

How Perfect Is “Perfect” or is Christian Perfection Possible?

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To be right with God is the most vital thing in life. Apart from all we do, all we have, what about us as creatures standing before our Creator? How do we stand with God? Paul declares that the only way to be right with God is to be clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ.

I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith. (Phil 3:8, 9)

The Sinner's Only Hope

The perfect righteousness of Christ is the only answer to the sin problem in any man's life, the only possibility of living like Christ here and now. "Our righteousness"-the best we can do and are in ourselves-are "as filthy rags" (Isa 64:6). Rags because they do not cover us, and filthy because they leave us in our defilements and our sins.

Many sincere Christians express dissatisfaction over the fact that they continually fall short of perfection. Many admit of continual failure in the spiritual life, of repeating sins again and again, of giving way to habit patterns contrary to the life of Christ. When they read the command of Christ: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matt 5:48), the effect is both condemnation and discouragement.

In almost all the great revivals believers have sought in one way or another to attain to perfection of living. They have longed for it, prayed for it, and worked for it. But the

testimony of all great Christians is that they have never attained to it; that the more they strived and the closer they came to Christ, the deeper was their sense of inadequacy and inherent sinfulness. While their lives bore testimony to victory over sin, at the same time they felt a deeper sense of their own need and unworthiness. Ask Peter, James and John. Ask Martin Luther and John Wesley. Ask the noblest souls that the Christian church has ever seen, the most zealous spirits that mankind has ever produced. With one mighty chorus and with one accord they exclaim with Paul:

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. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: 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. (Phil 3:12-14)

If there is one central truth borne out in Scripture in the experience of all true believers who have come to know the saving power of God, it is this: that the only perfection, the only sinlessness they have ever seen or known has been that of Jesus Christ, the only perfect and sinless man; that because of this Jesus is the whole of their salvation, the whole of their righteousness and perfection. To be a genuine Christian means faith in Christ, fellowship with Christ, faithfulness to Christ, and fruitfulness for Christ. Faith means that man has no perfection and no righteousness of and in himself; that man trusts wholly and solely in Christ.

Biblical Perfection

One of the hindrances to living the Christian life successfully is failure to understand what the Bible teaches on the nature of sin and perfection. A grave misapprehension lies at the root of much of the false teaching on this subject. The Bible, in applying the term "perfection" to believers, never means "sinlessness." There are at least nine different Hebrew words and six Greek words translated "perfection." Noah is said to be "perfect in his generations" (Gen 6:9).

Of Asa, the King of Judah, we read: "But the high places were not removed: nevertheless Asa's heart was perfect with the Lord all his days" (1 Kings 15:14). "If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body" (James 3:2). "We speak wisdom among them that are the perfect" (1 Cor 2:6).

The Bible writers are not saying that these men are sinless. The meaning is that of spiritual maturity, full grown spiritually, ripe in spiritual understanding, whole in response to god, keeping nothing back. A "perfect" Christian is one whose heart and mind are permanently committed to Christ, cannot be moved. Noah, Abraham, and Job were all declared to be "perfect" men. Yet the history of their lives shows that they were far from being sinless.

If one's view of sin is shallow enough, sinless perfection would not be an impossible achievement. It is a defective view of sin that leads to a wrong understanding of perfection. If sin simply means a deliberate, willful doing of what is known to be wrong, then no Christian should commit this kind of sin. But if sin includes also a man's state of mind and heart, man's bias toward sin, sin as an indwelling tendency, then perfection presents a totally different picture.

What God Expects of His People

There are some Christians who believe that it is possible in this life to reach a point in spiritual development, where the sinful nature is completely eradicated and therefore, no longer operative. The Bible does teach that the genuine Christian life is one of uniform and sustained victory over all known sin. The normal Christian experience should be one of victory and not constant defeat.

Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as

instruments of righteousness unto God. For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace. What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid. (Rom 6:11-15)

There is one truth that every believer needs to learn who would fully enjoy complete salvation in Christ. It is the need to abide in Christ, to look continually to Christ, to depend wholly on Christ and His righteousness. God's method of salvation is not eradication of a sinful nature, but the counteraction of divine power through the Holy Spirit. Only by the continual counteracting presence of the Holy Spirit is it possible to be victorious over sin and the sinful nature within us.

It is fatal to believe that if only we become totally surrendered to Christ, that the sinful nature is eradicated. The law of sin and death is still operating within us. It is something that remains in us as long as we live. Victory over all known sin does not mean sinlessness. It does mean the glorious opportunity in Christ to strive successfully against all sin and overcome it. But this is an experience that must be maintained day by day through fellowship with and surrender to Christ. The Christian life is a lifelong battle. So long as the believer abides in Christ, real holiness and victory are possible. What we have in the every-day life is the counteracting power of God against our sinful tendencies and our sinful natures.

O wretched man that I am. Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin. There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. (Rom 7:24-8:2)

Salvation in Christ alone means that the bias to sin in human nature is too strong and overwhelming to be dealt with apart from moment by moment trusting in Christ and in His

power to save. The law of sin and death is operating all the time. Deliverance comes by means of a higher law, a higher power-the law of the Spirit, the mightiest power of God which counteracts the law of sin in our members. Peter sank in the waves the moment he took his eyes off Christ. He sank because he had the tendency to sink in water. The only thing that kept him walking on top of the sea was the power of Christ momentarily exercised counteracting the gravitational power to pull him down. So it is in the Christian life.

There is always a conflict in this earthly life between the flesh and the Spirit:

This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would. But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law. (Gal 5:16-18)

The Christian must walk continually in the Spirit. Never in this life will the Christian arrive at the place where he can dispense with the counteracting power of Christ against the sinful tendency in his life. Only through the continual, day by day operation of the Holy Spirit is our sinful nature counteracted. The sinful nature is not eradicated until the day of the resurrection, until this "mortal shall have put on immortality." The Christian learns to live in the sphere of the Spirit, not in the sphere of the flesh. The believer is never beyond the reach of temptation or the possibility of sinning. But in Christ he is brought into a position of victory over all known sin. Sin no longer has dominion over him.

Sinful Nature: Controlled But Not Eradicated

The greatest men in the Bible never claimed sinless perfection. They were all painfully aware of the fact that they were sinners and remained so throughout their lives. So long as a man is in a state of sin with a sinful nature still present in him, he will confess himself to be a sinner. The Christian always recognizes himself to be a sinner in need of divine grace.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (1 John 1:8-10)

We find here the most solemn warning against the doctrine of sinless perfection in this life. The incontrovertible meaning of this passage is that the man is a self-deceiver who claims for himself what the apostle John dared not claim. The truth is not in him. The doctrine of sinless perfection leads to the conclusion that both Christ and the Holy Spirit are unnecessary once this state of eradication of the sinful nature is reached. Wherever the professed Christian claims to have the sinful nature eradicated in his life, there is a corresponding loss of true dependence upon Christ. There is a break in the only saving relationship that man needs for victory. This allows people to sin and call evil good. It discourages those who strive to be like Christ, but fall short of this false idea of perfection.

It is God's will that, having surrendered to Christ at conversion as best he knows, the believer will maintain that attitude that as fast as anything further is revealed to him contrary to the will of God, he will promptly give that up also. God will see to it that throughout the Christian life here on earth, there will be deeper insights into the sinfulness and selfishness of our own natures. There will be increased dependence, increased repentance, and prayer for forgiveness. The believer will never come to the place where he will not pray the Lord's prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." By this increased insight, we shall continually need an increased "looking unto Jesus the author and the finisher of our faith." There are no limits to God's power. He is always willing and able to give us the victory. But man limits God by virtue of his lack of insight and lack of surrender. In proportion to the maturity and completeness of his knowledge will be the completeness of his surrender and victory.

By Grace Alone: True Meaning

The basic doctrine of the Christian faith is salvation by grace alone. This doctrine represents the final renunciation of either human effort or the human claim to perfection. Christ is our sole perfection, our sole righteousness. In ourselves we are never sinless. But so long as we look to Christ, sin and self cannot prevail.

The pretension to sinless perfection at any time in this earthly life is the root of spiritual pride and self righteousness. The Christian does not deny that the new life in Christ is capable of a new righteousness, of victory over sin. He only insists that it is not his righteousness, not his victory, but Christ's.

There will be no point in spiritual achievement in this life where one may rest with the certainty that he will sin no more, or that he does not stand before God as a sinner in need of divine grace and power. The Christian knows that there still remains in him a fountain of evil, a depraved nature.

Salvation by grace alone means that absolute perfection and sinlessness cannot be realized here and now. Righteousness by faith means that we look continually and exclusively to Christ; that we look away from ourselves and any hope in ourselves altogether in order to live out of Him alone. Genuine salvation directs us at once to Christ, to the only perfect life lived here on the earth, and to His redemption through the Cross. What is absolutely central is Jesus Christ. Man's victory over sin is exclusively the work of God in Christ, the continual control of the life by the Holy Spirit; that through daily union with Christ we actually participate in Christ's holy life.

The righteousness of Christ that saves is not the beginning of a new self-righteousness, but the perpetual end of it. It is a perpetual living in Christ from a center and source beyond us and our wisdom and power. We live continually out of a risen Christ and never out of

ourselves. Victory is through the continual operation of the Holy Spirit, because the Christian life consists in the fruits of the Spirit and the power of God.