

Title: “spiritual perfection”  
 Mark 10:17-27

Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble  
 When you're perfect in every way  
 I can't wait to look in the mirror  
 'Cause I get better lookin' each day

To know me is to love me  
 I must be a hell of a man  
 Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble  
 But I'm doin' the best that I can!

I have a question for you! Are you perfect?

There was a young girl who asked her friend, “Am I vain because I think I am pretty?” Her friend answered: “Oh no honey... you just need new glasses.”

Now I ask a more important question... are you a perfect Christian? Most Christians know the answer. They would respond – “No, of course not.” No one is perfect Only God is perfect. Yet John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church, believed perfection was possible. “The perfect Christian” was one who does not commit sin. Spiritual perfection was a gift from the Holy Spirit.

[From *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, The Works of John Wesley* (1872 ed. by Thomas Jackson), vol. 11, pp. 383-385 (Baker Book House edition, 1996)]

He believed that this Christian perfection was an important component to one’s righteousness before God. Perfect living was a sign that you were saved. Sinful living was a sign that you were not. The lives of people of the community were monitored closely, and anyone caught in sin were kicked out of the congregation.

As Lutherans, this is surprising to us. Contrary to Wesley’s teachings Martin Luther wrote that the truth was far from this. Luther said Christians were both saint and sinner, simultaneously saint and sinner. Even as redeemed people, as people born from above by the Holy Spirit, we will carry around our sinful self, and we will until the day we die. It is this sinful part of us which needs to be chastised... chastised daily. As Lutherans we believe that “Perfection in this life” cannot be found.

In fact, “Christian perfection” is a dangerous doctrine. It is dangerous for two reasons. If we believe a person can be righteous before God, because he is perfect, because he does not sin, we will be forced to judge people only by the lack of outward sinful behavior. Scripture speaks of unrighteousness, not only because of “acts” of sin, but because of we have a sinful “nature.” The sixth commandment says “thou shalt not commit adultery.” But Jesus says: if a man lusts in his heart he has broken the commandment. Even though he physically has not broken the ten commandments, he will still be held accountable by what he thinks and feels. That is the sin of our nature, which cannot be seen by others. That, too, is the sin which condemns us. We will be held accountable by the sins which can be seen, and the sins which cannot. Striving for Christian perfection will only lead to despair. Even if it was true that Christians do not commit outward sinful acts, what about if you fail? If you fail in being righteous even just once, Scripture says you have transgressed the entire Law. If my righteousness before God depended on me, I may despair of ever getting to Heaven.

But God does not leave us there. In our Gospel lesson Jesus meets with someone who believes in Spiritual perfection. It is the story of the rich young ruler. The rich young ruler has a distorted view of salvation. He believes perfection is attainable. And more to the point... the young man thinks “he, himself, is perfect”. So how does Jesus respond? Not surprisingly... gently. Our Lord's intention was not to crush him with the knowledge of his sin, but rather to bring him into an understanding of his sinfulness so that he would realize that righteousness comes not from his accomplishments, but from God alone. And in realizing this he would place his faith upon Jesus and His work.

Mark Chap 10

*As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

Jesus answers

*"You know the commandments: Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.' "*

The young man replies,

*"all these I have kept since I was a boy."*

Here is the first challenge. Imagine the young man saying these things. We can sort of guess the subtle puffing of the chest. The small smile of self-satisfaction on

his lips. The pietistic nodding of the head. We can imagine his expectation of praise from the "good teacher" for his righteousness. "All these I have kept since I was a boy." The rich young ruler thought that "spiritual perfection" was attainable. He was looking to Jesus to confirm that he had attained Christian Perfection.

But Jesus knew by the rich young ruler's answer that he misunderstood the Law. The rich young ruler thought that "outwardly following the law" was sufficient. In reality however, the Law is not only concerned with the outward acts but with the heart as well. Interestingly, Jesus does not revile him for his lack of understanding the law. Rather, scripture says... "Jesus looked at the man and loved him." He saw in the young man the same sins which corrupted all men, yet at the same time looked upon him with the same love which God bears for all men. Very gently he says to the young man, "one thing you lack". Obviously, it was more than one thing that the man needed to change, arrogance, self-centeredness, pride to name a few. But it was not Jesus' intention to bring the rich young ruler to a complete understanding of his sinfulness. For that would be too much to bear. Jesus says to the rich young ruler: "*One thing you lack.... Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*" Jesus knew that the young man was still in bondage to sin. For the man, it was wealth, his attachment to material things, which was his sin. Jesus wanted to bring him to the point of realizing that he was sinful, not just to put him down. Jesus wanted the young man to realize his sinfulness so that the young man would turn to God. Unfortunately, the young man leaves, because, as scripture puts it "He had great wealth". We can imagine Jesus sadly looking at the departing young man, shaking his head. "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"

At this saying the disciples become heavily concerned... "Who then can be saved?" If this outwardly righteous man was not sufficient to enter the Kingdom of God, how could they, who were unable to be even outwardly righteous, be able to enter Heaven? "Who then can be saved?" In panic they crowd around Jesus. Holy Cow Jesus. So who can be saved? If not that awesome guy, then who? Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God." "All things are possible with God."

You know, the same thing happened to Martin Luther . When translating the Bible Luther realized that God is perfect and we are not, **and that** scripture says "the wages of sin is death." This almost led him into despair. We were all doomed. But just as Luther started to give up, God led him to the true meaning of the Gospel "Yes, you are not able to be righteous. Yes, you are sinful. Yes, you are worthy of death." But someone else has come up and said I will be righteous for

them, not only that but I will die in their place. I will die for them on the cross, I will go to the executioner so that they can go free. The person who said that was Jesus. Jesus.

Salvation is not about getting the power to be perfect Christians. Rather, Salvation was about being received by God. Salvation was about becoming a new creation. God says that we will be able to resist the influences of this world because we are undergoing a continual metamorphosis, we are changing from beings “who are easily tempted by this world” into “beings who are sons of God who naturally do His will.”

How was this transformation, this metamorphosis, accomplished? Because Jesus died on the cross, we received forgiveness for the sins which made us enemies of God. The sinfulness which is a natural part of us no longer separates us from God. Because Jesus died on the cross our relationship with God was restored. Because our relationship is based on what Jesus did when, by our own power, we are unable to walk in God’s ways, our relationship with God is never in danger. Our relationship with God has been permanently transformed by Christ. We are a new creation. But there’s more.

Because of our renewed relationship we have not been left in our sinful state. Because of our renewed relationship, God now sent his Holy Spirit to work within us. It is the Holy Spirit who now works a real transformation within us. We will be enabled to do God’s will because He transforms us from within. And what is a sign that this transformation is happening within us? Scripture refers to it as the putting on of the new self. The old self is self-centered and interested in worldly things. It is easily influenced by worldly forces. The new self is one which is centered on God. As scripture put it the new self is made new in the attitude of the mind. The new attitude of the mind is one which constantly searches out God’s will. Your desire to know and to do God’s will, that is a sign of God’s transformation within you. It is a sign of a transformed person that they realize that they are unable to do God’s will by their own power. It is a sign of a transformed person that believes on the promise that God has given them and puts their faith in Christ that He will accomplish all that we were unable to do.

And by what means does God use to accomplish this transformation? He does this through His Word. The renewing of the attitude of the mind comes when we positively receive the word of God. As God’s people we search for God’s will within the very words of scripture. As we search scripture our mind becomes filled with Godly images and the attitude of our mind is renewed. But the transformation

is more than just cognitive knowledge. For the transformation which scripture speaks of is a transformation of our very soul. Not only is our mind renewed by the knowledge of Godly things, but the word of God which we receive transcends it and renews the soul itself. The renewing word of God comes to us also in physical form in the Lord's supper. Here we come admitting our sinfulness. It is here God word has promised the forgiveness of sins, which comes to us when we receive in faith Christ's body and blood, in, with and under the bread and wine. It is a mystery. It is here where the Holy Spirit comes to us anew and our faith strengthened, and our transformation continues. So long as we do not reject the Holy spirit or despise his word, God's power will continue to work within us.

God has promised us that one day we will become, fully in fact, that which we are slowly being transformed into, that which we were created to be, holy and righteous sons and daughters of God. Until then we still carry around the "sinful" self. Even as Christians, as redeemed people, as people who have put on the "new self", we still feel the temptations of the world and can still sin. But we are "living" because through our renewed relationship with Christ who rose from the dead, we are now alive in Christ. We are no longer in bondage to sin, seeking to satisfy our lust in the world but rather are free to be sons of God. A change has occurred in our very being which allows us to please God. We have become the "new self" We are a new creation.

In summary, God, through the Holy Spirit, has transformed and continues to transform us by renewing the attitudes of our mind. At our Baptism God started our transformation. Through his Word and through the Lord's Supper He continues that transformation. We look forward to that day in Heaven when our transformation will be complete. Until then... may the peace of God which passes all understanding, guard and protect you always. Amen