

## Nobody's Perfect?

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“NOBODY’S PERFECT.” Say that in a loud voice, and just about everybody in any audience will nod with approval. All their lives they have been dismissing their moral failures with this worldly dictum, “Nobody’s Perfect.”

But that notion does not come from the Bible. The Holy Scriptures are not bashful in calling God’s people to perfection. But what on earth do the authors of Genesis, Matthew, and Ephesians (to name a few) mean when they set perfection as the standard?

As with the teaching of holiness, the doctrine of Christian perfection is best approached by examining its Old Testament roots. As a recent church council puts it, “most essential concepts of the Christian creed grew at first in Judaic soil. Uprooted from that soil, these basic concepts cannot be perfectly understood.” This is eminently true of the concept of perfection.

More than a dozen words are translated *perfect* in the King James Version of the Old Testament. In their various shades of meaning, they are applied to persons who, in light of the ethical thinking of their day, endeavored to obey God’s call to Abraham: “Walk before me, and be thou perfect” (Gen.17:1, KJV).

An open-minded reading of the Old Testament leads to the conclusion that the idea of spiritual perfection-understood as blamelessness before God and uprightness of heart and life-lies at the heart of Hebrew piety. This concept is the root of the New Testament teaching of perfection. And it is the understanding of perfection that found expression in the writings of the great saints and teachers of both Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism and came to Protestant formulation in the thought and teaching of John Wesley.

### Holiness and Perfection

While the terms holiness and perfection are used to describe the same experience of grace, an examination of those two terms in the older testament reveals that they reflect two different aspects of this grace. George Allen Turner explains, “While the terms associated with ‘holiness’ stress the contrast between Jehovah and man, which can be bridged by an act of cleansing, those associated with ‘perfection’ point to man’s kinship with God and the possibility of fellowship.”

Modern versions translate the several Hebrew words rendered perfect in the King James Version by such terms as *blameless*, *whole*, *sincere*, *upright*, and *upright in heart* to avoid the misleading connotations of our English word *perfect* that suggest a state of grace we will not know until we get to Heaven. These are

kindred terms help us understand what John Wesley believed to be the scriptural idea of perfection.

### **Relative Perfection**

Only in five instances, in which the reference is to God, is perfect used in the strictest sense (Deut. 32:4; 2 Sam. 22:31; Job 37:16; Ps. 18:30; 19:7). Only God is absolutely perfect; we are relatively “perfect” as we “walk with God” in sincerity and fidelity. “Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him” (Gen. 5:24, RSV). And “before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God” (Heb. 11:5, KJV). Of Noah we read he “found favor in the sight of the LORD...Noah was a righteous man, blameless [‘perfect’, KJV] in his generation; Noah walked with God” (Gen. 6:8-9).

Two points must be noted. First, it is only “before God” that Noah and other Hebrews were “perfect.” Second, this perfection was relative to the ethical standards of their generation. In contrast to his neighbors, Noah was “righteous.” But judged by God’s perfect law, he fell far short (just as we do!). Perfection among us mortals is always relative to our finite understanding of God’s Law.

Explaining John Wesley’s doctrine, Colin Williams wisely observes: “In terms of sin in the absolute sense, as measured by the perfect law,’ there is no such thing as perfection in believers. It is in terms of the sin of conscious separation from Christ that there can be perfection—a *perfection of unbroken conscious dependence upon Christ*” (emphasis added).

### **“Godly Sincerity”**

“Godly sincerity” is, therefore, an appropriate synonym for “perfection” in Scripture. Of course, one can be sincerely wrong and go to hell! But you cannot be insincere and enjoy the fellowship of the Holy One and the cleansing of Jesus’ blood. These promised blessings demand that we “walk in the light, as he is the light”

For Wesley, sincerity was a premium. The 1746 Methodist Conference Minutes are explicit:

Q. Whom do you term sincere?

A. One who walks in the light as God is in the light.

Q. Is not [sincerity] all in all?

A. God gives everything with it, nothing without it.

Q. But do we not [not] set sincerity on the level of faith?

A. No,...we do not put it in the place of faith. It is by faith the merits of Christ are applied to the soul, but if I am not sincere they are not applied.

**“Godly sincerity” is an appropriate synonym for “perfection”**

Note Paul's testimony to the Corinthians: "For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience that we have behaved in the world, and still more toward you, with holiness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God" (1Cor. 1:12, RSV, emphasis added).

### **A Single Intention**

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus cautioned that we beware of practicing our piety before others "to be seen by them" (Matt. 6:1). Rather, we must give, pray, and fast in the sight of God alone (see vv.1-18). "If therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light," He says. "But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness" (vv.22-23, KJV).

The term "single eye," says Richard Foster, has rich connotation: "It refers both to a single aim in life and to a generous unselfish spirit. The two ideas such a close connection in the Hebrew mind that they can be expressed by a single phrase."

John Wesley comments, "What the eye is to the body, the intention is to the soul... 'If thine eye be single, singly fixed upon God, 'thy whole body'... shall be filled with holiness and happiness." The "perfect" Christian is one who does "everything for the glory of God" (1Cor.10:31). Singleness of intention is a classic definition of perfection. Soren Kierkegaard put it unforgettably: "Purity of heart is to will one thing-the Good."

### **The Paradox of Perfection**

While the Book of Job addresses the problem of unjust suffering, it is also a treatise on perfection. It opens with the categorical claim the Job was a man "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil."

Although Satan admits Job's uprightness, he is cynical about Job's motive: "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him?... But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." The unleashed forces of evil then began to batter Job. While his friends taunted him with accusations of wrongdoing (otherwise why would God be punishing him? They reasoned), Job steadfastly maintained his integrity. Although he felt abandoned from God's presence in the depths of his trials and sufferings, yet he could say, "I have not departed from the commandment of his lips;" I have treasured in my bosom the words of his mouth." Satan was wrong; Job's was a disinterested love that could say, "Though he kill me, yet I will trust in him." He was indeed perfect!

Nevertheless, when he beheld God in His majestic holiness Job's lips were silenced. Then he could only say: "Now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." The final proof of Job's perfection was

the admission of his folly and shortcomings. To see and feel the full weight of this paradox is to acknowledge with Charles Wesley,

*Every moment, Lord, I need  
The merit of Thy death.*