



SAFE HARBOR

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Christian Perfection: What it is, Why it Matters

In Matthew 5:48 we read of Jesus admonishing his followers saying, “You must be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect”.

Perfect is a word that has many meanings as well as many implications in our present day vernacular. We speak of perfect scores in skating and gymnastics; perfect games in baseball; food cooked to perfection, etc. In the use of the word we seem to say something is done exactly as it should. In Christian realms though the word perfect is often shied away from even though there is concrete validity for its uses and its attainment.

How often have you heard someone say, “I am not perfect but a sinner saved by grace”? While the thought is true the reality is that the concept of Christian Perfection is wrong.

Coming from a Wesleyan-Holiness theologically the concept of perfection has become a form of legalism which is not Biblical nor experiential. Asked to define their faith they often answer that “we don’t drink, cuss, smoke, or other behaviors judged to be sinful”. It is such negativity that repels rather than attracts. It makes the faith seem ugly and even demanding. It causes people to look over their shoulders lest they stray from human expectations. Even John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was hesitant to use the term because of the problems that arose through misunderstanding. Yet his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* often sits unread and sits on too many pastor’s shelves.

Part of the misunderstanding of the word “perfection” lies in the difference between the Latin and the Greek terms usually translated perfection. Without going into great detail, the Latin *perfectus* means or implies a static state, a finished action, a sense of passiveness, being past or present, flawless and unchangeable, as well as being fixed or unmovable. In the Vulgate translation this is the rendering of the Greek, *teleiosis*.

The Greek word connotes a dynamic process, an ongoing development, is active and operative, implies present and future, is improvable and may change, increase or decrease. In his writings Wesley understands *teleiosis* as the concept of Christian Perfection. This is a difficult concept for those of the “Second Blessing Holiness” camp.

But if we do not understand this concept we miss the true nature of holiness in our Christian experience. This dynamic understanding allows us to fully grasp the sanctifying process so necessary in our Christian walk. The processes of cleansing and filling are the workings of God in those who come to him in faith. Paul spells this out clearly in Philippians 3:12-16. ¹²“Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. ¹⁶“Only let us hold true to what we have attained.”

When Jesus told the story of the house being swept clean which is unfilled or continuously left empty becomes the abode of seven evil spirits worse than the first. Being perfect is a state of being constantly filled by the presence of God through the Holy Spirit. It is then that we can go forward in walking humbly with God, being perfected by faith. This is the hope of those who come by faith to Christ.

The statement, “I am not perfect but is sinner saved by grace”, is in reality a half-truth. We are all sinners saved by grace but if we are not moving on to perfection then we are denying the true power of Jesus’ salvation. As we die daily we must be raised by God to a higher grace. Let us humble ourselves and rise to the person God would have us to be.

Reflections

Sometimes as we read Scripture it is easy to take the translations that are there and interpret them while not understanding the deeper nuances that they convey in the original. Our English terms like faith, holiness, covenant, love, prophecy, and etc. all carry much deeper implications than is commonly associated with them in English. One such portion of Scripture is found in Micah 6:1-8.

The first five verses are unique in that they set the stage for a courtroom drama that is unfolding in the cosmos where the mountains, hills and the very foundations of the earth are called to be witnesses. On trial is the faithlessness of the nations of Israel and Judah to the Covenant which was entered into with YHWH at the base of Mount Sinai.

In Eastern Thought a covenant was not a simple contract. In the case of Israel and Judah, they were allowed to enter into this covenant with YHWH by the grace of YHWH. It is a mutual agreement between a greater (powerful ruler) party and lesser parties (the people) with unique features. First, there is the recounting of the mighty acts of the ruler in protecting the people. (vss. 4&5) Then there the faithful response expected of the people to insure continued protection from the ruler. There are blessings made to be in place as long as the people follow the stipulations of the covenant and a list of curses for failure to uphold the covenant. (Deut. 28) This is the basis for the trial and YHWH’s complaint.

In the passage it is interesting that there is an alternate translation that can read, “*Man can tell you what is good but does YHWH expect of you.*” This brings a greater sense of meaning to the case. The expectations of YHWH for his people are spelled out in the Covenant entered into at Sinai and repeatedly affirmed over the years. As we look at the key points of the expectations we are drawn into understanding the progression of the believer in keeping the Covenant.

First is to do justice, *mispat in Hebrew*. This is to uphold what is right according to the tradition of YHWH’s will both in legal proceedings and in the conduct of life. It is a term that implies obedience to having faith in the Covenantal relationship with God. It is the step of faith leads one to fulfill the other requirements stated here. The term requires actions of faith in the service of YHWH including keeping the cultic rituals, observing the Commandments and if necessary bringing discipline to those who violate the Covenant.

Doing justice leads to having mercy or *hesed in the Hebrew*. The term is a term of the recognition of the condition of the helplessness and extending kindness. It is important to note that these first two actions are the basis for the case being presented. In these areas the people has failed their faith. Therefore their worship, sacrifices are meaningless and disgusting to YHWH.

The final requirement is to walk humbly with your God, *hasnea* in the Hebrew. This humility lies in attending to the will and way of YHWH. This the final step in the way that will please God. The one who walks humbly walks by faith and recognition of the power and presence of God.

The following verses, 9-16, are specific to the sins that will bring God’s punishment upon his people.

As Christians we are called to follow in the new covenant that has been sanctified by the blood of Christ. It conditions are the same as those cited by Micah. We must love justice, show mercy and walk humbly with our Lord and Savior.

Words of Encouragement

Romans 2:6-11 English Standard Version (ESV)

“He will render to each one according to his works: ⁷to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; ⁸but for those who are self-seeking[ⓐ] and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.

⁹There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, ¹⁰but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. ¹¹For God shows no partiality.

Also a footnote: My book of poetry, **Midnight Musings: Thoughts from a Restless Mind**, is available on Amazon and also Kindle. Your patronage and thoughts would be appreciated.