

How Perfect Am I?

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect”.
Matthew 5:45: *New International Version*

Perfection and Perfectibility

Someone has said, *“Salvation is free, but sanctification costs everything”*. Looking back on almost seventy active years of my life I can confirm these words as true. I did not set out to *“be perfect”* as a goal, but somewhere about the middle of my life, as I grappled with something I knew God wanted me to do and I did not want to do it because of the commitment, it dawned on me that the issue was not my *“obedience”* but God’s ultimate purpose, my *“perfection”*.

Like so many of my Christian contemporaries I had assumed that my sanctification after salvation was assured so long as I was obedient, that the righteousness of Christ was imputed to me. But at that critical point of struggle I learned that my true goal as a Christian was *“to be perfect as my Father in heaven is perfect; that I was not just expected to “be good” but my righteousness had to exceed “the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees”, or I would not “enter the kingdom of heaven”, as Jesus stated.*

So, striving for perfection became my goal or, strictly speaking,

for “*perfectability*” since perfection is beyond any creaturely capability. As the Apostle Paul described it, “*I count not myself to have attained . . . but I strive towards the goal*”. Now, at almost ninety years of age, and all my striving behind me, I reflect on where I am on the divine assessment scale before I enter heaven.

In his book, *The Promise of the Holy Spirit*, Dr. William Barclay, the noted Scottish theologian says:

“It is one of the significant features of the present time that the word and experience of conversion have been rediscovered in the orthodox Church. With that rediscovery there has come a very real danger, the kind of danger which comes from the confusion of half the truth with the whole truth. The danger is that the experience of conversion may come to be looked upon as the end of the road, and that the person who has undergone the experience of conversion may regard himself as a completed and perfected Christian unless he realizes that there is such a person as the Holy Spirit, unless he lays hold of the power of the Holy Spirit . . . Unless the Holy Spirit daily lives more in him and he in the Holy Spirit, then the experience of conversion will necessarily lead to nowhere but disappointment, disillusionment and frustration. That is why so many of those who experience conversions which accompany mass evangelisms never last the course, but relapse into their old way of life.” (my emphasis)

Possibly that is why, too, there were only 120 committed but fearful believers in post-resurrection Jerusalem—even the eleven Apostles were meeting in a room with locked doors—and why tens of thousands left following Jesus and “*went away because these sayings were too hard for them.*” They wanted to be perfect, but they did not want the necessary perfecting process—like the rich and religious young ruler who came to Jesus.

It would be morally inexcusable for both God in the *Old Testament* and Jesus in the *New Testament* to command “*be perfect*” to creatures and followers and not to provide the means for accomplishing this. It is obvious, also, that they expect it to be possible of attainment in the lifetime of every individual aspirant, and not just a benevolent

act of divine grace of “*imputed righteousness*” in the hereafter. Let it be clear at the beginning of this search after holiness: *perfection as a state is not possible for a sinful creature; but perfectibility as a goal is possible for every kind of sinful creature.*

I agree with those who believe sanctification and holiness are the same, having the same root word, *hagios*, but too many expositors, both in the past and present, confuse sanctification with *godliness*—which is different from holiness. Godliness has a different root word, *eusebeio*, and is often confused with holiness. It is important to distinguish between the words that are often confused by Christians: sanctification, holiness, godliness, and righteousness.

It is not necessary to be a Christian to be righteous, as Jesus made clear when he said that unless the righteousness of his followers exceeded the righteousness of the Pharisees they would not enter the kingdom of heaven. “*Righteousness*”, or “*right actions*”, by its very nature requires a prior moral law and not just a sense of “*common good*” or decency; a recognition of a Creator who has provided an intellectually understandable design for living acceptably with and for Him. That “*intelligent design*” divides the world of *homo sapiens* into two distinct camps: believers in a Creator who has provided the blueprint as the standard; and unbelievers who create standards for themselves based on self-generated morally relative projections.

The difference between the righteousness of the Christian from the non-Christian is the goal: the Christian’s goal is godliness by the obedience of faith in the Creator, and the gift of the Spirit in acquired holiness. The goal of the unbeliever, or moral relativist, on the other hand, is a constantly changing series of theories and practices based on contemporary circumstances. In this process Christ, by the grace of God, is made unto believers “*holiness, righteousness and redemption*”;⁴⁰ but, at the same time, believers are called to work at all three attributes for themselves: (i) “*Be holy as your Father in heaven is holy*”, (ii) “*your righteousnesses*”, and (iii) “*work out your own salvation.*”

First, let us look at what the much-used and much-abused term “*sanctification*” means. Dr. William Barclay has defined the word:

⁴⁰1 Corinthians 1:30

“The Christian is sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ (I Peter 1:2). The word for sanctification is hagioσmos. All Greek names ending in —asmos describe a process, and not a finished event. Hagioσmos, therefore, may best be translated the road to holiness. Hagioσmos is the noun which is connected with hagioσ, the word which is generally translated holy, and which is also the word for the people whom the New Testament calls saints . . . A saint in the New Testament sense is, therefore, an individual in whom there is something which is unattainable in our own power. The Holy Spirit is the person through whose power upon us we can day by day walk the road to holiness, day by day acquiring this quality of difference, day by day becoming more and more hagioσ, that is, more and more like God. But, we must note, this change is not an effortless thing on our part. We are sanctified for obedience. It is a power which demands our own effort, our own self-discipline, as the price of its cooperation. When our will begins to cooperate with the power of the Holy Spirit, then things happen in life.” (my emphases)

It can be seen, therefore, that sanctification differs from regeneration, in that regeneration is instantaneous, a single creating act. No one is more or less regenerated than any other; every believer is equally regenerate. But sanctification is a progressive work of the Spirit, and subject to degrees of experience. One individual may be more sanctified and more holy than another—who is still to a degree truly sanctified and truly holy. The work of holiness is the seed of the Spirit that is implanted in the believer at conversion; the work of sanctification is like the activity of the farmer who cultivates the seed, waters it, reaps it, threshes it, grinds it, bakes it, and makes it into the perfected bread of life. *Holiness is the inherent life in the seed; sanctification is the work which brings it to fruition.* Holiness is wholly the work of the Spirit; sanctification requires the obedience of the believer in faith appropriating the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to fulfil its purpose.

A “*sanctified heart*” is just another way of saying a “*holy heart*”—a heart from which all self is excluded and only God reigns supreme in reciprocal love. This is why sanctification was

also known as “*perfect love*”, or “*pure love*”. Madame Guyon, writing of her spiritual experiences poetically said:

*“My heart is easy, and my burden light;
I smile, though sad, when God is in my sight.
The more my woes in secret I deplore,
I taste Thy goodness, and I love Thee more.*

*“There, while a solemn stillness reigns around,
Faith, love, and hope, within my soul abound;
And while the world suppose me lost in care,
The joys of angels unperceived I share.”*

It is this “*quality of difference*” which distinguishes the true Christian from the false, as well as the Christian from the non-Christian. The Jews, nationally, were different from the other nations around them, such as Egypt or Syria; but they were also uniquely different in that they had been conditionally chosen by God to fulfil a destined purpose in the world. The operative words there are “*conditionally chosen*”. God said that He would keep His promises concerning them “*if you keep my commandments*” in the *Covenant* between them.

The same is true of the Church of Jesus the Messiah. In the *New Covenant* between God and the followers of Jesus the condition laid down by Jesus is still “*If you love me, keep my commandments*”; and the divinely destined purpose is to “*be perfect as God is perfect*.” If that goal is ignored, or neglected, for whatever reasons, then the divine promises and rewards here and hereafter are no longer tenable.

There are several variations of the Hebrew and Greek words used for “*perfect*”. In Hebrew, the primary root of two of them—*tamam*, *tamiyim*—is used most often; a third is *shalem*. The first two mean: “*complete, accomplish, come to an end, come to the full, make perfect, whole*”; the latter means: “*complete, friendly, make ready, peaceable, perfect(ed)*”. In the Greek of the *New Testament* the words used for “*perfect*” are *teleios*, in its various forms; and *katartizo*, a derivative of *artios*. The former means: “*to complete, accomplish, consummate, finish, make perfect*”; the latter means: “*to complete thoroughly (i.e. to repair)*”,

to mend, join together, prepare, restore, make perfect."

With these definitions in mind let us look at what God said regarding them to and through His servants in the past. The first important fact to be noted is that God was not propounding an esoteric doctrine when he used the term. He was using it very specifically in relation to individuals and their daily conduct.

Noah

The first time ever it was used was when God was speaking of Noah:

"Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God."

This tells us three things about Noah: one, he was justified by faith in God; two, he was blameless in his family responsibilities before God; and, three, he lived an inner life of communion with God and outwardly observed the commands of God. This made Noah "perfect" in the sight of God.

Abraham

Of Abraham it was said:

"The Lord appeared to Abraham and said to him, "I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be perfect."

Abraham was ninety-nine years old at the time, and he had been "walking with God" for over thirty years, ever since God called him out of his pagan native home in Ur of the Chaldees to go to Canaan. This was the first time that the Lord God appeared to Abraham; previously He had "spoken", or "came to him in a vision". Whatever this meant in physical revelation, the introductory words of God established the majesty of His identity: "I am El Shaddai—the Almighty God—the All-Powerful—the All-Sufficient." It was the beginning of an unfolding series of revelations regarding the nature of God, each marking an epoch in human history. Yet it was in this declaration of divine majesty and omnipotence that God said to a very fallible man, "Walk before me and be perfect." In other words: "I am All-Powerful and All-Sufficient, and I expect you to act perfectly in the light of this."

Israel

The next use by God of the word “*perfect*” is found in Deuteronomy, (although the word “*holy*” is used 150 times in Leviticus) where God is speaking to His “*chosen people*”, Israel, through His servant Moses. He had just been instructing them regarding their conduct in the Promised Land of Canaan, and He had warned them against the heathen practice of idolatry and spiritism—divination, horoscopes, familiar spirits, talismans, witchery, and necromancy. Idolatry and spiritism were the major sins spawned by pagan Babylon, and exported into the surrounding regions. Any powers other than human or divine were sought, cultivated, and worshipped, in the world’s early rebellion against God, in the widespread pursuit of self-interest rather than divine intention. It was in this extremely unpromising context that God declared emphatically: “*Thou shalt be perfect with the Lord thy God.*”

The initial anti-God rebellion had been led by Satan in his own self-centred ambition to be like God—a likeness on his own terms, and not God’s. Satan himself had known what it was to be perfect. It was said of him:

*“You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones. You were blameless (perfect) in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you . . .”*⁴¹

The flawed Prince of Angels, implacably committed to the destruction of all that God desired in and through men and women on earth as well as angels in heaven, eagerly corrupted all those willing to pay his price for his forbidden powers. It was in this challenging environment of occult powers, demonic temptations, and titillating defiance of God, that the people of Israel were commanded by their God to “*be perfect like the Lord God.*” It was not so much the perfection of faith that God was requiring of the Israelites as the perfection of obedience, of works. His words to them had been:

“I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws, then you will live and increase,

⁴¹Ezekiel 28:15f

and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.”⁴²

God went on to “call heaven and earth as witnesses that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.” But what they received depended on their choice and their commitment. God’s desire for them, as He demonstrated in His love and provision for them, was;

“Now choose life, so that you and your children may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him.”

The nations around them might worship strange gods and cultivate occult powers, but the Israelites were to keep the commandments given them by God, and in those observances of conduct they would be perfect before God. To help them in this God would provide a succession of prophets, as His spokesmen, guides and instructors. In this way, at different times, they would always know the mind and will of God in changing circumstances.

David

With David and Solomon there is introduced a different word for “perfect”; not the *tamam* used so far, but *shalem*. Both carry the primary meaning of “complete”; but, whereas *tamam* emphasizes the completeness of a circle, or making a purposed whole of something, *shalem* means to make ready, to be at peace about an intention. The former is the certainty of an artist who starts with an idea, and is satisfied when he has completed the work that it reflects his intention; but at the same time it never fully satisfies him that it completely reflects the scope of his creative urge. The latter is the assurance of the builder that his completed construction accurately represents the design of the architect. Another comparative analogy might be that the former is like the artist, while the latter is like the photographer; both can be satisfied with the respective perfection of any given work, but the former is more dependent on intuitive gifts while the latter is more dependent on physical skills.

David, of whom it was said he was “*a man after God’s own heart*”, was a murderer, an adulterer, a betrayer of a loyal commander, a liar, a deceiver, an inadequate parent. But, at the end of his life, David, in his last words, could say, “*God makes my way perfect.*” These words

⁴²Deuteronomy 30:15-30

were said in the context of his acknowledgment of his God-given skills and strength:

*“With your help I can advance against a troop; with my God I can scale a wall. As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the Lord is flawless. He is a shield for all who take refuge in him. For who is God besides the Lord? And who is the Rock except our God? It is God who arms me with strength and makes my way perfect. He makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he enables me to stand on the heights. He trains my hands for battle; my arms can bend a bow of bronze . . .”*⁴³ (my emphasis)

There is never any doubt from David’s words, here or elsewhere, that he was more concerned with the perfecting of his spiritual walk with God than with all his physical skills and professional accomplishments. From the *Psalms* he wrote it is evident he was conscious of his own capacity for evil, as well as others, and of God’s great willingness to love and to forgive in order to rise above the baser elements. In the *Psalms* “being perfect” is mentioned five times: Psalm 18:32 speaks of a “perfect way”; Psalm 19:7 speaks of a “perfect law”; Psalm 37:31 speaks of a “perfect man”; Psalm 101:2 speaks of a “perfect heart”; Psalms 138:8 speaks of a “perfect goal.”

David was aware of the evil around him, and the evil within him. His life as a shepherd, warrior, ruler, statesman, poet-musician, had shown him human nature in all its capacities for vice and virtue and vision. In all his circumstances—the bad as well as the good—he sought out the purpose and direction of God. He established the first, and only, theocratic nation-state, and in the process saw unparalleled massacres and hatreds and greed and betrayals by foes and friends. Yet he wrote confidently that there was a perfect way, a perfect law, a perfect heart, a perfect goal, that a perfect man could follow—even when he and others fell short. David not only knew he was not perfect; he never lost sight of the possibility of being perfect.

Solomon

This could not be said of his son, Solomon. Solomon was groomed by God and by David to be a pre-eminent king. God granted Solomon’s request for divinely bestowed wisdom,

⁴³2 Samuel 22:30-35

knowledge and understanding. Solomon built the first Temple in which God agreed to dwell on earth with His creatures. At the dedication of the Temple, Solomon renewed the consecration of the people of Israel to God's great destiny for them in the words:

"May he (God) turn our hearts to him, to walk in all his ways and to keep his commands, decrees and regulations he gave our fathers. And may these words of mine, which I have prayed before the Lord, be near to the Lord our God day and night, that he may uphold the cause of his servant and the people of Israel according to each day's need, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord is God. But your hearts must be fully committed (perfect: KJV) to the Lord our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands, as at this time."

For all his great potential Solomon fell far short of the ideal he set himself, and the goal God had set for him. His undisciplined family life led him to take seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines; and they, in turn, led him into conspicuous idolatry. Eventually, God said of Solomon:

"When Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father". What is particularly interesting about this epitaph is that it implies Solomon had an opportunity to be perfect, but threw it away; and that David, his father, despite his many faults, was *"perfect with the Lord his God."* This is later expanded to show how Solomon *"did evil"* progressively, in first following his wives' gods, then building shrines for them, finally building a temple for Chemosh *"in the hill that is before Jerusalem, the mount of Olives."* No doubt Solomon continued to attend the ordained Temple services, observe the stipulated Feasts, offer the required sacrifices; but these became less as his commitments to other gods and other practices increased. Somewhere, and for some unstated reason, he lost his focus on, and his interest in, God, and it all became a matter of performance and not meaning. His father, David, on the other hand, never lost his focus on, or interest in, God, and he responded to *"follow the Lord perfectly"*.

Asa

The same word for “perfect”, *shalem*, used for David and Solomon, is used of Asa, one of Israel’s later kings. Because of Solomon’s flagrant sins of disobedience and idolatry God vowed to punish his royal line, and the people of Israel, who had followed him. A prophet of the time, Azariah, described the situation to Asa, the king:

“For a long time Israel was without the true God, without a priest to teach and without the law. But in their distress they turned to the Lord, the God of Israel, and sought him, and he was found by them. In those days it was not safe to travel about, for all the inhabitants of the land were in great turmoil. One nation was being crushed by another and one city by another, because God was troubling them with every kind of distress.”

Azariah went on to inform the king that, if he followed the words of the Lord he would be helped by Him. Asa began dismantling all the temples, shrines and altars set up by Solomon, and he repaired the altars to Jehovah that had fallen into disuse, and initiated the sacrifices once again. Any Israelite who would not worship the God of Israel was put to death. He even deposed his powerful and evil grandmother, Maacah, because she had set up an idolatrous Asherah pole.

But Asa, it is said, although he removed idolatry from the cities, *“did not remove all the high places”* (heathen worship sites on hills, mountains and passes). Nevertheless, the Scriptures said of him: *“the heart of Asa was perfect all his days.”* This was allowed to be said of him despite the fact that he later used the sacred Temple vessels as a bribe for help from a heathen king. God’s message to him was:

“Because you relied on the king of Aram and not on the Lord your God, the army of the king of Aram has escaped from your hand. Were not the Cushites and Libyans a mighty army with great numbers of chariots and horsemen? Yet when you relied on the Lord, he delivered them into your hand. For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed (perfect:KJV) to him. You have done a foolish thing, and from now on you will be at war”⁴⁴.

The judgment made Asa angry, and he responded by throwing the prophet into prison and brutally intimidating his people. Shortly

⁴⁴2 Chronicles 16:7-9

afterwards he was afflicted by a loathsome gangrene of his feet, and it is said *"he sought doctors but not the Lord"*. He died in great distress, and had to be buried with flowers and perfumes to conceal the putrescent odour.

The lesson from Asa is that, while he knew how to *"be perfect"*, and could walk in this way before God, it was no guarantee that *"once perfect always perfect."* He did not reach a perfect state; he attained a process, at least, of perfectibility. It was because he mistook the latter for the former that he failed to maintain the process, and lapsed into defeat and ignominy.

Job

Of Job it was said he was *"perfect and upright, feared God and shunned evil."* God said: *"There is no-one on earth like him."* When God used these words about Job he did so in heaven, in the presence of the witnessing Satan and angels. Satan did not challenge their veracity, but he accused God of providing Job with circumstances in his life which made it easy for him to be perfect.

In his great work on *Faust*, Goethe has Mephistopheles reply to God in circumstances similar to Job's:

Mephistopheles:

*"Forsooth! He serves you after strange devices:
No earthly meat or drink the fool suffices:
Half conscious of his frenzied, crazed unrest,
The fairest stars from Heaven he requireth,
From Earth the highest raptures and the best,
And all the near and far that he desireth
Fails to subdue the tumult of his breast.*

The Lord:

*Though still confused his service unto Me,
I soon shall lead him to a clearer morning.
Sees not the gardener, even while buds his tree,
Both flower and fruit the future years adorning?..."*

Job's subsequent history, under the most intense sufferings

imposed by Satan, and permitted by God, were a test of his desire to be perfect before God. Between the parameters of “*fearing God*” and “*shunning evil*”, in a situation of utmost extremity and unremitting attack by Satan, even in the midst of his most vitriolic diatribes against God for His absence and apparent neglect, Job did not sin. So that at the end his time of trial God twice said of him to his companions: “*You have not spoken of me what is right like my servant Job has.*”

Deprived of family, wealth, possessions, health, home, and social acceptance, Job continued perfect before God. Satan could laugh with delight, and angels tremble with apprehension, at the vehemence of Job’s language to and about God as he challenged every attack on his integrity, but still *Job remained perfect before God*. Job himself was not conscious of that perfection—in fact, he could say of himself, “*I am vile . . . If I justify myself, my own mouth condemns me: if I say, ‘I am perfect’, it shall prove me perverse.*”

Job went on to argue that “*although I were perfect, yet would I not know my own soul; I would despise my life.*” He knew that to be self-consciously perfect was a contradiction in terms. To be perfect it was necessary to be humble enough not to be aware of it. Job had no concern for himself, or for what others thought of him. His only concern was to live a life well-pleasing to God. His conclusions regarding himself were:

“Though I were righteous in my own apprehension, and my own heart did not condemn me, yet God is greater than my heart, and knows there are secret errors and faults of mine which I do not and cannot understand, and therefore I would not answer.”

If God chose to designate his life “*perfect*”, then that satisfied him. Hezekiah

Hezekiah was king at a crucial period in Israel’s history, when the northern and southern portions of the nation were being torn apart by internal strife and wars with Egypt and Assyria. Hezekiah had restored the services and worship of the Temple, according to the instructions of David; or, at least, he initiated them, but because few really knew how to conduct them properly, and few of the priests were properly sanctified, he ordered the ceremonies to take place on

the fourteenth day of the second month, rather than of the God-commanded first month. He asked God to pardon them for this alteration, and God agreed. In the fourteenth year of a reign in which he sought to bring the Israelites back to obedience to God's commandments, he became seriously ill. Isaiah the prophet came to him to confirm that God's time for him to die had arrived.

Hezekiah was distressed. He was only thirty-nine years of age. So he prayed intensely to God:

"Remember now, O Lord, how I have walked before Thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in Thy sight."

God did not confirm that Hezekiah had a "perfect heart", but neither did He deny it. And he answered Hezekiah's prayer by giving him another fifteen years of life. But this respite for Hezekiah did not result in a more consecrated life. During this period, when, it is said, "God left him to try him, to see what was in his heart," in a fit of pride he foolishly showed his possessions, and the sacred treasures of the Temple, to visiting Babylonians. This stimulated their avarice, and they determined to possess them for themselves. Isaiah told Hezekiah the judgment of God:

"The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your fathers have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the Lord. And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon."

Hezekiah let pride destroy his acknowledged perfect walk with God.

After Hezekiah—or, perhaps more correctly, after the Dispersion of Israel to Assyria and Judah to Babylon, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple—there is no mention of anyone else being perfect before God. Until the time of Jesus and his public ministry.

Jesus

The gospel of Jesus the Messiah—bridging the gap between God and His alienated creatures—was established on two "pillar-imperatives": one, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you as well"⁴⁵; and, two,

⁴⁵Matthew 6:34

its related, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter into the kingdom of heaven”.⁴⁶ These two “pillar-imperatives” support the third “span-imperative” bridging the gap between the creature and the Creator: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect”.⁴⁷

These three imperatives comprise “the truth of the gospel” — all the remainder of Christ’s teachings—as contained in the Christian Manifesto, the Sermon on the Mount. All truth is not contained in the Sermon on the Mount, but all truth is certainly enshrined within it, does not exist without it, and is represented in the person of Jesus himself who delivered it. The fundamental principles of all later revelation conditioning individual and social conduct are contained in the moral and ethical standards of the kingdom of God uttered by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

The kingdom of God in both *Old* and *New Testaments* was, and is, not an entity with boundaries; but rather a state, or condition, where God is acknowledged as sovereign. The citizens of that kingdom in both *Old* and *New Testaments* are “priests, holy priests, offering spiritual sacrifices”, and as such are to be perfect before God, because without holiness no person can be in the presence of God.

Jesus follows the above-mentioned “three imperatives” immediately with the words:

“Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men to be seen by them; if you do you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

From this it is clear that there are two forms of “righteousness” required of Jesus’ followers in their aspirations to be perfect: God’s own righteousness, and our acts of righteousness greater than that of the Pharisees, etc. The former is what all evangelical Christians believe to be the “imputed righteousness” bestowed on all believers who accept Christ as their personal Saviour through his sacrificial death on their behalf, and which allows them to present themselves “blameless”, or “perfect”, before God in heaven.

Unfortunately, they usually stop there and—if they think about it at all—they might grudgingly and uneasily concede that what the Apostle Paul designated “*deeds done in the body*” could be considered “acts of righteousness”, and suitably rewarded or punished by God in

⁴⁶Matthew 5:20

⁴⁷Matthew 5:40

their commission or omission.⁴⁸ Yet, as we shall see later, the Apostles Paul, Peter, James and John, all accepted and taught not only an aspiration to be perfect, but a positive commitment to a walk devoted to that as a possible goal in their own lifetime.

What is even more significant is the context in which Jesus declared that goal. He did not state it in the context of an inspirational discussion on holiness or Spirit-power, but interspersed with challenges such as *“Do not resist an evil person . . . turn the other cheek . . . if someone sues you, give away your tunic . . . give to whoever asks you . . . love your enemies . . .”*

When he said *“Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect”* he had just been talking about that same heavenly Father sending sun and rain on the good and evil alike. He was not asking them to donate money ostentatiously to worthy causes, or to go conspicuously to places of worship, or to witness publicly in the streets, or to pray sanctimoniously and repetitively, or to draw attention to their excessive piety and humility, as contributions to that spiritual perfection. In fact, he specifically denounced all of that as sheer hypocrisy. All of this kind of self-conscious *“righteousness”*, he said, is what the religious professionals and hypocrites practice. Whatever self-examination was involved in these performances was both mindless and mordant.

Jesus did not teach perfection of the believer because of the ideal state that it offered, nor even of the transforming power that it bestowed, but because of the ultimate goal that it inspired: *“ . . . as your heavenly Father is perfect.”* Then he immediately applied it to the practical demands of daily living: *“do your acts of righteousness . . . give to the needy . . . Your will be done on earth . . . daily bread . . . forgive debtors . . . temptations . . . the evil one . . .”* Nor was it just something to spread over one’s lifetime; it was to be done now.

For Jesus, in his personal responsibility, that meant rejection of his family and to be thought *“insane”* by them; to be despised, and homeless, and misunderstood by his closest companions; to touch lepers, fraternize with social outcasts, refuse to conduct healing campaigns, seek solitude instead of personal acclaim, not call on angels as evidence of his closeness to God, and die an apparent

⁴⁸1 Corinthians 3:13-15

failure by the political, social, and religious standards of his time.

Jesus not only aspired to be perfect before God in his lifetime, and not only expected his disciples to aspire likewise, he also expected it from a practicing Jew. When a rich young ruler came to him to ask about obtaining eternal life Jesus first told him, *"If you want to enter life, obey the commandments."* When the young man heard the list recited by Jesus he said that he had kept them all and still lacked something. Jesus then said to him: *"If you want to be perfect, go sell your possessions and give to the poor . . . Then come, follow me."* The rich young ruler was unable to meet such a challenge, and went away sad, because, it is said, *"he had great wealth."* Presumably, had he responded to Jesus' challenge he would have been able to realize the goal so explicitly stated by Jesus—*"If you want to be perfect."*

In his last great conversation with his disciples before going to be crucified, Jesus prayed to his Father on their behalf. In the course of that prayer he said,

"The glory that Thou hast given me I have given them; that they may be one as even we are one. I in them, and thou in me, that they may be perfect in one . . ."

This is the ultimate goal for every believer: to be made perfect in one with the heavenly Father. This goal was made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for every one. But it is something that will only be realized in its completeness experientially in heaven; here, on earth, it is anticipated spiritually by faith. On earth, even Jesus knew what it was to be separated from his Father when, on the cross, he said, *"My God, why have you forsaken me?"*

Here on earth the true Christian has to live the promise and experience implicit in Jesus' prayer—*"they may be perfect in one"*. That means the *capacity* to be perfect as God is perfect, to be holy as God is holy, to be perfect related to our heavenly Father at all times by faith in the promises of God and His Son, Jesus the Messiah.

Paul

The Apostle Paul taught about the possibility of being perfect to *Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians,*

Thessalonians—possibly to *Hebrews* in almost every chapter, if he was the author of that *Letter*—and to his young protégé, Timothy.

In *Romans* he speaks of knowing the “*perfect will of God*” (12:3); in *I Corinthians* of “*perfect wisdom*” (2:6); in *II Corinthians* of “*strength being made perfect in weakness*” (12:9), and again of “*our prayer is for your perfection*” and to “*be perfect*” (13:9); in *Galatians* against “*being made perfect by the flesh*” (3:3); in *Ephesians* of “*growing into the perfect man*” (4:13); in *Philippians* of “*to many as be perfect*” to press on to perfection (3:15); in *Colossians* of “*presenting every man perfect in Christ Jesus*”, and that they might be “*perfect and complete in all the will of God*” (1:28); in *I Thessalonians* that God’s “*might perfect that which is lacking in your faith*” (3:10); in *2 Timothy* that all Scripture is given by God that “*the man of God may be perfect*” (3:17).

In the *Epistle to the Hebrews* Jesus is “*made perfect*” (2:10); believers are urged to “*leave the principles of the doctrine of Christ and go on to perfection*” (6:1); the Law “*made nothing perfect*” (7:19); the offerings of the Tabernacle and Temple “*did not make him that did the service perfect*” (9:9); the Christ is “*a more perfect tabernacle*” (9:11); that “*(the faithful) might together with us be made perfect*” (11:40); the “*spirits of just men made perfect*” (12:23); pray that “*the God of peace . . . make you perfect in every good work to do His will*” (13:21).

James

The Apostle James followed Paul in his emphasis on seeking to be perfect. He opened his *Epistle* by advocating “*let patience have her perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing*” (1:4). He goes on to show how through works faith is made perfect; and that anyone who is never at fault in what he says is “*a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check*” (3:12).

Peter

The Apostle Peter prayed in his *First Epistle* that “*The God of all grace . . . after you have suffered a while, make you perfect*” (5:10).

John

The Apostle John speaks in his *First Epistle* of “*herein is our love*

made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment" (4:17); that *"perfect love casts out fear"* (4:18), and *"he that feareth is not made perfect in love"* (5:10).

In his *Book of Revelation* he records the condemnation of Christ against the Seven Churches, especially Sardis, *"for I have not found your works perfect before God"* (3:2).

It seems incontrovertible from these Scriptural examples from *Old and New Testaments*, that God's will is for men and women to strive for perfectibility in their lifetimes, and that He provided for them to aspire and to realize that goal. The fact that few attained perfection for any length of time, if at all, does not diminish in any way from the Christian's responsibility to aspire to reach the prize. In the words of Paul: *"Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me . . ."* That is perfectibility on the way to perfection.

Not to strive for perfection is an indication of a lack of faith in reaching for that prize. It is easier to believe that perfection or perfectibility is not possible, or even that it is not important, and do nothing about it, than to admit to oneself that for most of our lives we have been remiss in not laying hold of all that God has provided for us in Christ Jesus. There are even the casuists who argue that to desire such a thing is an indication of an unhealthy spiritual arrogance, a desire to be part of an unScriptural elite, a Gnostic heresy. These people are the most dangerous of all to the true witness of the faith that is provided for all believers in Christ Jesus.

In his essay, *"Christian Perfection"*, Dr PT Forsyth says:

"Christian perfection is not a perfection of culture. It is not a thing of ideas or of finish. Such perfection is for the select few, for a natural elect. It is the perfection of an elite. This is so even with ethical culture. Its fine programme is yet no gospel. The soul's true and universal perfection is of faith. It is a perfection of attitude rather than of achievement, of relation more than of realization, of trust more than of behaviour . . ."

"Look to the faith and the conduct must come. True faith has all ideal conduct in its heart and, what is more, in its power. And it is the

only thing that has it...What Christ always demanded of those who came to Him was not character, not achievement, but faith, trust. It was faith in Himself as God's Grace. It was trust, not in His manner but in His message, His gospel. That was the one demand of God; and to answer it is perfection. Obedience to God's one comprehensive demand must be perfection . . . That is to say, perfection is not sanctity but faith . . ." (his emphasis)

Perfection, as Jesus taught it, was not a matter of the believer's performance before God as Judge, but of his or her relationship to God as Saviour. Whatever emphasizes personal achievement at the expense of spiritual commitment is a departure from the divine record of perfection. Like Paul each believer must "*press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me*", a perfectibility that makes us ultimately "*perfect like God*".

Now, as I look backward at my life, and look forward to my death, I realise how often I have fallen from the divine standard; but I am glad that I have made the attempt. I am acutely aware that immediately after death I will shortly face my Lord at his judgement seat to give an account of words spoken and actions done. But once that is completed, and I have met Meg and the other members of my family in heaven, I will eagerly await a whole eternity of expectation ahead.

Chapter -7 -

will be available on this site on the 1st December 2008