

Who Do You Say That I Am?
Seeing and Delighting in Jesus through an Expository
Journey through the **Gospel of Matthew**
37- The Kingdom of Heaven and Its Citizens- Part 17
The Pursuit of Holiness will Deliver Us from
the Curse of Perfectionism

Church November 20, 2022

Matthew 5:48

Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

*To the Glory of God the Father; God the Son;
and God the Holy Spirit. Amen*

Human beings are what theologians call, “*Fallen*”. We have *fallen* down or fallen away from our *first* “Estate”; or our *original* Condition. You see, *before* he sinned- Adam enjoyed *complete* and *unfettered* Access to God. In other words, Adam had no Barriers between himself and God. And in the language of Moses- Adam “*walked*” with God.

But when Adam sinned- God cursed him. And because God cursed Adam- that Curse now falls on each and every successive Generation through the seed of the Father. And so, we are formed in our Mother’s womb- as fallen sinners. And so, two things are now true:

1. We have the very SAME fallen (rebellious/God-hating) Nature that Adam had AFTER he fell
2. We are *personally* Guilty of the Sin of Adam (by virtue of being in the loins of Adam when he sinned)

... which is the despised Doctrine of “*Original Sin*”.

So, we are NOT “Sinners” because we sin. We sin because we are already “Sinners”- by being the Sons and Daughters of Adam. So, we really don’t have to commit any additional Sins to deserve eternal Damnation. We don’t have to sin against God *personally*- to deserve to go to Hell. We are ALREADY personally Guilty of the Sin of Adam. And that means we are formed in our Mother’s womb

as being “Sinners” and “God-haters” before we ever commit our first Sin. In other words, *before* we are born- we are ALREADY fallen, lost and damned people.

So, there are NO “innocent” people on earth. There are NO “good” people on earth. Nobody, who is Lost; Fallen; and Sinful is “Innocent” or “Good”. And nobody is “Righteous”- outside of Jesus and the New Birth. Every single Person who breathes air is a “Sinner”, who insults and belittles the Glory of God- blatantly and repeatedly.

Now in **Romans 3:10b-18**, the Apostle Paul is teaching about the Lost; Fallen; and Sinful Condition of ALL of Humanity (both Jews and Gentiles) who are NOT saved. And it is this Lost; Fallen; and Sinful Condition that causes ALL of us to NEED God’s Salvation. And in that Passage- Paul quotes from **Psalm 14:1-3** and **Psalm 53:1-3** when he said,

**10 ... "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 ASPS 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."**

And it is this Charge that makes “Original Sin” to be one of the most hated and despised Truths that the Bible teaches. It is what causes biblical Christianity to be categorically rejected by many today. This Truth is insulting and demeaning and offensive because it strips every single Human Being of the Concept that he is a “Good Person”.

Perhaps the best “Summary Statement” that is found anywhere in the Bible about the Condition of Lost; Fallen; and Sinful people is found in **Genesis 6:5** that says,

Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

Now this verse was written AFTER Adam sinned. And it describes the spiritual Condition of every single Human on earth. Nobody is exempt from this Statement. And the phrase that says, “**the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth**” means that the Wickedness of every single person on earth is “**great**” in the sense that Man’s Wickedness is “*All- encompassing*” or “*All-pervasive*”. In other words, there is NO area of “human Existence” that was left untouched by the Wickedness of fallen Man.

And the second phrase that says, “**every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually**” explains what this “**All- pervasive Wickedness**” looks like. But look at how Moses was “moved” by God the Holy Spirit to phrase this. Moses said, “**every intent of the thoughts of his heart**”. So, this means “*ALL the intentions of EVERY conceived Thought that originated from his sinful heart*” And that means EVERYTHING! In other words, there is no other Intention behind every single Act of every single person on earth that is excluded from being part of this. So, EVERY here means ALL.

And then look what Moses said next, “**was only evil continually**”. Now for something to be “**ONLY Evil**” means that there is no other disposition that it could be besides being Evil. So, another way of saying this would be to say that, “Every single Intent of the Thoughts of the human heart- after the Fall of Adam- was NOTHING ELSE BESIDES EVIL! So, this is ALL Evil. Pure Evil. Totally Evil. But then it gets even *worse*- because Moses wrote, “**continually**”- which means: *all the time*.

So, the “Evil” that exists inside of fallen Man- is *total*. It is *all-pervasive*. It is *absolute* and it is *constantly*. In other words, there is NO capacity in any human being- after the Fall of Adam- for him to be “Good” or “Righteous” or “Holy” or “Godly”. NONE! We lost that in the Fall. So, EVERY Thought; EVERY Intention; EVERY Act; EVERY Deed; and EVERY Word that EVERY human on earth engages in- as a lost and unsaved person- is ALL Evil- ALL the Time!

That is why Salvation is so important. Because unless we are saved- we are doomed! Because in that Condition- NOBODY can save himself. NOBODY can make himself acceptable to God. And NOBODY with that kind of “Fallen Nature”- can get God’s Favor.

So, this absolute Truth goes on to say that, because this IS the Condition of every single Person on earth- that unless they experience the Miracle of the New Birth and are saved- through Faith in Jesus and in His finished Work- God will damn them into Hell for all of Eternity.

So, Salvation in Jesus forgives Sin; and it covers the individual with the Righteousness of Jesus Christ. And that is what allows us to go to Heaven- being Forgiven and being made Righteous.

Salvation changes our Nature and gifts us with the Power and the Desire to love God; to love His Commandments; and to find the fullness of our own Joy- in obeying the Bible. Salvation also *grants* to us both the Power and Desire to *turn away from Sin*- every time we see it in ourselves. And that ongoing; constant; and relentless “*turning away from Sin*” is what the Bible calls, “*Repentance*”.

And that is wonderful; and we rejoice at what God has sovereignly done for us in the Lord Jesus Christ and in His finished Work! But even AFTER we are saved- we are still “Fallen” and we are still Cursed. What Salvation did was to save our Souls. And so, immediately after our Death- our Souls will go to Heaven to live in unspeakable Joy! And at some point in the Future- our saved Souls will be *re-united* with a glorified Body- and that will complete this amazing Process that we call, “Salvation”.

But while we are still alive- the Curse that God put on our Flesh- is STILL in place. And that is why we die- *even after we are saved!* And that is why our fallen, sinful Flesh *cannot* go to Heaven. At Death- our physical Flesh goes back to the dust of the earth and will rot and decay – while our Souls will be in the Presence of the Lord!

But while we are alive- our physical Bodies- our unredeemed Flesh- is in accord with the Devil and with the fallen and sinful world *System*- that argues with and fights against- God. So, while we are on this earth- after we are saved- we have three Enemies:

1. The World (System)
2. The Flesh
3. The Devil

... and these three Entities wage War against us and our Efforts to love and obey Jesus Christ.

Now many people are confused about this- but we MUST acknowledge that, as human beings, we ONLY have ONE single “Nature”; ONE “Essence”; and ONE “Substance”. And our Nature is Who we are- NOT What we do. What we do- is predicated on Who we are. So, Who we are- is infinitely MORE important than What we do.

So, as we struggle to obey God- we are fought. And many teach that saved people are still fighting with our old fallen Nature- but that isn’t true. A human being can have ONLY one Nature at a time. Jesus is the ONLY one, Who had two Natures (Divine and Human). We only have one single Nature. And that Nature is either “Redeemed” or it is “Fallen”. And so, what we wrestle with- as saved people- is NOT our fallen Nature- but our unredeemed Flesh.

You see, we “DO” what we *love*; what we *want*; and what we *enjoy*. So, unless we are being coerced- we Choose; we Decide; and we Do- what we “want to”; what we “enjoy”; and what we “Love”. So, for example, we marry the person- we love. We but the color car- we want. And we engage in Hobbies- that we enjoy.

So, as humans, we choose- yes! We choose all day long. But all of our Choices; and all of our Decisions; and all of our Actions are predicated on What or Who we love; enjoy; and want. And so, absent any Coercion- all of our Choices and Decisions and Actions are based on Who or What we Love; Enjoy; or Want. And we CANNOT and we WILL NOT choose contrary to those Loves; Desires; and Wants.

But *why* do we love what we love? *Why* do we enjoy what we enjoy? And *why* do we want what we want? What is it- *inside of us*- that formulates; or that is the Basis for- our Loves; Wants; and our Enjoyments? Our Nature.

So, we choose all the time. But our Choices are NOT “autonomous”. In other words, our Choices and Decisions are NOT made in a vacuum. Our Choices are NOT arbitrary. The Foundation of ALL of our Choices- is what we Love; what we Want; and what we Enjoy. And the Basis or the Foundation of what we Love; Want; and Enjoy- is our Nature- which is “Who we are”.

And all human beings have one of two Natures:

1. Fallen
2. Redeemed

All Lost and unsaved people have a “*fallen Nature*”- which is the kind of Nature that is after Adam- in that it ONLY loves “Sin” and “Self”. A “*fallen Nature*” ONLY loves and wants and enjoys Sin and Self. And that means that a person with a “fallen Nature” CANNOT Choose Jesus; He CANNOT decide in favor of Righteousness; and he CANNOT want to enjoy God- precisely because there is NOTHING within that fallen Nature that finds any Love; or Enjoyment in ANYTHING other than “Sin” and the betterment of “Self”. So, a person who has a “fallen Nature” CANNOT choose to repent and trust in Jesus for Salvation- precisely because he doesn’t *want* to. And since every single human being on earth is formed in his Mother’s womb with this fallen Nature- unless God does something powerful and sovereign inside of that person- FIRST- to change his Nature- to give to him a “redeemed Nature”- he will NEVER choose Jesus in a million years!

And this is why everybody MUST be born again. You see, being born again is the sovereign Act of God- whereby God *changes* the Nature of that individual.

The Miracle of the New Birth is where God takes away from that person the *fallen* Nature and gives him a *new* Nature; a *redeemed* Nature!

And with that new redeemed Nature- comes *new* Loves; *new* Desires; *new* Enjoyments; and *new* Wants. The person, who has been given a new, redeemed Nature- now loves God; He loves the Bible. He *enjoys* obeying Jesus. He now *delights* in striving to please God. And those new Loves; Wants; and Enjoyments- produce new Choices; new Decisions; and new Actions.

So, a lost and unsaved Person CANNOT choose to be saved- precisely because with his fallen Nature- he doesn't *want* to be saved. With his fallen Nature- he doesn't love God ; and he sees NO Enjoyment in striving to obey the Bible. But a person, who has been gifted with the Miracle of the New Birth- has received within himself a new Nature. And that new Nature produces new Loves; Wants; and Desires- which facilitates new Choices and new Decisions and new Acts that are toward the Glory of God.

So, it is true to say that everybody who is saved- is saved because he *chose* to be saved; he *wanted* to be saved. Yes, Yes, Yes! But we must *complete* the Statement- because the ONLY Reason he *wanted* to be saved (and somebody else *didn't* want to be saved)- is because he has been born again! And in the Miracle of the New Birth- God sovereignly gave him a *new* Nature. And with that new Nature comes new Loves; new Wants; and new Enjoyments. And based on those new Loves- that individual now is both able and willing to make new Choices and new Decisions- which involve *wanting* to be saved and *enjoying* our Walk with Jesus!

So, *wanting* to be saved; *choosing* to be saved; *desiring* to obey Jesus – all of those things are merely human RESPONSES to having already received the new Nature in, by, and through the Miracle of the New Birth! We do NOT initiate ANYTHING with God. God does ALL of the initiating; and we receive ALL of the Blessings; while God gets ALL of the Glory!

And now that we are saved- we now avail ourselves of the various “Means of Grace” that God has provided that help us to remain faithful; fruitful; and busy in the Work of the Lord. And among those “Means of Grace” are:

- Bible Study
- Prayer
- Fellowship
- Communion
- Fasting
- Giving
- Service

... these are the “Means” that God has created and given to His Church that will empower us to “walk this world in white” and to *remain* saved.

But even though we are saved- our unredeemed Flesh- in league with the fallen World and the Devil- conspire *against* us to trip us up; and to frustrate us; discourage us; and to fight against us. And one of the ways these three Enemies do this- is by and through tempting us to Sin. But another way is by taking a terrible Evil; a destructive Tool of satan- and dressing it up to look like something wonderful and helpful- so, we are fooled- as it sucks us into its grip.

And one of those Evils; one of those destructive Tools of satan; one of those Tactics of the Enemy- is something called, “*Perfectionism*”. Perfectionism is a false Teaching; a Heresy; an evil Tool of satan that sounds great; it sounds Holy and Right- but it is terribly destructive; and it is the Enemy of the Cross of Jesus Christ.

Perfectionism is the false Concept that human beings can become sinlessly Perfect or morally Perfect- in this Life and on this earth. It is the Notion that if we just try hard enough- Christians can cease from ALL Sin and can reach a Place with Jesus where we no longer disobey God- at all. Ever.

Those deceived by this false Teaching number in the millions; and there is a church- maybe even several churches- somewhere near here- that right this minute is boldly and energetically teaching this Heresy-as those who listen to it- nod their heads in approval. And, sadly, one of the verses that Perfectionists use all of the time to justify their wayward understanding of the Bible- is the verse that we just heard read to us- **Matthew 5:48** that says:

Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Now I have told you many times, that if you allow me to take verses of the Bible- out of Context- I can justify just about any kind of Sin that is imaginable- even sacrificing children. And that is why we MUST try to get the correct Context of every verse that we read and study and that we seek to obey.

Now before I get too far into this- you need to hear me say that Jesus spoke the words of **Matthew 5:48**. Yes, He did. And our Lord said what He meant; and He meant what He said. And what He said here is Inspired and Infallible and Inerrant. It is true. And we need to take what He said here- *seriously*. That is true. But what is *also* true- is that Jesus did NOT say these words in a vacuum. Jesus said the words of verse 48- AFTER He spoke 47 other verses- *first*. So, the Statement and Command of verse 48 comes on the heels of; and is connected to; and is to be understood by- the other 47 verses. So, this is NOT a “stand-alone” verse- even though MOST Perfectionists use it as exactly that. But **Matthew 5:48**

is the “*Concluding Statement*” or the “*Summary Statement*” of what He has been talking about since verse 3.

Now all of Chapters 5, 6, and 7 are what we call, the “*Sermon on the Mount*”. And the “*Sermon on the Mount*” is the *first* of five large Sections of Teaching that the Apostle Matthew was careful to put in his Gospel Record- so, that the Jews, who would read this Record, would link with the first five Books of Moses.

So, in addition to Matthew wanting the Jews to accept and believe that Jesus was the Messiah and Immanuel- he wanted them to see Jesus as the 2nd Moses- who would lead God’s new people; out of the Bondage of Sin; and into the new Kingdom of Heaven. So, the Sermon on the Mount is giving us the Attributes and the Characteristics that the new people of God, who would inherit the new Kingdom of Heaven would have- AFTER having been saved by the Messiah- Jesus, the Christ.

So, the Issues that Jesus deals with in this Sermon are NOT what *earns* Salvation for people- but what people, who have ALREADY been saved- must strive to have and possess. So, the Issues that Jesus brings up in this Sermon are the Issues that matter to God. And what was so strange to many of the Jews of the 1st Century- is that the Issues that they were so worked up about; the Issues that were at the top of their list; the Issues that were of primary Importance to them- were not even mentioned by Jesus. And this is one of the Reasons why so many Jews rejected Jesus. They wrongly assumed that if an Issue was vital to them- that it MUST be vital to God and to whoever the Messiah would be. But as Jesus goes deeper into this Sermon- He shows them and us- that when there is a Difference between what is important to us and what is important to God- WE are the ones that MUST change- because God is always Right.

Now we must understand that the Heresy of “*Perfectionism*” is NOT the same as the “*Pursuit of Holiness*”- even though many teach that it is. When we pursue Holiness on Purpose- we’re *determined* to “put on Christ” and to strive to obey the Bible- in the Way that the Bible teaches.

But Perfectionism is a Pride- or a Fear-based Compulsion that either fuels our obsessive Fixation on doing something without Fault- or something that *paralyzes* us from acting at all. And *both* of these Responses to this false Teaching result in the harmful Neglect of many other necessary and good Things.

So, what is behind the Tendency that some have for Perfectionism? Well, human beings are very complex creatures- so it’s rarely just one thing. In unusual cases- the primary Cause of Perfectionism is a clinical disorder that flows out from spiritual Bondage. But as a rule, Perfectionism nearly always has its roots in our Desire for Acceptance and our Fear of Rejection working against us. It can be the

garden-variety, Pride-fueled, general Fear of what other people in the Church might think of us, or it can be a crippling, conditioned Fear of failing- that was instilled into us by an abusive Past or present authority Figure.

But if we're honest, sometimes Perfectionism is nothing more than a convenient Excuse to not even attempt to do something that we perceive as being hard. And in those cases- it really isn't Perfectionism at all- but sinful Indulgence wearing a disguise.

Perfectionism is a "common-to-Man" Temptation that we all will face in our fight against Sin. And the wonderful News is that God wants us to live in Freedom from its tyrannical and cruel Domination.

But to understand and believe this, we must first understand something Jesus said that sounds completely contradictory:

Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Now at a quick glance- this sure sounds like a Demand for Perfection. And it is- which means it really isn't. In other words, in one sense- it IS a Command to be Perfect. But in another Sense- it isn't.

Now Jesus, in His Sermon on the Mount, made this Statement as the impossible Culmination of the (fallen) humanly impossible Standard of what it means to not ever sin in Anger, or Lust, or Divorce, or swearing Oaths, and Retaliation, as well as to what it means to "love our Enemies."

But just before He launches into this "Perfection" section of His Sermon, Jesus gives us a Clue to what He meant:

Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. (Matthew 5:17)

In the Old or the First Covenant- God absolutely DID demand perfect and sinless Obedience. And right here- Jesus said that He came to perfectly *fulfill* that Demand for sinless Perfection- for us. In other words, not a single person- not even Moses- fulfilled or completed or obeyed God's Demand for sinless Obedience. Nobody was able to accomplish the Reason that God gave the Law: Righteousness. Because that is what perfect Obedience to the Law brings. And that is part of what the Fall of Adam stole from us- the other being "Forgiveness".

And much about modern Evangelism just skips right by this. But unless Sinners are forgiven and then "made Righteous"- they will NOT go to Heaven. And phrases like, "*Accept Jesus into your heart*" fall woefully short of conveying to a lost person that they MUST be forgiven of ALL Sin; AND they MUST become perfectly (sinlessly) Perfect- or they will NOT go to Heaven.

The Reason we tell lost people to “*trust in Jesus and in His finished Work*”- is because Jesus DID obey God perfectly. Jesus DID accomplish what the Law demanded. So, instead of trying to get people to work harder so they can try to obey God’s Law perfectly- we tell people to look to the ONLY one who actually did that- Jesus Christ. Instead of telling people to work harder and try harder and longer so they can attempt to obey God without any fault- we tell them to embrace the ONLY one who actually loved God with ALL His Heart, Soul, Mind, and Strength- Jesus Christ. And by believing that Jesus did that; and by believing that by fully embracing and trusting and hoping that God will count His Obedience as Ours- we are saved.

And that is what we mean when we tell people that we are saved, “by Grace alone through Faith alone”. We mean that since we CAN’T obey God *perfectly*- we put all our Hope and Trust in the ONLY One Who did- Jesus Christ. And God the Father takes our Faith in Jesus and in what Jesus alone has done- in *perfectly* obeying His Father- and based on that Faith and that Faith ALONE- God imputes or credits the spotless Righteousness of Jesus (that He earned by obeying God perfectly) to us! So, legally speaking- God takes our faith in Jesus and in what He alone has done; and God credits that Faith as being Righteousness! And THAT is what allows us to go to Heaven!

And that is what the New Testament writers said things like:

**For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.
(Hebrews 10:14)**

There is the Key to what Jesus meant in **Matthew 5:48**, and the Key to our Liberation from the Tyranny and Cruelty of Perfectionism. Because Jesus perfectly lived, died, and rose again for us, He has already purchased our Perfection! And God the Father, though not unaware of the remaining Sin that contaminates everything we do, sees us as perfectly Righteous- in Jesus Christ!

In God’s Eyes, we have been perfected by Virtue of being joined to Jesus by Faith. And that frees us from needing to earn His or anyone else’s Approval through Perfectionism. We are free to engage- imperfectly- in our sanctifying Fight against Sin!

The Bible nowhere encourages us toward Perfectionism. It promises us absolute Perfection- *imputed* Perfection now (**2Corinthians 5:21**) and future Perfection in the Age to come (**The Revelation 21:3&4**) - as a free Gift of God’s Grace- precisely so that we will be Free from the Horror of Perfectionism.

And that is why God goes to great Lengths to expose the imperfect, “clay feet” of ALL of the heroes in the Bible. Abraham, the great model of Faith, has his Hagar Episode. Moses, the great Christlike Prophet, has his disqualifying Rock

incident. Aaron, the great Christlike High Priest, has his golden calf Disaster. David, the great Christlike King, has his Bathsheba Affair. Peter, the great Apostle and Christ-confessor, trips over his own clay feet throughout the Gospels and beyond (**Galatians 2:11-14**). And The Acts and the Epistles give us a warts-and-all View into the *imperfect* Lives of the earliest Christians.

God knows our perfectionistic Temptations and Tendencies, and so He fills the Bible with Stories of His amazing and phenomenally patient Grace toward Sinners, who continued to *imperfectly* fight with, and stumble in, their Sin throughout their earthly Sojourns. He wants us to know that Perfection in Behavior and Motivation is completely out of our experiential Reach in this Age.

God has something far better for us to strive toward than our idealized Imaginations of Perfection, which only end up enslaving us. Perfectionism's subtle, but great Danger is its Self-orientation. Since it is a Fear- or Pride-fueled Effort to win Approval for the Self- its primary Focus is *de facto* on "Self" and not on God. In other words, Perfectionism, even in the Battle against Sin, is not motivated by either Love or Faith- and therefore it reveals what it truly is- a Tool of satan. Because...

... whatever is not from faith is sin (Romans 14:23).

But God wants us to be Free- Free from the Tyranny of Pride and Fear. He wants us to live in the Freedom of knowing that He has our Past, Present, and Future Perfection Issues completely covered. So, in our ongoing Battles with Sin- God is NOT looking for perfect, externally performed Behavior or perfect, internally performed Motivation from us. God is looking for Love and for Faith- knowing full well that both will be *imperfect*- no matter how much we grow in them.

God is calling us to the wonderfully refreshing Experience of getting our eyes off ourselves and of how we're measuring up, and onto Jesus (**Hebrews 12:2**). He wants us to stop pursuing or being paralyzed by Perfectionism- so we are free to pursue Love (**1Corinthians 14:1; 1Timothy 1:5**) and pursue trusting Him with all our hearts (**Proverbs 3:5**). And if Perfectionism has an inordinate Influence on us, God will mercifully design Circumstances to defeat our best Efforts to fight Sin "successfully" until we learn where our Freedom really comes from.

In Jesus Christ, you are Free! You are Free to follow Jesus- *imperfectly*. You are Free to fight the Fight of Faith- *defectively*, because that's the ONLY Way you will ever fight for Faith in this Age. Perfectionism is a ponderous Weight that we must lay aside in the Race of Faith (**Hebrews 12:1**). God doesn't want us to focus on the Myth of a perfect

Performance; He wants us to focus on living out a childlike, dependent Faith-through authentic Acts of Love (**Galatians 5:6**).

So, Jesus keeps us “off balance”. We think we know that Perfection is a fastball of Justice, and so, He throws us the curveball of Grace.

Now when I read **Matthew 5:48**- abstracted from its proper Context- I think mainly in terms of “Justice”.

Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

“Perfect,” ah yes, surely that’s mainly about being Just.” But Jesus’ Context gives this Charge some amazing Spin. So, despite what I would guess in extrapolating from verse 48, with my innate Definition of Perfection, **Matthew 5:38-47** is all about moving way beyond mere Justice to God-like Grace. And that means that “Perfection” in God is NOT merely **“an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”** (verse 38) but strange “unworldly” things like “Turning the other cheek; Giving more than is asked; and Walking the extra mile” (verses 39-42).

The “Just” thing would be to “love those who love you; and to hate those who hate you” (verse 43), but Jesus *disorients* us with this strange Conception of Perfection: **“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”** (verse 44).

So, Who is this Guy- and what kind of serious Rethinking (call it a “New Birth”) do we need to get in Line with His Father in Heaven? I would think that “Perfection” then means giving the Unrighteous what they *deserve*: like no Sunshine or no Rain. But then Jesus said this about His Father,

He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:45)

So, the kind of Perfection that Jesus said comes from His Father- and the Kind He calls His disciples to pursue- does NOT find its Sense of Completion in delivering Retribution for Wrongs done. Rather, it is the Perfection of a Heart that finds so much Fulfillment and Satisfaction in the God of Grace that it is able to *extend* Grace to those who don’t deserve it.

So, *“How do we find the Balance between pursuing Holiness and moving past our Failure to be Holy?”* And *“Is pursuing Holiness the same as pursuing Perfection?”* So, is pursuing Holiness- which the Bible *commands*- the same as pursuing Perfection- which the Bible *condemns*? It’s an *ambiguous* Question because it switches from the *Quality* of Holiness to a *Quantity* of Holiness- NOT merely Holiness- but *perfect, flawless* Holiness.

And you can see the Ambiguity if you *rephrase* the Question like this: “Is pursuing *partial* Holiness the same as pursuing *complete* Holiness?” And the Answer is that there is a difference between *partial* and *complete*. So, when it comes to Holiness, the Question becomes, “Which are you pursuing- *partial* Holiness or *complete* Holiness?”

And what makes a Question like that complicated is that the overwhelming bulk of the New Testament teaches that, in *this* Life- Christians will NOT attain to sinless Perfection. And yet, Jesus *commands* us to be Perfect to the very SAME extent as God Himself is Perfect (**Matthew 5:48**). So, not Perfect just by human Standards, but Perfect by Divine Standards- which are God’s Standards.

So, how are we to understand this seeming Contradiction? When Jesus *commanded* in **Matthew 5:48**, “**Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect**”- it is simply another Way of understanding, “**You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind**” (**Matthew 22:37**)- which is the *greatest* Commandment.

And **Matthew 5:48** is also another Way of saying what Paul said in **2Corinthians 7:1**- “... let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”- and what James said in **James 1:4**- “let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

Yet, in spite of these repeated Commands to pursue Perfection, we are taught in the Bible that our Victory over the Power of Sin will be *incomplete* until we’re in the perfect Presence of Jesus. For example, **James 3:2** says, “**For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.**”- even the Tongue. But then he went on to say, “**But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.**” (**James 3:8**)

And there’s also **Philippians 3:12**: “**Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.**” So, Paul never claimed to be Perfect. He explicitly said, “*I haven’t attained Perfection yet.*”

Or consider the Prayer Jesus taught us to pray”. Right after we’re told to pray every day for our “daily bread”, we’re to pray,

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. (Matthew 6:11&12)

... and that’s not something we should pray about just one time- at the *beginning* of our Christian Life. “**Forgive us our debts**” is the same *kind* of Prayer as “**Give us this day our daily bread.**” And Jesus was talking to His disciples here- NOT

lost people. So, this is a Command for us to avail ourselves of regular, repeated Forgiveness- precisely because we *regularly* and *repeatedly* sin against God. In other words, we are told to pray to God to receive ongoing Forgiveness because we are NOT perfect and we NEED that Forgiveness.

So, on the one hand, we have the Command to be Perfect repeated, and on the other hand, we have the Teaching that we will NOT in this Life ever be Perfect. Now back to our Question. “*What should we pursue? Is it even meaningful to say that we are pursuing Perfection?*” It would be like an athlete saying, “*I am pursuing a high-jump record of thirty feet, or a long-jump record of one hundred feet, or a one-mile running time of one minute. That’s my Goal.*” Yet none of those things is ever going to happen while human beings are the kind of human beings they are now.

But as long as God is God, His Standard CANNOT be less than absolute Perfection. And when He calls us to Perfection- He isn’t being Naïve. He knows that, in this Life, we will fall short. But He also knows that He intends to give us Success in the pursuit of Perfection when we see him face to Face. So, the Quest is NOT in vain. We WILL attain Perfection- just not now.

But the Pursuit of Holiness- right now- is *essential* to attain the final perfecting Work of God. So, it’s never wrong to say we are “pursuing Perfection”- in *that* sense. So, as we pursue Holiness- here and now- we are actually pursuing the Perfection that God will grant us- *through the Pursuit of Holiness*- someday.

But in the Pursuit of Perfection- which we will only attain in the perfect Presence of God- there is this brief Period of Time on earth when our Pursuit is so embattled; indwelling Sin is so strong; satanic Opposition is so great- that even though we are ALREADY counted Righteous in Christ- by Faith- we are not yet completely Righteous in our Conduct; and will not be completely Righteous in our Conduct until we see Christ face to Face.

So, perhaps, we should say it like this: “*In our Pursuit of Perfect Holiness- that we will one day have in the Presence of Christ- let us seek now to be as Holy as a justified Sinner can be.*” We don’t know what the Limits are on this *imperfect* Holiness, and there are always *more* Victories to be attained.

So, how do we find the Balance between pursuing Holiness and moving past our Failure to be Holy? We all fall short not only of what we *ought* to be, but also of what we *could* be. So, how do we not let our Failures to be as Holy as we *ought* to; and *could* be; depress and so discourage us that we are paralyzed with Hopelessness in the Pursuit of Holiness?

This is difficult, *especially* when we realize that our Lives must bear witness that we truly are born again; that we have “saving Faith”; and are truly Justified. We know that we’re not justified by Works, but we also know that our Works

confirm our Justification. So, how do we enjoy the Assurance of our Salvation when our Holiness remains so Imperfect?

Let me just point to one passage of Scripture that is so important, and I pray that we will all linger over it long enough to let it have its assurance-giving Effect. Here's **1John 1:6**:

If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth;

... in other words, how we walk- how we live our daily Lives- testifies to whether we really have a Relationship with God.

And if that is all John said- we would be in total Despair. But the Apostle went on to say,

but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. (1John 1:7)

So, John is saying here that "Walking in the Light" is *essential* to show or to prove that we are being cleansed from our Sins by the Blood of Jesus. Now look at **1John 1:8**:

If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.

... here, John says, "*Walking in the light*" **DOES NOT and CANNOT mean, "Sinlessness"**. Now please let that sink in. "*Walking in the Light*"- *which is commanded- DOES NOT and CANNOT mean that we do not ever sin.*" How can we say that? Because John just said, "You have to walk in the Light," but he also just said, "If you say you're Sinless- you're dead wrong." Well, then what then does "*Walking in the Light*" mean?

And to answer- John gives us verse 9:

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

So, here is John's Description of the *imperfect* Christian. The *imperfect* Christian does NOT claim Perfection, but he DOES claim to "Walk in the Light"- because if you don't Walk in the Light, you don't have Fellowship with God, and the Blood of Jesus doesn't cleanse or cover you from Sin.

But what does “Walk in the Light” mean if it doesn’t mean “Sinlessness” (1John 1:7)? And John’s Answer is that it means: “*A Pattern of Obedience that involves regular, sincere Confession of Sin.*” So, the person who “Walks in the Light” has enough Light to see Sin for what it is; to hate that Sin; confess it; and receive Forgiveness for it with Thankfulness and Humility; and then to press on with fresh Resolve to love God and people- *better*.

That is the Apostle’s Answer and now we need to pray that God would work the Miracle of this biblical Pattern into our own, individual Lives.

Amen. Let’s pray.

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The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. Be watchful and quicken your pace. Soli Deo Gloria. For the Glory of God alone