

The Impossibility of Perfection in Sanctification

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“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48). In a simple sentence Jesus laid out the demands of his heavenly Father. It is clear that Jesus is not speaking here of only a relative perfection; the perfection he demands is to be equal (*kathos*) to that of God himself. Human beings who are honest with themselves quickly realize that they neither are nor have been perfect as God is perfect. Yet, a part of us doesn't want to admit our failure. A part of us wants to hang on to something good in ourselves and hope that we can somehow meet God's demand for perfection.

Unfortunately that part of ourselves, dubbed the *opinio legis* by the dogmaticians, remains with us throughout this life. Even after we have been cleansed of every sin by the blood of Christ (1 Jn 1:7) and are seen by God as radiant, holy, and blameless (Eph 5:27), part of us wishes we didn't need this "righteousness from God" that Paul writes about so beautifully in Romans. We think that somehow--perhaps with God's help, but also through our own diligent striving--we might become pure and holy in our own selves, not just vicariously through Christ.

It is because of this inborn stubbornness, no doubt, that the concept of perfect sanctification during earthly life continues to pop up in the history of the church. It can be seen in Pelagius, the monk who denied the existence of original sin, and only sought to eradicate actual sin as a means of obtaining salvation. It can be seen in the Middle Ages, where the cult of the saints was created and exalted. Such persons were said to have performed such deeds of righteousness that they had not only covered for their own sins but could add to a “treasury of merits” that could apply to the sins of others. It becomes even more clear in the life and writings

of John Wesley and the early Methodists, as well as their later heirs in the Holiness and Pentecostal movements in America during the last century.¹

But this perfectionism is a dangerous delusion. It not only has no basis in Scripture, but can have a devastating effect on one's belief in other articles of faith.

I. Sanctification is always imperfect in this life

Perhaps the most clear and extended explanation of the Christian's opposing natures of saint and sinner is Paul's vivid self-description in the seventh chapter of Romans:

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do if I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing...

So I find this law at work: When I want to do what is good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am? Who will rescue me from this body of death? (Romans 7:15-19, 21-24)

From the context it becomes clear that Paul is actually writing these verses to combat any idea of perfectionism. In the previous chapter he had described how through the death and resurrection of Christ, we are no longer controlled by sin. "Our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with...anyone who has died has been freed from sin" (Rom 6:6-7). Someone might have falsely concluded from these verses that the believing child of God is completely separated from the sinful nature. In chapter seven, Paul shows that this is not the case. Even he himself, an apostle of Christ Jesus, had to daily struggle against his old self, and often his actions reflected his sinful nature rather than the true "I" of his new self.

¹For a concise summary of the history of this movement, see the article by Prof. Armin Panning in *Wisconsin*

Some interpreters have tried to get around this conclusion by claiming that in Romans 7 Paul is speaking about his former life as a persecutor, or about an unbelieving person, instead of his current state. However, a look at the verses shows that this is impossible. For one thing, Paul uses present tense verbs throughout the section. An even stronger proof is that an unconverted person could never say, "I have the desire to do what is good," as Paul does. Such a struggle only takes place in the believer, not in someone without a new man created by the Holy Spirit. Moreover, Paul had already dealt with the unbeliever's spiritual condition in chapters 1 and 2 of Romans. Therefore, these verses in chapter seven are speaking about the imperfect sanctification of the Apostle Paul himself at the very time he wrote the letter. They are equally fitting for every Christian. The chapters before and after this section make it clear that Paul was not speaking of himself alone. All of us face the same struggle with the sinful nature that Paul did and often fail just as he did, and our consciences bear witness to that fact.²

The Bible confirms our experiences by making it crystal clear that all human beings on this earth continue to be sinners. Scripture plainly says, "There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins" (Ecc 7:20). "All have turned aside, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one" (Rom 3:12). This is true even after conversion. The apostle John reminded his readers, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us...If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives" (1 Jn 1:8,10).

This is why Paul so often encourages his readers to grow in sanctified living. He did not assume that they were perfected saints free from sinful thoughts or desires. Instead, he urged them to continue to progress in sanctification. Paul prays that the Philippians "abound more and

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more in knowledge and depth of insight” (Php 1:9). He admits that he himself has not “already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect,” (Php 3:12) and reminds them that “All of us who are mature should take such a view of things” (3:15). Paul reminded the Corinthians that here on earth our knowledge of God's will is imperfect, and that only in heaven would we see it clearly. (1 Co 13:12) All of Paul's letters contain similar exhortations to sanctified living.

The same truth was taught by God when he established the worship life of his Old Testament people. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, all the people's sins were removed. No one was exempt; even the high priest himself had to offer sacrifices for his own sins and the sins of his family before he could sacrifice for the sins of the people (Lev 16:11ff). Only Christ, the perfect high priest, was free from every sin in himself (Heb 7:27-28).

God also took care when he inspired his Word to record the weaknesses and failings of even the mightiest men of faith. Abraham twice lied about his relationship with Sarah rather than trust God to protect him. Jacob deceived his father. Moses murdered an Egyptian, and later grew angry and resentful of his role as leader of the people. Elijah fell into despair. Job accused God of wrongdoing. David committed adultery and murder. Solomon fell into idolatry. Peter denied that he knew Jesus. James and John wanted to destroy a Samaritan village. The list could go on and on, but the point is clear. God never holds mere humans up for us as examples of perfection. That honor goes to Christ alone. “He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth” (Is 53:9).

II. Arguments of perfectionists

²Paul describes this same inner struggle in Galatians 5:16-17.

With such clear Scriptural proof of the presence of our sinful nature, why would anyone be so bold as to deny this truth? As mentioned above, human pride gets in the way and refuses to believe this humbling truth. But this is not the only reason. At times, Christians long for visible confirmation of their future salvation. Because of the weakness of our faith, we long to be able to see and experience right now some of the contentment and the perfect state of heaven rather than endure the stormy seas of this life.

This seems to be the situation in which John Wesley found himself in the early 18th century. A nominal Anglican by birth, Wesley was by his own admission strongly influenced by Thomas a Kempis' *Imitatio Christi* and William Law's *Christian Perfection*.³ He witnessed in others, notably some Moravian sailors on his Atlantic voyages, a certainty and assurance of faith which he realized he did not possess himself. Especially after a "conversion experience" he had while listening (ironically?) to Luther's preface to the Book of Romans, Wesley began to earnestly spread his teaching of Christian perfectionism.

Wesley turned to passages like 1 John 4:17 for proof of his teaching: "In this way love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him." Christ himself, Wesley claimed, had taught that "a good tree cannot bear bad fruit." (Mt 7:18) Some of Scripture's most beautiful passages on justification were twisted by Wesley into proofs for total sanctification. Writing on 1 John 1:7, he stated,

Now, it is evident the apostle here speaks of a deliverance wrought in this world. For he saith not, The blood of Christ will cleanse (at the hour of death, or in the day of judgment), but it "cleanseth," at the present time, us living Christians "from all sin." And it is equally evident, that if any sin remain, we are not cleansed from all sin. If any unrighteousness remain in the soul, it is not cleansed from all unrighteousness.⁴

³Panning, 9.

⁴Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, 20-21.

The passage could not be talking about justification, Wesley maintained, because this would make justification dependent on our “walking in the light”--a phrase which Wesley understood to refer to good works. To apply 1 John 1:7 to justification, Wesley claimed, would teach work-righteousness “in the strongest sense possible.”⁵

Wesley dismissed passages like Ecclesiastes 7:20 by claiming that the standards of the Old Testament no longer applied. In the New Testament age, he claimed, the gift of the Holy Spirit made it possible for Christians to aspire higher than in former days. When confronted with James’ words, “We all stumble in many ways,” (Ja 3:2), Wesley claimed the author was using a figure of speech. 1 John 1:8-10 was said to refer only to one’s past life, not his current situation, because of the tense of the verb in verse 10 (“If we claim we have not sinned...”). When confronted with Romans 7, Wesley admitted that Paul might not have been entirely sanctified when he wrote his earlier letters, but that this did not mean such a feat was impossible.⁶ In addition, Methodists cite the many places that Paul and others encouraged Christians to strive for fullness, perfection and maturity. They argue, “Would God command the impossible?”

There are a number of problems with these interpretations. It is true that the Bible repeatedly urges us to be perfect, but this does not imply that such perfection is within our grasp. God has indeed given us what he demands, but the perfection God demands he offers to us through faith in Jesus Christ. This is the great truth of our justification, not our sanctification. “By one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (Heb 10:14). Jesus’ perfection is already ours, and it lasts forever. Our sanctification, by contrast, is a work in progress. We are “being made holy,” but we will not attain that holiness until we reach heaven.

⁵Wesley, 21.

⁶Wesley, 33-34.

A careful look at the passages Wesley used show how mistaken he was in his views. John is clearly speaking about a Christian's present sins in chapter 1 of his letter, as well as elsewhere (cf. 1 Jn 2:1; 3:20a), not sins committed long ago. Such sins have already been covered over by the blood of Christ and need trouble us no longer. At times John does speak of the Christian only according to the New Man, as in 1 John 3:9, but he never denies the existence of the Old Adam.

Nowhere in the Scriptures are the "gifts of the Spirit" given to the church, equated with the "entire sanctification" which Wesley taught. Solomon's words in Ecclesiastes 7:20 are as applicable today as they were when they were written, as are Paul's words in Romans 3:12.

III. Impact of perfectionist teaching

As mentioned above, perfectionism's most devastating impact is that it turns people away from the work of Christ. It directs them toward their own hearts and lives. Although Wesley tried to give credit to God for sanctification, his "method" directed people to the law rather than to the Gospel:

How are we to wait for this change?...Not in careless indifference, or indolent inactivity; but in vigorous, universal obedience, in a zealous keeping of all the commandments, in watchfulness and painfulness, in denying ourselves, and taking up our cross daily; as well as in earnest prayer and fasting, and a close attendance on all the ordinances of God. And if any man dream of attaining it any other way...he deceiveth his own soul.⁷

According to Wesley's method, such perfection is not a result of God's work, but it is first and foremost a human achievement. If someone believes they have reached perfection in this way, the inevitable result is spiritual pride in one's own works. "God, I thank you that I am not like other men...I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get" (Lk 18:11-12). Like the Pharisee,

⁷Wesley, 53. Note how Wesley even added to the commandments of God by demanding fasting and painfulness. One cannot help but be reminded of the self-chosen works of the monastic system in their quest for spiritual perfection.

perfectionists belittle the free forgiveness of sins offered by Christ and those who rely on it, because they are certain that they no longer need it.

Although the Bible repeatedly encourages us to live holy lives, it never offers perfection as the motivation for our striving. Instead, it emphasizes the beauty of justification. “He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (2 Cor 5:15). Methodism is really legalism because it urges us to keep God's law for our own benefit and self-improvement rather than to praise and glorify God. By focusing on the law, perfectionism really is detrimental to true sanctification, because it robs people of the Gospel which offers the only real power for holy living.

Another side effect of perfectionism is a belittling of the law. This must happen because the closer we examine the law, the more clearly we see how impossible it is to keep all of it (cf. Ja 2:10). So perfectionists are forced to “lower the bar” a bit, as Wesley did: “I believe, a person filled with the love of God is still liable to these involuntary transgressions. Such transgressions you may call sins, if you please: I do not...”⁸ But softening the law is forbidden (Mt 5:18), and it only leads people to think that they don't need the salvation of Christ in the first place.

Martin Luther realized that perfectionism really was an attack against the very heart of the Christian faith. He defended the proposition “a pious man sins in all his good works” against the attacks of the papacy because he saw that this statement “overthrows the foundation of Roman work-righteousness and of the whole papacy.”⁹

IV. Conclusion: which way from here?

⁸Wesley, 44.

⁹Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* III, 35.

We have clearly seen that the Bible does not teach the kind of perfectionism that Wesley and so many others have imagined. But where does this leave us? Forced to admit that we are doomed to fail God's demand for perfection, how shall we respond?

God never intended this belief to lead to spiritual apathy. But this is exactly how our sinful nature wants to respond. "If I'm not going to keep God's law perfectly anyway, why bother trying?" Francis Pieper reminds us, "The fact that sanctification in this life will always be imperfect must not be put forward as an excuse for the neglect of sanctification. On the contrary, it is God's will and the will of the Christian that he strive after perfection."¹⁰

Instead of leading us to spiritual laziness, this truth drives us back to our need for a Savior. We daily repent and return to our baptism. There we find the assurance of our forgiveness from the God whose mercies are new every morning. Although we despair of our own worthiness and cry out with Paul, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?", we also respond firmly with him, "Thanks be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Ro 7:24-25).

Paul can say this, and so can we, because we do have a perfection to look forward to--not in this life but in the next. This is "the prize to which God has called [us] heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Php 3:14). The bodies we now have will be "sown in dishonor," but they will be "raised in glory" (1 Cor 15:43). The "old order of things," including our struggle with the sinful nature, will pass away when God makes everything new (Rev. 21:4-5). May God preserve us in faith and motivate us with his Gospel to carry out his will, ever increasing in holiness until the day he grants it to us in full!

¹⁰Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, III, 33.