

A Perfect Man

Ephesians 4:11-16

11 And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, 13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; 14 that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, 15 but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head--Christ-- 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:11-16)

I have entitled this message “A Perfect Man” after the words in verse 13.

13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.
(Ephesians 4:13)

This is God’s most earnest desire for you and me, His beloved children, that you, that I would be “A perfect man (a perfect woman) . . . the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”. But, in truth, such a measure as this, as “perfection”, often seems so very far removed from who we really are, and far beyond our reach, especially as we struggle to navigate our way through all the many difficulties and trials that befall us each day. Troubles and struggles come at us from every quarter, from the remnants of our old sin nature that hang on and remain within our mortal flesh, to all the many attacks that come from the outside of us, from the world and its ways, and from our ever-present predator, the devil.

The old Prophet Job said it wisely, that “life is but a few days and full of troubles”. And it is!

But with that being said, we still do have these words that are set before us here in today’s passage. And what are we supposed to do with them?

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“Perfection” is such a lofty word, one that has the highest of standards and principles, a measure of conduct and behavior that cannot be simply “acted out” on the stages of daily life and circumstances. “Perfection”, such as this that God is calling us too, has to come out from a deeply engrained character that is not common to the souls of ordinary men and women.

Such “perfection” was surely once present in man, in those earliest days of Adam and Eve, before their fall from grace. But when sin entered into their souls, “perfection” ceased for them, and struggles became the ordinary way of life, Eve suffering in childbirth, Adam working the soil by the “sweat of his brow”.

And to say that we have “progressed” since the days of Adam and Eve, would give the wrong understanding. Yes, we have progressed in intellect and technology and other such progressions, but not in this matter that God speaks to us about here, “perfection”. In that, we have sorely gone off course.

But this is where He wants us to be and where He is clearly saying that we really can go
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Again, may I repeat myself? This “measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” is not a behavior that we can merely “act out” daily and hope that it will become natural and real to us. Such thoughts remind me of a question that was raised in a recent bible study. “Can we do as the people who espouse the “behavior modification” theories and methodologies suggest and, “Fake it till we make it”. Can the mere practice of good behavior progress until we actually become the kind of person we are trying to be?

A study of the “Be-Attitudes” in Matthew chapter 5 will answer that question from these scriptures. Simply put, behavior flows out from the attitude of the heart. The heart must be “right” before the behavior become “right”. “Doing right” comes out from “being right”.

But how can we do that? How can these words of our scripture text become really real within our souls?

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Here, these words are set within the context of the working of the Holy Spirit. From that we can know that this ultimate goal of a kind of perfection that is the measure of the

stature of the fullness of Christ is part of and dependent upon the work that the Holy Spirit will do within our hearts, the infusion of His presence and His “Spiritual gifts” into our souls. And not only within our own souls, but within the souls of each member of the Body of Christ, and then the interaction of each member with all the other members, bringing all of us to this “perfect measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”.

And this “plan” by God is one that really will work, if we will simply join in with it and allow it to have its way in us. But unfortunately, God’s “plan” has not worked as He intended. Even from the first moments that the members of the Body of Christ assemble themselves together to discuss such a possibility as perfection, disagreements and discord will inevitably begin and roadblocks are erected.

We immediately hear a chorus of voices crying out loudly, “But no one is perfect and neither can they be while they are in this life”. And folks, those words and beliefs are earnestly taught and preached by the best of our bible scholars, contending that it simply is not possible for any person or any group of persons, while still in our mortal flesh, to actually attain to the condition of “a perfect man”.

We are told and reminded over and over again that “no one is perfect”, except Jesus alone. And further that we should not expect to be perfect until we get to heaven. And sadly, as we live out our daily lives in the ordinary circumstances within it, those contentions become true for us.

But then again, what about these words here in verse 13 . . .

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If we who are the ones that God is calling out to as the Body of Christ absolutely insist that this is an impossibility, that “no one is perfect”, except Jesus, and neither can they be, how must we deal with these words?

I confess that even right at this moment, I am not wholly sure of the answer to this question! But it is my hope that by the end of this message, God will have given us enough light for today, and will instill within our hearts the deepest of desires to know all the more, because I am convinced from these words that God truly does desire that we know and personally experience this kind of “Godly perfection”.

So then, may we ask ourselves the question again, “Is it possible for us to attain to this measure of Godly Perfection that is spoken about here”? I have to believe that because it is here, it is not only possible, but it is also commanded of us.

But if that be so, what are we supposed to do with all of the sin that invades our lives each day because sin is always the ultimate roadblock. Each sin is an egregious violation of that perfection. How are we supposed to deal with that sin?

The Methodists, in their struggle to attain to what John Wesley called “sinless perfection” simply redefined sin into a much simpler form, making perfection somewhat easier to attain too. His definition of sin was reduced down to being only “the willful violation of any known law of God”. That is a very narrow definition and is not always shared by many, even within the Methodist denominations.

Most believers agree that the definition of sin should include not only our “willful commission” of sins, but also our “non-willful” sins, those that we unwillingly “stumble into”. And also should include “sins of omission”, those things we should have done, but didn’t do. And when we broaden the definition of “sin”, then “sinless perfection” truly does seem to become impossible.

But still, again, with all of this being true, what are we to do with these words in verse 13? What can they mean, and how do we attain to them . . .

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If we take these words within their context, that of Christ giving special Spiritual gifts to men, and then the members of the Body of Christ uniting together and interworking as one “Body”, exercising the gifts that we have received as they relate to one another, denying our own self and seeking to use our “gifts” for the benefit of our fellow members, then we can begin to get a glimpse of this perfection.

Because that is who Christ was and who He now is as He lives within us. He was truly “selfless”, both as Son of God and as Son of Man. He gave up everything that He was so that we might gain.

He cared nothing for the possessions of men, nor for their positions of grandeur, nor for their worldly acclaim and accolades. Jesus said on one occasion,

58 . . . "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." (Luke 9:58)

But we cry out, “But you don’t understand, I have a family to feed and to protect”.

But Jesus says back to us, “Why do you

31 . . . worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' 32 For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. (Matthew 6:31-33)

When we try to envision this “Body of Christ” at work, we see the communal gathering together that took place in the first-century church, where the people sold their possessions and gave freely to one another, knowing that if they themselves lacked anything, other members of the body would step forward to meet their needs.

And that worked well for a while, but even that later broke down. The problem was that all the many “selves” within the group began to exert themselves and perfection was thwarted. How that must have grieved our Lord.

But folks, still these words remain. And God does not waste space within this bible and neither does He give foolish commands or vain hopes. This is real and this is not only possible, God expects it of us.

May I read these words again, and may we carefully note their context.

11 And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, 13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; 14 that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, 15 but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head--Christ-- 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:11-16)

Here, Jesus is giving gifts to men directly from His own hand. In this context, He is already at the right hand of God the Father, seated upon His throne, with all things in heaven and on earth under His charge. From those very same hands in times past has come the creation of all that has been created, both the heavens and the earth and everything in them. And even beyond the creation, it is His divine hand that actually keeps and sustains and enables the earth to continue in all that it does. He sustains the air that we breathe and every breath that we take within it.

So then, why can we not trust that the next things that He will say to us here will be absolutely true and trustworthy?

12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, 13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:12-13)

God is on His throne but He is also in us, carrying out the enabling power of His gifts, bringing unity to all the members of the body and lifting us up to be more than we can otherwise be.

And as our heavenly Father and as our loving Bridegroom, He is ever and always at the guard to protect us from the wiles of the world and of satan,

14 that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting (Ephesians 4:14)

Folks, it is one thing to be taken in by a Nigerian scam artist, and many are these days. But here Jesus is vowing to fight against and protect us also from those same kinds of vile wrongdoers that rear their heads within the church, sometimes even the most earnest of believers who go astray in their thinking and in their beliefs.

But here too, we must also understand our own role, the one God is calling us too and equipping us to carry out within the “body”. I confess to you, the image immediately come to my mind of what the current culture is calling the “boomerang kids”, those sons and daughter who grow up, perhaps even attend college, but eventually return and move back in on Mom and Dad and begin to just soak up the provisions.

That is not God’s intention for you and me within the Body of Christ. Here, God is calling each of us to be productive members of the Body, denying self and blessing others in all that we think and say and do. Verse 15 . . .

15 but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head--Christ-- 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:15-16)

This is what the Christian life is supposed to be like, Godly people having Godly behavior in all that they think and say and do, blessing every other member of the body and seeking nothing for self.

So then, as to “perfection”, perhaps it begins as a “collective” perfection, the whole body, with all of its individual imperfections combining to attain to an overall perfection. Perhaps that is where it has to begin, and then from there, spreading on out to each individual within the body.

For today, may I leave us with a strong encouragement! While most all to the deeply devoted members of the Body that I have known, like my friend Ralph Newman and his father-in-law, Dr. Paul Culley would have strongly disputed their “perfection”, in my estimation, those men came really, really close to what God is talking about here.

And it would be my desire that someone might think, at least to some small measure, the same generous thoughts of you and of me after we have left this earth.

But until then, may we simply face each day with the assurance that God really is living and working within each of us, enabling us by the power of His Spirit and with His gifts to do all of the things of “perfection” that He is calling us to be and to do.

Praise be to God!