

#170 “The Call to Perfection, Not Perfectionism”

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God is perfect (Matthew 5:48), and His Word is perfect (James 1:25). Mankind, apart from Christ, is everything but (Romans 3:23). Yet the call for all people is given in Matthew 5:48 in which Jesus says, “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” His challenge to the people of the day and to all who would come after them was to recognize their utter imperfection and their need for the holy cleansing of God Who alone is perfect. They needed to see just Who it was Who was speaking to them, so that they could see their utter failure in stark contrast. Yet, the story of man is a story of rebellion and hardness of heart, a repeated refusal to surrender to the truth concerning sin and the need for salvation. Only when we see that there is only One Who is perfect and just to expect perfection from us as well will the gospel make sense. God, being perfectly holy, cannot accept anything or anybody less than perfectly holy. He alone is complete, whereas we are incomplete and insufficient of ourselves. Perfection alone belongs to God, but the story doesn’t end there. God sent His Son Jesus Christ to die as a perfect sacrifice for sin. He lived a holy and sinless life and died in our place, paying the penalty for the death that we should have had to face. Yet we can be free and clean because Jesus took our penalty for sin upon Himself. This is the glorious message of hope and grace in the gospel. Though we sin, we can be forgiven, saved, sanctified, and changed. In fact, in and through faith in Christ, one day God will finish the good work of salvation which He has begun in our hearts, perfecting us. Paul says in Philippians 1:6, “For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.” He doesn’t say that we will be perfect in and during this life, for our entire lives on this earth will be a process of sanctification as we continue to learn to walk in Christ’s ways. Even Paul, one of the great models of faithfulness to Christ said of himself in Philippians 3:12, “Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.” Paul understood that he would never be a model of perfection this side of eternity, but he purposed to pursue perfection and holiness because that is what Christ had called him to be. He says in 2 Corinthians 7:1, “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” And in Romans 12:2, he says, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” So, we know that one day we will be perfected, but in the meantime, it is our call and responsibility to yield to the work of the Spirit in our hearts and to the commands of Scripture such that Christ can keep working in us to make us more like Christ. Perfection, though practically unattainable and unreachable this side of eternity, is still to be pursued.

Yet never let us drift into perfectionism. We must understand that we will all stumble in many ways, as James 3:2 clearly states. The Bible does not present a picture of the righteous in Christ being perfect successes all the time. In fact, the Bible is quite frank and plain when it comes to showcasing the failures of God-fearing saints. We are given

in-depth detail about Abraham's attempt to fulfill God's promise through an immoral relationship with his household slave. We can read at length about David's immorality and murder, and this coming from a man that God said had a heart after His own. Moses struck a rock when God told him to speak to it. Peter denied Christ three times before coming to repent. There is a reason that God includes these stories in the Bible. He wants us to see that, though we are called to be holy and to pursue Christlike character in all things, inevitably we will come up short. Those who struggle with perfectionism fail to understand God's grace and the nature of His unconditional love. These are much too hard on themselves, expecting perfection from themselves and becoming bitter and even hating themselves for coming up short. Perhaps they might try to read their Bible more or pray more only to fail yet again. The flesh and the effort of man doesn't sanctify. But Jesus does. He forgives, He strengthens, and He uses imperfect people who deal with their imperfections, own up to their sin, and move forward in righteousness. It is not that we are to take a callous, careless approach to sin as if we might as well just accept sinning given that we can't help ourselves. That is not a Biblical view. God holds us responsible for our choices because He always makes a way of escape from temptation (1 Corinthians 10:13). We are to humbly obey and be faithful, but even the most faithful people will stumble and fall. So we must not be too hard upon ourselves, though we must quickly repent and confess our sins. Christ will quickly forgive, and we can move on in faithfulness.

Perfection is not a prerequisite for being used of God. Faithfulness and obedience, albeit imperfect, are what God asks of us. He desires those who do not hide sin in their hearts but who deal with sin quickly and with all sincerity and humility. He is full of grace and truth, truth that calls us to confront sin and grace that readily cleanses us. We need this balance so that we can keep pursuing perfection without falling into extremes of carelessness or perfectionism.

Though we struggle now, our future is sure and our hope confident. Hebrews 10:14 says, "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified." Jesus died once for all, and we who have put our trust in Him have been perfected for all time. Nothing can change the fact that God will complete the good work He started and will one day perfect us. Let us rest in this gracious promise.