

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF VILLA RICA, PCA

Attaining Ethical Perfection

By

Rev. Todd W. Allen

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Matthew 5:43-48

⁴³"You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴"But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶"For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷"If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸"Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Matt. 5:43 through Matt. 5:48 (NASB)

Pastor Dean Miller shares this story about perfection: It seems the pastor was saying to the people that none of us is perfect, and not only that, none of us today even has the opportunity of knowing a perfect person. In fact, he went so far as to challenge the people, asking them if any of them had even heard of a perfect person among their contemporaries. One fellow stood up and allowed as he knew of such a person. The pastor pressed him for details: Did he really know him? Had he met him? The man admitted that he didn't know the man personally, but he had certainly heard a great deal about him. In fact, this storied man of perfections was his wife's first husband. --James S. Hewett, Illustrations Unlimited (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1988), p. 405.

Jesus tells us that our Heavenly Father is perfect. All who attain to heaven must therefore be perfect in order to enter that perfect place presided over by a perfect heavenly Father. We are told in the Word of God that without holiness no man shall see the Lord. But the Word of God also tells us that that **there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins** (Ecc. 7:20).

Isaiah wrote, ⁶**For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; And all of us wither like a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.** **Isa. 64:6 (NASB)**

Paul makes the case that every person in the world is sinful and therefore imperfect. He wrote to the Romans, ⁹**What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; ¹⁰as it is written,**

"THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE;

¹¹ **THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD;**

¹² **ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS; THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE."**

¹³ **"THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE, WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING," "THE POISON OF ASPES IS UNDER THEIR LIPS";**

¹⁴ "WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS"; ¹⁵ "THEIR FEET ARE SWIFT TO SHED BLOOD, ¹⁶ DESTRUCTION AND MISERY ARE IN THEIR PATHS, ¹⁷ AND THE PATH OF PEACE THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN." ¹⁸ "THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES." Rom. 3:9-18

None of us enjoys hearing that we are sinful and imperfect moral beings. It is bad enough to know that I am a mistake maker, that I cannot do anything perfectly. Somehow we all would like to believe that there is something we can do to perfection.

Some years ago there was a Peanuts story that showed Charlie Brown working on a woodworking project. Lucy came by and asked: "How's the birdhouse coming along, Charlie Brown?" He replied, "Well, I'm a lousy carpenter. I can't nail straight. I can't saw straight and I always split the wood...I'm nervous, I lack confidence, I'm stupid, I have poor taste and absolutely no sense of design..." And then in the last frame he concluded, "So, all things considered, it's coming along OKAY."

Poor Charlie Brown. The proverbial loser, continually dissatisfied with himself. The reason Charlie Brown is so popular is that many of us can see ourselves in him.

For some of us that profound dissatisfaction with who we are is reflected in an obsession with how we look. NEWSWEEK some time ago reported on a health phenomenon that seems to highlight our nation's fascination with external beauty. The sub-headline on the story read, perpetual plastic surgery patients go from face-lift to face-lift in search of physical perfection.

Take Barbara. When she first made an appointment with plastic surgeon Dr. Frank Dunton she didn't really need to, but thought she'd give it a try. Since then, she has gone under his knife at least a half a dozen times.

She is not alone. The article comments that "so-called scalpel slaves, mostly women in their late 30's and 40's are perpetual plastic surgery patients. As soon as their new nose is six months old, they're back for another job."

The doctors themselves have the most telling comments regarding the reasons for such behavior--and the reasons are more than skin deep. One comments, "They experience a temporary high, but there's a certain sense of lacking that they try to fulfill with yet another procedure."

He goes on to point out that they are looking for a profound change in their social life and answers to problems they haven't found through more conventional means. (Newsweek, Jan. 11, 1988, "Scalpel Slaves Just Can't Quit.")

The gospel of Jesus Christ speaks to the deepest need of man, the need for forgiveness, reconciliation with an offended God, and the need for a new heart that can attain to perfection. The knowledge of one's sinful imperfection is vital if one is to be changed by the gospel into a new creature. God does not reform that old nature that each of us was born with. God imparts to the believer in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord a new nature that loves righteousness and hates sin. The convert to Jesus Christ is a man with two natures, he still has his old nature but he now has a new nature as well. And it is this new nature that is able to attain a heavenly perfection.

Sad is the man who comes to the realization that in order to go to heaven he must be perfect but who then seeks to achieve a perfection deserving of heaven apart from repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as the only Savior of sinners. Whatever we do to acquire a perfect righteousness is bound to fail without relying solely on the Person and work of Jesus Christ for it is he alone who can save us from our sinfulness and do a work of grace within that will present us before the Father in a perfect condition of righteousness and holiness necessary to enter heaven.

Some men have read or heard the beatitudes and have mistakenly believed that they could acquire holiness by human means. If that were possible then surely a

man named Symeon who lived from 390 – 459 would have qualified. When Symeon, as a shepherd boy at the age of 13, heard the beatitudes he betook himself to a cloister. He lay at the threshold for several days without eating or drinking and begged to be admitted as the meanest servant of the house. He began his ascetic life by

eating only once a week on Sundays. During Lent he would fast the entire forty days. This he did on 26 occasions. Another affliction he imposed on himself was to lace his body so tightly that the cord passed through to the bones and could be cut off only with the most terrible pains. For this they dismissed him from the cloister.

He went from the cloister to a mountain and chained his feet. But this didn't satisfy him, so in 423 he invented a new sort of holiness that many others copied. He began to live on a pillar, which was gradually raised in height until at the end of his life, after 36 years on the pillar, he had raised it to sixty feet. The top was only three feet in diameter and had a railing around it to keep him from falling. He took rest by leaning, since there was no room to lie down or sit. Disciples on a ladder carried food up. He wore a covering of skins and a chain around his neck. For days and weeks and months and years he stood exposed to the scalding sun, the drenching rain, the crackling frost, the howling storms, living a life of daily death and martyrdom, groaning under the load of sin, never attaining to the true comfort and peace of soul which is derived from a childlike trust in Jesus Christ's infinite merits, earnestly striving after a super-human holiness, and looking to a glorious reward in heaven, and immortal fame on earth.

He died at the age of 69 of a long concealed and loathsome ulcer on his leg; and his body was brought in solemn procession to the Metropolitan Church of Antioch. Others followed him in this form of asceticism and self-denial in the east down to the 12th century. (saint Symeon the Stylite, Philip Schaff)

The beatitudinal man knows that his righteousness is not self-induced. He receives it as a free gift from the Son of God. All who believe in him are justified freely as a gift of God and have imputed to them the righteousness of God. This is a perfect righteousness. And by grace this commences a program of sanctification that will ultimately issue in a perfect practical righteousness.

He says that the beatitudinal man is different from the natural man. He declared, **46 "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?"** ⁴⁷ **"If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?"** ⁴⁸ **"Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."**

This new man in Christ, Spirit-indwelt man that he is, is able to manifest a supernatural love, a love like unto the love of God Himself. We are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. We are to imitate God in showing love to others.

This is not hard to understand when you realize that righteousness has a concomitant of love. God bestows on us a perfect righteousness and with that comes a perfect love. Neither the righteousness or the love is a fully realized practical character quality in any of us until sanctification is complete, but it is in process and we are commanded by Christ to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. I am consciously to be seeking to be like my heavenly Father. This is not in order to go to heaven but because I am going to heaven. The practical ways for that to be realized is through loving the unlovely, by going the second mile, by praying for those who persecute me, by showing sacrificial love to others. One of the greatest expressions of love is simply to notice people and to pay attention to them.

This runs contrary to that old nature that still dwells in my flesh. So I have a struggle against my own flesh. I must deny that old nature and yield to the new man in Christ who is born of the Spirit of God. Loving the unlovely is a great challenge. Leaving the sanctuary, a church member comments: "I'd like to see you love MY neighbor."

The ultimate question is not can I be perfect, but am I in Jesus Christ consciously seeking to be like my heavenly Father? To be in Jesus Christ is to be his disciple. To be his disciple is to be letting him

live the Christ life through me. Loving him I will keep his commandments. Loving him I will love my neighbor and even love my enemies. The difference should at least be noticeable to me, to each of us, as we take to heart his teaching in the beatitudes. The beatitudes are not instructions on how to save ones' self, but they are guidelines for those who have already been saved, who know the Lord and love the Lord.

If you sense imperfection in yourself and desire to be what God would have you to be, then turn to the Lord Jesus Christ and ask him to save you from your sins. Ask him to give to you the gift of his Son, his forgiveness and his love. He will save you if you ask him. Whosoever comes to him he promises to receive and not turn him away. Have you come to Him? Are you embarked on the life that leads to the heavenly Father through Jesus Christ the Son? Heavenly perfection can be attained only by and through Him. Don't miss the glory and blessedness of what the Father freely gives thorough the Son.

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF VILLA RICA
519 MAIN STREET
VILLA RICA, GA. 30180
770-459-5276

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