



Fuel Week 2008
Saturday Morning Lesson

Students Should

Learn:

1. Christian perfection is not about our acts but about our intentions.
2. Holiness looks like love and is based on our relationship with Christ.

Scripture Focus:

- Exodus 3:1–6
- Matthew 5:43–48
- 1 Corinthians 13

What You'll Need for this Lesson:

- Music for a time of worship (either live or recorded)
- Paper, pens, pencils, markers, etc.
- Decks of cards
- Bibles

Perfect Love

Lesson Background:

True confession: I am a perfectionist. I am of the true blue variety—the type that should be attending meetings or something. I live with it, I laugh at it, but there it is: always lurking at the corners. Deep down I strive for harmony and order, even if it does not always come out in reality.

The way I see it, my perfectionism unfolds in two ways: first, I can be counted on for a good product. Whether it be a paper for school or an art project, my words will be meaningful and my lines will be straight. However, my perfectionism also leads to paralysis. For example, as a musician and a writer, why is it I have never written a song? Truthfully, I am terrified of writing a mediocre song. If I decide to be a songwriter, I want to perfectly express myself, to move people and not be another street performer with a guitar. Therefore, I have songs piled up inside me that will likely never see the light of day. Paralyzed.

What is it in me that strives for perfection? And where does this pressure come from? I think a lot of people would be sitting with me in those meetings. Perfectionism hounds many of us.

To me, the most terrifying phrase in the entire Bible is this: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). When I hear this, bells and whistles go off in my head: Do better, try harder, *be* more. I wonder how many of our students experience a similar reaction to these words?

Christian perfection is at the heart of holiness; but it is a life-giving perfection rather than a paralyzing perfection. As Jim Hampton explains in *Everyday Saint*, the Hebrew sense of perfection refers to being whole and unblemished—in a word, blameless. The good news is that I am indeed called blameless by God through His Son’s death on the Cross! So my perfection, and therefore my ability to be holy, is based on my relationship with God who

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chooses *me* out of His love for me. Combine this with the Greek understanding of perfection: A thing is perfect when it does what it was intended to do. As one who is called out by this loving, holy God, I am intended to *love*—love God and love people; this becomes easier as I grow in my relationship with the God who called me holy in the first place. So, in a Christian sense, perfection has less to do with my actions and more to do with *who I am* and *how I am created to be*. As I grow in my relationship with Christ, I come closer to perfection because I am living as I am intended to live: I am living in love.

In my mid-twenties, this concept is like a breath of fresh air. I wonder as I look back on years of depression and struggle what might have been different had I truly grasped that Christian perfection is based on love, not on what I can do. I also wonder at the many adults who are obviously living their lives in paralysis: Do they know the great news that they are, in a sense, off the hook? The pressures teenagers face today are off the charts, so to speak; and as caring adults, we have the opportunity to share this amazing news with them. Holiness is freedom, not only from the chains of sin but from the chains of our own bloated expectations of ourselves and others.

We serve a God who *is* love, a God who *is* holy—a God who calls us to the same.

The Lesson

Introduction

Reflect on God's Holiness

To start this lesson, spend some time reflecting on God's holiness. You may choose to do this in any number of ways, depending on the nature of your group. The following are only suggestions, and may be used in any combination:

- Set the mood so that as students enter your meeting space, they know something is different. You may choose to play worship music and light candles to achieve this change. Encourage an atmosphere of reflection as the students gather.
- Read aloud Exodus 3:1–6, then go on to tell the rest of the story of God's call to Moses. Then re-read verses 5–6 and explain that we serve a holy God. In recognition of this, invite your students to take off their shoes as you enter into a time of reflection in the presence of a holy God.
- Sing songs of worship together that focus on God's holiness. Some suggestions: "God of Wonders" (Byrd and Hindalong), "Agnus Dei" (Smith), and "Holy Is the Lord" (Tomlin).
- Pass out pieces of paper along with markers, crayons, pens and/or pencils. Read sections of Scripture that describe God's holiness; as you do so, encourage your students to

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draw or write based on what they hear and feel as you read. Some suggestions: Psalm 11, Psalm 77:13–20, Psalm 99, Isaiah 6:1–8, Revelation 4, Revelation 15:3b–4.

- Encourage your students to use your meeting space for kneeling, lying down, or whatever other posture of worship they choose. Play songs of worship that focus on God’s holiness as your students reflect in silence (see suggestions above). Allow time for the students to share anything they were thinking or feeling during this time regarding God’s holiness.

In transition, read Leviticus 19:2: **“Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: ‘Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.’”** Then say in your own words, **We are called to be holy like this holy God. Today we will discover what this kind of holiness looks like in our lives and how we can attain it.**

Dig In

Read the Word

As you transition, pass out a few decks of cards, enough for every two or three students to have one. Explain that as you begin thinking about and discussing perfection, you want students to attempt to build houses of cards. Allow students to continue on with the cards for a few minutes as you discuss the questions; collect the cards at your discretion based on your group’s ability to focus or when you transition to the definitions found on the next page. Discuss the following questions:

- **How would you define perfection?** Encourage students to think not only in terms of a dictionary definition, but also in creative ways; e.g. ice cream on a hot summer day, a no-hitter baseball game, watching a sunset, and so forth.
- **What are areas in which we have learned to expect perfection?** Help your students think of persons, areas, and professions in which we do not tolerate mistakes: the mail service, airlines, teachers, doctors, sports/music figures, bank records, and so forth.
- **How do you think building a house of cards helps us think about perfectionism?** Help your students see that one mistake will ruin the entire structure. In our lives, we often put pressure on ourselves to not mess up in certain areas for fear that everything will fall apart.
- **What does it mean to be a “perfectionist?” Is this a good thing or a bad thing? Why?**
- **Where do you strive for perfection in your own life?** Answers might include sports, music groups, academics, relationships, and so forth.
- **What might we mean by the term “Christian perfection?”** The following excerpt from *Everyday Saint* will shed light on this question: “Even with all the ways we strive for perfection, most Christians are very uncomfortable with the word *perfection*; if there is one area

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of life in which Christians are likely to steer clear of perfection, it is in our relationship with God. In fact, many are downright terrified of the concept of perfection, believing that they can never be perfect. Instead, we are quick to label ourselves “sinners.” Here, more than any other area of life, we are ready to expect *less* of ourselves rather than more. But what if Scripture calls us to perfection in our relationship with God?” (pg 56). Ask students whether they agree with Hampton’s statement that we are uncomfortable with the concept of perfection, and why.

Provide for students (in print, by posting, or by reading) the following three definitions (modern dictionary, Hebrew, and Greek) of *perfect*:

- Dictionary.com (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/perfect>)—“Entirely without any flaws, defects, or shortcomings; accurate, exact, or correct in every detail.”
- Hebrew (Hampton 58)—*Tamim*: Blameless, sincere, or upright. Someone is considered perfect based on his or her identity as one who is close and open to God.
- Greek (Hampton 58)—*Teleios*: the root word means to the “end” or “intended purpose.” Someone is considered perfect when her or she lives according to his or her intended purpose.

After sharing these different definitions, discuss the following questions:

- **What is our common understanding of perfection?** Perfection is something exact—something we can do or achieve by our actions.
- **What is the biblical (Hebrew and Greek) understanding of perfection?** Perfection is a state of being, not based on action. It is based on who we *are*, not what we *do*.
- **How do you feel when you think of perfection in these different terms?**
- **As children of God, what is our intended purpose?** We are called to love God and love people. Refer to Luke 10:25–28: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”
(*Note:* This would be a good tie-in to do some further study on spiritual gifts. We are living in Christian perfection—to our intended purpose—when we are operating within our giftings for the benefit of the body of Christ.)

Say in your own words, **We often think of perfection in terms of what we do, but Christian perfection is about our intentions. We can have perfection of purpose when we bring our will and our desires in line with those of Christ.**

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Now invite your students to turn to Matthew 5:43–48, and ask one student to read the passage aloud. Then discuss the following questions:

- **How would you sum up this passage in your own words?**
We are called to love even our enemies.
- **How does the Father treat the righteous? the unrighteous?**
- **What does Jesus call us to in this passage?** He calls us to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.
- **From this passage, what does perfection require of us?**
Perfection means that we love as God loves. Help your students equate this with our intended purpose to love God and love people.
- **We serve a God who is holy, and this God is love. What does this tell us about what holiness truly looks like?**
Holiness looks like love.

Say in your own words, **The process of holiness requires that we become more Christlike in our love. We can only reflect Christ when we are pursuing a relationship with Jesus.**

Read the following excerpt from *Everyday Saint* (pg 62):

“In order to become the holy people God has called us to be—perfect, complete, and ready to do what we were created to do—Jesus *must* be reflected in our lives. Everything we do, every word we say, every thought we think must be a reflection of Jesus . . . if Jesus is to be reflected in our lives, this means that we have an ongoing relationship with Him, one that continually pulls us closer to Him and His will for our lives. When we live close to God we are holy people.”

Then discuss the following questions:

- **Have you ever started reflecting your friends’ habits and attitudes? In what ways? What causes this to happen?**
We tend to adopt the habits of friends after spending significant time with them.
- **What happens when we spend significant time in relationship with Jesus?** Our actions and attitudes begin to reflect those of Jesus.
- **What are some ways in which we can seek to spend more time with Jesus in order to be a better reflection of Him?** Help your students think through some of the classic spiritual disciplines such as prayer, study, service, and worship.
- **What is one change you can make this week in order to truly pursue a closer relationship with Jesus?** Remind your students that we cannot equate holiness with a checklist of spiritual disciplines. Rather, our obedience through discipline comes out of an all-encompassing desire to grow closer to the heart of Jesus, and therefore to pursue holiness through relationship with Him.

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Invite your group to turn to 1 Corinthians 13:1–3, and ask a student to read this passage aloud. Then discuss the following questions:

- **What are some of the actions the writer mentioned in this passage?** Speaking in tongues of men and angels, prophesying, understanding mysteries and having knowledge, having great faith, giving to the poor, sacrificing the body.
- **What characterizes all of these actions?** They can all be seen as big, impressive actions for God.
- **What are some of the images the writer used in this passage?** Resounding gong, clanging symbol.
- **What do you think the writer meant us to understand through the use of these images?** These things are loud, but they do not mean anything. In other words, our big important actions—even if they are for God—mean nothing if they do not have love behind them.
- **What are some of the big and important actions that *you* do? Do you do these actions with perfection of intention—with love? How might you think differently of these actions in the future?**

In transition, read the following excerpt from *Everyday Saint* (pg. 67): **“Holiness isn’t what you do or don’t do. It’s who you are. When we choose to engage in certain practices, it is for no other reason than that it is based on the love relationship we have with Jesus as we seek to draw closer to Him, seeking to serve Him above all.”**

Wrap Up

Give your students the opportunity to take home a visual reminder of this session. Provide paper, pens, pencils, and markers. Encourage each student to come up with a phrase that, for him or her, sums up the whole of the lesson. Students can choose to write their phrases bumper-sticker style, or they may choose to make more elaborate art projects out of their words.

Encourage students to be creative with their words, but tell them they may choose to use any of the following suggestions:

- Who I am, not what I do.
- Holiness is love.
- Love God. Love people.
- Created perfect.
- Called to love.

As your students work, read the whole of 1 Corinthians 13 aloud as another reminder that love is the greatest act we can do.

Closing

Close in prayer, allowing students time to pray silently. Finish by asking God to give them hearts of love.