

On Being A Perfectionist.

Text: Phil 3:7-15

1) Our perfection is in Christ

Suggested Hymns:

2) Christ's perfection grows in us

134, 179, 610, 129, 164

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Philippians 3:7-15, ⁷ *But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ.* ⁸ *Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; ¹⁰ that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, ¹¹ if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.*

¹² *Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.* ¹³ *Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, ¹⁴ I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.* ¹⁵ *Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Once there was a very famous horse race which was lost by a few cm just because the rider, who had practically won the victory, took his victory for granted and took it easy a few seconds too soon.

A group of medical students, observing a famous surgeon stitching an incision after surgery, noted that he tied three knots where other doctors usually tied two. And when they asked him about it, he explained it this way, “*That*

third knot is the sleeping knot. It may not be necessary to tie it, but I sleep better because of it. It is safer that way."

Now to bring these illustrations into focus on our text, there are many people who in all they do are satisfied with something less than their best effort, content just to get by. They have no lofty ideals, no challenging goals. They do their job in an easy-going, unconcerned manner, but never accurately, never thoroughly, and certainly with never more than constitutes the bare minimum requirement.

They excuse their mistakes with the old cliché that *"to err is human,"* and they excuse their slipshod attitudes by asserting, *"Well, I'm no perfectionist."* But these attitudes also carry over into the church, where there are many people whose discipleship is of the *"just-getting-by"* variety, who do not take their religion seriously but do just enough of the Lord's work to make themselves believe they are doing it.

They are content to be average, even just-below-average, Christians, excusing their failures with the old cliché, *"After all, none of us is perfect."* This is what Paul wants to talk to us about today, guided by the Holy Spirit into all truth and increasing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ (mentioned in today's Gospel), but also a doer of the Word and not a hearer only. He is pleading for a holy discontent with self in the constant awareness that we are not perfect, but in the constant striving to attain the perfection of Christ.

We hear people use the word "perfectionist" as though it was something evil, to be avoided, and as though applying oneself toward perfection were socially unacceptable. But St. Paul submits it to us as something to be desired. Be a perfectionist! Never get the idea that you have "arrived" spiritually, but keep pressing on toward the mark of your upward calling of God in Christ Jesus. It is not easy to be a Christian. It takes more than anything and everything you and I have in us. Are you ready for it? Being a Perfectionist! May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. Our Perfection Is In Christ

When God through the apostle Paul submits for our consideration the idea of being a perfectionist, He wants us to understand that our perfection is in Christ. In the church at Philippi, as in most of the churches founded by the apostle Paul, there were those who insisted, contrary to the Gospel, that before a Gentile could

be called a child of God, he would have to submit to the rites and ceremonies which had been the yoke of the old Jewish covenant. This is like putting new wine in old wineskins (Luke 5:37). It will break.

They were proud of their outward works of the Law, and they paraded in these works as though they were of superior holiness and more certain of their standing before God than the Gentile Christian. *“Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers,”*¹ Paul told the Philippians, because in reality these were dangerous, contemptible people, false Judaizing teachers, who insisted on circumcision and the Ceremonial Law instead of the perfection of Jesus Christ.

There was a time when Paul, too, was satisfied with that kind of outward righteousness, and if these people wanted to boast of these observances of the old Jewish Law, Paul could outboast them any time.

He was born a full-blooded Jew, of the tribe of Benjamin. He had been circumcised on the eighth day; and as far as keeping the Law was concerned, he had been a Pharisee, completely meticulous and beyond reproach. Or if you would judge by his enthusiasm, then see how this young proud Pharisee had bitterly persecuted the church of Jesus. If these are the things on which our hope must rest, then Paul could certainly boast.

But these imaginary advantages, what did they mean to Paul, the apostle, now that he had learned to know Christ? He counted them as useless rubbish. What he, too, had formerly considered marks to his credit he now counted as loss, for all these righteousnesses were as filthy rags.

When he learned to know Christ, he learned to know that he could never again be satisfied with his own works of merit, that his own righteousness was something infinitely less than the spotless, perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. He learned to know that he could never attain perfection in his own merit, regardless of how zealously he applied himself to the old Jewish covenant with its rites and outward ceremonies.

Our perfection is in Christ. Now that the apostle had learned to know the Saviour Jesus, he possessed a priceless perfection, the righteousness which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith. His own good works could no longer satisfy. They could never measure up to the

standard of God's eternal holiness. He must have a better righteousness and glory, and this was it — the righteousness of God by faith in Jesus.

Our Lord was perfect, holy, sinless, spotless, pure, undefiled, and beyond reproach. It is His perfect holiness which is chalked to our credit in God's ledger in the precise moment that we believe in Jesus Christ as our Saviour. To receive Jesus as Saviour is to receive His righteousness and to be accepted by God as righteous.

This means that you are declared just and holy in the sight of God, your sins completely washed away. It is to be justified by faith, clothed no longer in the spotted garments of your own sinful flesh, but in the beauty and glorious dress of the Saviour's blood and righteousness. This brings you, you see, to the central truth of our Christian faith, and the answer to the most vital question that any soul can ask: *Where can I find a righteousness sufficient to attain to the favour of God and to be restored to His fellowship? What must I do to be saved?*

Some answer that question as many of the people in Philippi answered it. Deluded by the damnable error that salvation can be achieved by something less than the righteousness of Christ, like good character, contributions, fastings, rituals, penances, they present the likes of these as peace offerings to the Lord. They are satisfied with these cheap righteousnesses.

But God is not satisfied. He tears these peace offerings to shreds as the filthy rags that they are. Only when we receive the perfect holiness of Christ in humble faith, only when we are justified by faith, can we have peace with God. Only the righteousness of Christ is perfect.

Therefore, says Paul, you have to be a perfectionist. You can be satisfied with nothing short of the perfect merits of God's Son. If you are awake to the religious tempo of our time, you will understand how timely these words are for us. Countless souls are satisfied with their own works, their own character, their own respectability, and count these sufficient to merit the favour of God. *"If they are good enough for me, why shouldn't they be good enough for God?"*

But when the justice of God must be satisfied, only perfection suffices, and our own spotted and piecemeal respectability does not satisfy that requirement. We dare not be satisfied with anything less than perfection, the perfection that is ours in Christ, who for us sinners and for our salvation took our sins to the cross

so that we might be given the crown. To be satisfied with something less than this is to pull up short of the mark.

To find your perfection in the perfect righteousness of Christ, applied to your account through faith, that satisfies. It satisfies God, who sealed the payment of the cross by raising His Son from the dead on the third day. It satisfies the sinner, who with Paul must then raise an exultant voice in praise of this glorious possession.² The hymnist writes,

When I shall launch to worlds unseen,
O may I then be found in Him,
Clothed in His righteousness alone,
Faultless to stand before the throne:

2. Christ's Perfection Grows In Us

Our perfection is in Christ, and when in faith we have put on the garment of His righteousness and the cleansing of His blood, we are just and holy in the sight of God. But that is only half the story. Christ's perfection must also grow in us.

We said a moment ago that it is not easy to be a Christian; that it requires more than anything and everything you and I have in us. Scripture makes it clear that salvation is by faith alone, but we cannot deduce from the simplicity of that truth that our Christian life is a simple matter.

A man who had formerly taken little interest in his religious faith once said to Dwight Moody, *"I attended one of your meetings a year ago, and I was saved."* *"That is interesting,"* Moody replied, *"but what is more interesting is what has happened since. What progress have you made in your Christian life?"*

It was the same Mr. Moody who, in speaking of the struggles of the Christian life, said, *"I have had more trouble with Dwight Moody than with any other man I know."*

You see, then, how this points up the words of Paul, as written in Philippians 3:12, ***"Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on."*** Paul is talking about Christian growth, about moving on toward the mark of perfection. This new spiritual life which has been born within us through faith in Christ must grow and increase as the Holy Spirit feeds our faith

through the Word and fashions us day by day into noble sons and daughters of the King.

If we must warn people against thinking that salvation can be achieved in any other way than through faith in Christ, there is equal need to warn them against the delusion that a worthless, fruitless, useless faith can save.

When an army arrives at an enemy's island, suppose they sat there on the shore playing cards and saying to one another, "Brother, we have arrived! The battle is ours!" Now wouldn't that have been a happy state of affairs? Quite the contrary, they need to be pressed on and pushed on and battled on until every last enemy had been killed, captured or surrendered. That describes our Christian life — pressing on, pushing on, fighting on in the power of the Holy Spirit's might, until the last enemy has been defeated and the palm of victory is ours before the throne of God.

As believers in Jesus Christ, you and I possess the spotless, perfect righteousness of the Saviour. By faith in Him we are declared just and holy, spotless and pure before God. This priceless blessing of our Saviour's death at Calvary and of His resurrection in the garden is ours.

Christ is ours in all the fullness of His grace and mercy, and we are heirs of salvation. But this does not mean that we have "arrived" spiritually. Through faith in Christ we have life, but that life must now grow and increase as we press on to partake finally of all the blessings of our Lord's resurrection.

That is what Paul means when he writes, in Philippians 3:10-11, *¹⁰ that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, ¹¹ if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.* The last great goal is still before us, the perfection of eternal life with Christ in heaven to which He ascends to prepare a place for us. There all the weaknesses of our flesh and all our imperfections shall be put away completely, and we shall stand in the blood-washed robes of spotless white before the throne of the Lamb.

But until then, leaving the past behind, we concentrate on the goal that lies ahead, and with outstretched arms press on toward the goal.

This must be a very personal concern in every heart today, that we recognise our Christian lives as no part-time job, for the shaping of our Christian character

in Christ and in the perfection of Christ is our lifework. Are we ready for it? Are we at it? Or are we content to treat our Christian faith as a side issue and then to hurry back again to our personal interests in what we deem the bigger questions of what we shall eat and what we shall drink and what we shall wear and where the money comes from?

Too many of us are still obsessed with the notion that our faith is a Sunday affair with no relevance to the big issues of love-making, pleasure-making, and money-making with which our time is occupied. Too many of us are content with mediocrity, pitching our Christian lives downward, satisfied to be average, even below-average, Christians.

Too many are not one bit concerned about growing in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus through the study of His Word. They are content with the meagre knowledge appropriated in a confirmation class but now forgotten. Their Bibles rot with age. When confronted with the needs of the Lord's kingdom, they ask, "Well, what are others doing?" and then they give a little less.

Feeling that being justified by faith, they have a cheap forgiveness, they live their lives much as they please, with no striving to curb the bitter tongue, to bridle the flesh, or to live in peace with all people.

Will you listen to Paul and catch the spirit of his faith? *I ... count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him.*

Dig into these Scriptures, ponder over them, search them, ransack them, and pray that the Spirit of God would help you cast overboard all this useless ballast that you are trying to carry in the ship of life. Ask God that He would through the power of Christ's resurrection raise you from death to life, and strengthen you to push on and battle on and grasp even more firmly the purpose for which Christ has called you.

Do not be deceived. You have not yet arrived. Keep striving in His power. You are not yet perfect, therefore you cannot rest until you are, for you are a perfectionist! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Philippians 3:2

² Hymn 331 v 4