that man is peace."

Anyone who professes Christianity without this kind of perfection is as phony as the proverbial three dollar bill. Every true believer must have a perfect heart.

The Bible says a lot about this essential perfection. It says that Noah was perfect in his generations (Genesis 6:9). So was Job (Job 1:1, 1:8; 2:3). And king Asa (1 Kings 15:14). And king Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:3).

So was Doretta. Doretta was as determined to follow Christ as any teenage convert I had ever seen. And just as full of mistakes. But Doretta was walking in all the light she had. She had a perfect heart. That is why she matured spiritually. As light increased, so did her Christian growth.

God made his requirement very clear to Abraham: "...walk before me, and be thou perfect" (Genesis 17:1). Moses emphasized it to a new generation of Israelites in Deuteronomy 18:13: "Thou shalt be perfect with the Lord thy God." Jesus told us plainly: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."

These are the kind of people God is looking for to bless. 2 Chronicles 16:9 says so: "For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him."

King David made a definite commitment along this line. We read it in Psalm 101:2: "I will behave myself wisely in a perfect way I will walk within my house with a perfect heart." David knew what was essential in religion. So he was determined to be *real* in his relationship to God. No hypocrisy. No insincerity.

David wanted the same spiritual honesty in the people whom he ruled. That is why the offering for the building of the temple made him happy. We read about it in 1 Chronicles 29:9: "...with perfect heart they offered willingly to the Lord; and David the king also rejoiced with great joy." Joy in the offertory is a good sign of genuine religion.

And David was concerned about his son Solomon, concerned enough to tell him straight-from-the-shoulder: "...know thou the God of thy father, and serve him with a perfect heart" (1 Chronicles 28:9), concerned enough to pray: "And give unto Solomon my son a perfect heart" (29:19).

So when Solomon failed, he had no excuse. He knew better, because as a young king he had urged his nation: "Let your heart therefore be perfect with the Lord our God" (1 Kings 8:61). Now, in 1 Kings 11:4, we read this sad report: "... when Solomon was old...his wives turned away his heart after other gods."

Others, too, failed the basic requirement. We read of Abijah (1 Kings 15:3), and Amaziah (2 Chronicles 25:2), the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:21), and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:2-10).

On the story goes. Right through the Scriptures and down to modern times, the record of human morality is written. Each day adds a new chapter--in the church, in government, in commerce, in the home, in daily life. The record is saying something very clearly. It is telling us that one basic issue is dividing mankind into two main categories: those whose hearts are right, and those whose hearts are not right.

That basic issue is this: *Who shall reign supreme on the throne of your heart--Christ or self?*

A heart surrendered to Jesus Christ is a perfect heart. It is honest before God. It loves simply and sincerely, thus perfectly. As John says in the New Testament, "If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us. 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. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear, because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love" (1 John 4:12,17,18).

Only those with a perfect heart are ready to hear and understand true wisdom. Paul said, "Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect...the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 2:6,7).

A perfect heart is a clean heart. That is what God accomplished for us at the cross. In Hebrews 7:19 we read: "For the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did." And listen to this tremendous statement in Hebrews 10:14: "For by one offering he hath perfected forever them that are sanctified."

Mrs. Carlson was one of the best people in our church. She was faithful. She was godly. But one Sunday morning at the close of my message I felt deeply impressed that she had some real doubts about her salvation.

Certainly not Mrs. Carlson, I argued with myself.

Anyhow, at my first opportunity I went back and sat down beside her. When I approached her about the subject, she very quickly acknowledged that she was lacking real assurance, a lack that greatly hindered her Christian joy and effectiveness. Immediately I took her to such great Bible passages as John 5:24 and Romans 5:1. Without hesitation she seized upon these promises and experienced real assurance and joy. From that day she was a changed person.

So we do not need Jesus *plus* something else for salvation. He made the perfect sacrifice. It is all we need. With a pure heart the believer stands perfect before God in Christ by faith. "And ye are complete in him" (Colossians 2:10).

Yet there is another kind of perfection. It involves a process of spiritual growth and maturity, of becoming like Jesus.

Every Christian has a lot to learn. Daily we bump into the world. People rub us the wrong way, even in church. Jesus said, "...every one that is perfect shall be as his master" (Luke 6:40). That involves taking a few lumps. Jesus did.

Becoming like Jesus in our spirit and behavior is a life-long process. We must never stop in this world. There is always room for improvement, development and training.

Anyone who thinks he has "arrived" should take the James 3:2 test: "If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man." I haven't met that man yet.

So Hebrews 6:1 urges us, "Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection."

Paul said concerning himself, "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect...but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:12-14). Then in verse 15 he throws out the challenge to every believer: "Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded."

The perfect in heart must go on to perfection!

To the church at Corinth Paul wrote: "...this also we wish, even your perfection....Be perfect..." (2 Corinthians 13:9,11). Now, that's a big order. How we respond is extremely important.

Some people react like Del. Whenever Del fails, his usual defense is, "Well, nobody's perfect." Perfection looks like too big a job. All he can see is his own human weakness. He fails to see Christ's strength. Discouraged, he gives up and quits trying. As a result, he has settled for spiritual mediocrity.

Then there are folks like Steve. Steve is a perfectionist. He always is trying and has no sympathy for those who are not. He has little tolerance for imperfections, in himself and in others. He is hypercritical of others and merciless on himself.

Obviously, we must avoid both traps. There must be a normal, healthy way to fulfill the command of Scripture to be mature, developed Christians. Let's see if we can identify it.

First, we must remember that spiritual growth is not a private do-it-yourself project. It is a process, something God does in us as we abide in Christ. Paul asked the Galatians, "Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3).

Read the parable of the sower in Luke, chapter 8. Fruit does not grow by struggling but by staying in its ecosystem. As it remains in proper relationship with the conditions of growth, development follows naturally.

So it is with the fruit of the Spirit. It develops naturally as we stay in our spiritual ecosystem, remaining in a proper relationship with the conditions of growth in Christ.

What are the conditions of growth as we abide in Christ?

Love is an important one. Colossians 3:14 says that love is the "bond of perfectness." Love ties it all together. It produces the unity with one another and with God that is necessary for the development of the Church. That is how Jesus prayed for us in John 17:23: "I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one..."

Close communion with God creates in us a healthy reverence for Him. This, too, is necessary for Christian growth. 2 Corinthians 7:1 speaks of "...perfecting holiness in the fear of God."

And let's not neglect our Bibles, because "all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable...that the man of God may be perfect" (2 Timothy 3:16,17).

It's important to be humble and teachable, too. If we are not, our spiritual growth will be stunted. Ephesians 4:12,13 tells us that God gave ministers to the Church "for the perfecting of the saints." Epaphras was a good example. Paul told the Colossians that Epaphras was "always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God" (Colossians 4:12). He also told them that he preached and taught "that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus" (1:28)

So honor and respect your pastor. He has an important part in the process of your spiritual growth. Be sure that when he presents you before God he won't have to say, "Here's a half-finished Christian, Lord. I did my best, but he just wouldn't co-operate."

In the final analysis, of course, the perfecting of the Church is God's work. In Hebrews 13:20,21 we read: "Now the God of peace...make you perfect." We find a similar prayer in 1 Peter 5:10: "...the God of all grace...make you perfect, establish, strengthen, settle you."

The process might be painful at times, but the result is of eternal value. Hebrews 12:23 says that we have come to "the spirits of just men made perfect." Think of the eternal joy of becoming a part of that company!

That's why God is aiming at nothing less than perfection. And so should we.