



Be Perfect?

DOES GOD REALLY EXPECT PERFECTION FROM US?

ARE YOU A PERFECTIONIST? Is your boss one? Perhaps you have a perfectionist parent or sibling? In any case, you probably know that perfectionists can be hard to please. The pressure to be perfect is hard to escape. We live in a culture that demands, especially at work, things and products to be just right. Some of us, like me, also have perfectionist tendencies. When I try too hard and expect too much of myself—trying to write that perfect sermon or that perfect article—it can really slow me down or even paralyze me from doing what I can.

Perfectionism is a tough critic and master.

And how many of us expect perfection of our local church and/or worship experiences? How many of us expect perfection in our spiritual walk with God? Moreover, how many of us think that God expects perfection from us?

Jesus commands us in Matthew 5:48, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” That sounds impossible to live up to. What kind of perfection does Jesus expect from us? Are we doomed to failure and frustration?

To answer such questions, let’s first consider what biblical perfection is *not*. Then, digging deeper, let’s look at the Old Testament view of perfection, followed by the New Testament

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

—Matthew 5:48

view and the Matthew text in particular. You may be surprised by what we find.

What Biblical Perfection Is Not

Jesus is, first of all, *not* telling us to be sinless. In Western culture our conventional understanding of perfection has to do with flawlessness. To be perfect, we think, is to be without any defects, without any mistakes—to be flawless.

When we apply that definition of perfection to ethical behavior or to religious and spiritual perfection, we naturally think it means to be sinless, to be without any moral or ethical flaws, to be fully obedient to God’s laws.

But how can we ever achieve that? Our dilemma is obvious. We are sinners. We sin often and we sin repeatedly and, sometimes, we sin deliberately. How can any human being ever be perfect like God is perfect? And how can God demand such perfection from us?

Thankfully, God does not demand nor expect us to be sinless. First John 1:8-10 clearly states that all Christians sin and all have

Jesus' command sounds impossible to live up to.

to ask for forgiveness. Sinlessness is not the kind of perfection God is speaking of.

Old Testament Perfection

There are, mainly, two words in Old Testament Hebrew that mean “perfect”: *tammim* and *shalem*. *Tammim* is normally used in relation to being blameless in obedience to God’s commands. For example, Genesis 6:9 calls Noah “a righteous man, blameless [the King James Version (KJV) uses *perfect* here] among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God.”

Shalem or *shalom*, which we normally translate as “peace” in English, can also be translated as “perfect.” When it gets translated as “perfect,” it is normally used with the word “heart” to describe undivided devotion to God.

For example, King Solomon, in dedicating the temple he built for the Lord, ends his blessing to the people of Israel with these words: “And may your hearts be fully committed to the Lord our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands, as at this time” (1 Kings 8:61). The phrase “fully committed” is from the word *shalem*. The KJV translates this verse as “Let your heart therefore be perfect with the Lord our God. . . .”

The word *shalem* is translated similarly in 1 Kings 15:14. Speaking of King Asa, the text reads, “Although he did not remove the high places [of idol worship], Asa’s heart was fully committed to the Lord all his life.” (In the KJV: “Nevertheless Asa’s heart was perfect with the Lord all his days.”)

So we find that the Old Testament does not equate perfection with being sinless. Noah got drunk (Gen. 9)—not so perfect in our eyes, is he? But Scripture calls him blameless, or perfect. And when it calls King Asa perfect or fully committed in his heart to God, it explicitly notes that Asa didn’t get rid of the high places of idol worship in his country. Nevertheless, his heart was considered perfect with the Lord despite that huge mistake in his leadership.

It seems, then, that the Old Testament’s view of perfection before God is not a sinless or mistake-free existence, but rather being fully committed to God with an overall obedient life.

New Testament Perfection

We see a similar view in the New Testament. The Greek word translated as “perfect” in Matthew 5:48—and in many other passages in the New Testament—is *teleios*.

Outside the Bible, *teleios* carries a range of meanings that includes the concepts of being whole, unblemished, full, perfect, actualized, mature, supreme, and dedicated. In the Bible, *teleios* always seem to be connected to wholeness, completeness, undivided devotion, or maturity.

For example, 1 Corinthians 2:6 says, “We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age.” The word translated “mature” here is the Greek

word *teleios*. Again, the KJV translates it as “perfect”: “We speak wisdom among them that are perfect.”

You’ll find another example of *teleios* in James 1:4: “Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” We see the word used twice here: let perseverance finish its work (*teleios*) so that you may be mature and complete (*teleios* again). That’s why the KJV translates the verse this way: “Let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.”

So the emphasis here, too, is not about being flawless or sinless. It’s about maturity, completeness, wholeness, and reaching your goal or destination.

In Matthew 5 we see all that and more. The immediate context suggests that the focus of the perfection in verse 48 is love (see verses 43-47). Believers must love all people as God loves them. Instead of loving our neighbors and hating our enemies, Jesus commands us to love our enemies because God causes the sun to rise and the rain to fall on both the evil and the good. If you love only those who love you, says Jesus, you are just like everybody else. But be perfect in love as God is perfect in love.

Jesus asks us to be mature and complete in our love, to be totally devoted and undivided in loving others, even our enemies, because God loves that way too. That’s what Jesus’ command to “be perfect” is all about.

Is God a Perfectionist?

So is God a perfectionist? No and yes.

No, God is not a perfectionist in that God demands flawless or sinless moral living from us. But yes, God is a perfectionist in that God calls us to live spiritually mature lives fully devoted to loving God and loving our neighbors—all our neighbours, even our enemies—just as God loves each of us.

Even in that sense, however, we find ourselves hard-pressed to be perfect. We still fail to be spiritually mature, to be fully devoted to God, to love our enemies.

Thankfully, God provides two aids toward our “perfection.”

First, Jesus Christ, the perfect Lamb of God, fulfilled all God’s requirements perfectly on our behalf. If we are in Christ, his perfection covers our failings.

Second, the Holy Spirit’s ongoing perfecting work in our lives will eventually culminate in our perfection in the new heaven and earth, when we serve God with all the saints in glory. We begin our spiritual lives in Christ’s perfection, grow in perfection through the Spirit’s work, and end in the perfection given to us at the new creation. Thanks be to God! ■



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