

## *Be Ye Perfect*

Opening Hymn: #167 – “The Beauty of Holiness”

“...love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven. Be ye therefore perfect even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”—Matt. 5:44,45,48

We can all understand the idea of loving our enemies and doing good to those who do evil to us, but how are we suppose to understand how we are to be “perfect”? Is it a prophetic utterance that comes true when faithful Christians receive their heavenly reward? Surely actual perfection as human beings cannot be the thought since the scriptures tell us that there is none righteous, no not one.

Br. Russell suggested that the perfection called for in this scripture means perfection of heart intention. The idea is that we can never be actually perfect in the flesh, but we can desire to do right even if we do not actually do everything perfectly.

The difficulty of actually performing everything perfectly is suggested by James:

James 3:2 If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man and able also to bridle the whole body.

In the eighth verse, James says that no man can tame the tongue ... and to that we must all agree. Thus it would seem that actual perfection is something that James would say is beyond all human beings. What is interesting, however, is that he also says that perfection of a sort is attainable:

James 1:4 But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.

Here James seems to say that if we are rightly influenced by our trials and experiences, we will be perfect, and the Greek word is the same one he later uses when he talks about a perfect man being able to control his words.

And what is this Greek word? It is #5046 in Strong’s concordance. It means: complete (in various applications of labor, growth, mental and moral character, etc); completeness. It is translated: of full age, man, perfect. It should be translated “mature.” And that is the way Rotherham (and others) render it:

James 1:4 (Rotherham) But let your endurance have mature work that ye may be mature and complete, in nothing coming short.

That we can understand. If we are told we must become perfect, we would stop before we begin. But if we are told that we must become mature, we would believe it to be attainable. Maturity is everyone’s goal. We all try to achieve it about the same time we learn what the word means.

Phil. 3:14,15 I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as be perfect be thus minded.

Here is the same Greek word #5046. Paul includes himself in an “us” class, a class that is perfect. Of course the proper sense of perfection is maturity:

Phil. 3:14,15 (RSV) I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are **mature** be thus minded.

And just what is maturity?

- mature:** 1. complete in natural growth or development, as plant and animal forms, cheese, wine, etc. 3. fully developed in body or mind, as a person.  
4. pertaining to or characteristic of full development.  
5. completed, perfected, or elaborated in full by the mind.

Clearly it is possible for us to attain maturity as part of the new creation of God. Paul tells us that those who join him in this maturity are pressing toward the goal for the prize of the call of God. In fact, the best contrast we have for the fact that maturity is possible, is the scriptures that contrast it with immaturity, or childishness:

Heb. 5:12-14 For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For everyone that useth milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are **of full age**, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

The phrase “of full age” is the same Greek word #5046; it means mature:

Heb. 5:14 (RSV) But solid food is for the **mature**, for those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil.

There is nothing wrong with the milk of the word, but Paul says that after a period of time, sufficient development should take place so one’s diet is not milk alone. Babies can’t handle “meat,” but they can when they mature. Note that development comes “by reason of use.” A child matures because he uses his faculties ... imperfectly at first, but later with skill. If we don’t exercise our spiritual “senses,” maturity will not be ours.

We know that there are some characteristics children possess we should copy. A firm and abiding trust in our Heavenly Father is one example. But maturity means growth in understanding what is expected of us:

1 Cor. 14:20 Brethren be not children in understanding, howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be **men**.

The word translated men is Greek word #5046, the same one found in the phrase “be ye perfect.” Earlier in this letter Paul tells the Corinthians that development and growth is natural among humans and is expected to take place in new creatures:

1 Cor. 13:11 When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

What sort of things do you suppose Paul means when he says he put away childish things? If we understand how a child operates, we can contrast it with the behavior of a mature individual.

## **A Child is Self-centered**

A baby thinks it is the only thing in the world and everything exists to serve its needs. It learns that smiling and crying bring attention. Its concern for itself may develop into a problem if another baby arrives a year or two later. The attention that had been exclusive now must be shared. It is a mark of maturity when a child begins to realize that the world does not exist to serve its needs. Doing something for others without expectation of reward demonstrates even greater maturity, and sometimes is never reached at all.

Are we self-centered? Do we believe others exist to serve our needs? Do we ever find ourselves doing something for others with no hope of reward?

Matt. 25:42-45 For I was an hungered, and ye gave me no meat, I was thirsty and ye gave me no drink, I was a stranger and ye took me not in, naked and ye clothed me not, sick and in prison and ye visited me not. Then shall they also answer him saying, Lord when saw we thee an hungered, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? Then shall he answer them saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.

The separation of the sheep and the goats clearly applies to a class of faithful and unfaithful ones at the close of the kingdom. As a consequence we may be inclined to dismiss this indictment as not applying to us. But God's standards don't vary. The expected development on the part of the world during a period where righteousness predominates is the same expected of the church during a period when unrighteousness predominates. How do we treat those who have need of spiritual meat and drink? Do we content ourselves with our own affairs, ignoring the "stranger" or the spiritually sick? Around us are those in the vast prisonhouse of death. If we are to be pleasing to our heavenly Father, we will look for ways we can be of service to others.

It is interesting that doing things for others brings more joy to the giver than it does to the receiver. It can be a small thing, a simple "good deed." A good deed is one you don't expect to benefit you in any way, not even a gold star. It isn't that easy to find such a deed, but when you do and follow through you feel so good. It means concentrating your attention on what's happening around you right now. Don't turn your back when the chance comes your way. You'll feel good you took the opportunity, and you will be growing into a mature Christian.

## **A Child is Weak**

The responsibility of parenthood is great. A child needs constant care, both physically and mentally. He believes anything and may escape into his own make-believe world. His emotions govern his thinking and he is easily led astray. The military loves the 18 to 20 year olds because they think they will live forever. They glamorize circumstances that can mean certain death.

Eph. 4:14,15 (Phillips) We are not meant to remain as children at the mercy of every chance wind of teaching and the jockeying of men who are expert in the crafty presentation of lies. But we are meant to hold firmly to the truth in love, and to grow up in every way into Christ, the head.

Propaganda is the spreading of principles or ideas by an organization with the intent to influence thought. A committee of cardinals established in 1622 by Pope Gregory was called the “College of Propaganda” and was responsible for the training of priests for foreign missions. People are influenced by propaganda and can be controlled by others through it. Paul says that unless we hold firmly to the truth and grow in it, we are subject to external influences that will take us far from the Lord.

A child hates to feel afraid or uncertain. He wants to believe that his dad or mother—his leaders—know everything. It is a good parent who trains his child in growing up so that they do not need to lean on others. Leaders in the church should be dedicated to the growth and development of the entire congregation so that they too can judge things that differ. A tolerance for uncertainty is a mark of maturity. The truth gives us so much. If we aren’t satisfied with a particular answer to something, we should put the matter on the shelf for awhile. In time it will be clear. Looking for someone who has all the answers will ultimately prove to be a great disappointment.

### **A Child is Unreliable**

Children are children and that means we can’t really trust them. True, we try to develop them into mature individuals where trust is possible, but in the early stages of development their immaturity makes them do foolish things.

Luke 6:38 (Phillips) For whatever measure you use with other people, they will use in their dealings with you.

This lesson is generally hard for a child to learn. He has a ball and wants others to play with him. If a disagreement comes up, the possessor of the “ball” thinks his way should prevail. If it doesn’t, he takes his ball and goes home, thinking that he wins. Actually, everybody loses. In time, the child learns this is no way to solve problems. It is an empty thing to be liked because you have the ball, or whatever it is the others want. When a child meets those who are liked because of their good qualities, he begins to learn about growing up and acting in a responsible way.

If we treat people with tolerance, we will receive it. If we exact an eye for an eye, we will likewise receive that judgment when we least expect it. In our fellowship we say we operate with the spirit of tolerance and good will toward all. But we must develop that spirit in a genuine sense. We are very much on trial when we discuss the truth with those who disagree with us. If we become irritated or annoyed because “they just can’t see it our way,” we are acting childishly. It is like the child who picks up his ball [and his books!] and goes home.

1 Cor. 13:11 [Free translation] When I was a child, I was impetuous and immature. I spoke as a child and said what I pleased. I thought as a child, in an emotional and make-believe world of my own creation. I reasoned as a child in a superficial, self-centered fashion, content with half answers to questions I only partially understood. But when I became a mature man, I put away these childish things.

## The “Perfect” Man

Psa. 37:37 Mark the perfect man and behold the upright, for the end of that man is peace.

This same Hebrew word is used as a descriptor of Job:

Job 1:1 There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright.

The Hebrew word is #8535 and has the same thought as the Greek word we have been studying in the New Testament. It means complete or mature. Clearly it is an appropriate goal for all of us.

We have some helpful guidelines in the scriptures for developing maturity. That we have a responsibility for doing something there can be no doubt:

Philippians 2:12,14 Wherefore my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only [note: *parousia*—hardly his coming!], but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. ... Do all things without murmurings and disputings.

The favor that God has given to us requires great care on our part to follow the example that has been set before us. Working out our own salvation means that we will be held personally accountable for our own growth and development. Paul was a great leader of the brethren, but he taught the brethren they would not get into the kingdom on his coattails. Growth implies growing pains. Perhaps in an effort to avoid such pains, some of our brethren stop developing and take no interest in their own salvation.

The recurring theme of the scriptures is that we should pattern our life after that of our elder brother Jesus:

Heb. 12:1,2 Let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith.

When we look to Jesus, we receive that encouragement to keep striving for the prize of the high calling. Peter could walk on water as long as he kept his eyes on Jesus. But when he took his eyes away, he started to sink. In the same way we can be helped to accomplish impossible things as long as our eyes are fixed on Jesus. But if we look around at our brethren and not Jesus, we will be disappointed, distressed, and possibly led away from the lighted “path of the just.”

Growth and development requires vigilance and activity. It also must influence every facet of our lives.

1 Peter 1:13,15 Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober ... But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation.

Peter is not telling us that we should watch what we say—important as that is—but rather that we should be holy in every phase of our behavior (the real meaning of Greek word #391, rendered here as “conversation”).

We cannot possibly be happy when those around us are not. Therefore we ought to be on the alert to how we can help others, for in so doing we become the beneficiary.

James 3:15-17 (Phillips) If a fellow man or woman has no clothes to wear and nothing to eat, and one of you say, “Good luck to you; I hope you’ll keep warm and find enough to eat,” and yet give them nothing to meet their physical needs, what on earth is the good of that? Yet that is exactly what a bare faith without a corresponding life is like—useless and dead.

Peter points out that the real peril of sustained immaturity is that we might eventually lose our sonship:

2 Peter 3:16,17 (Phillips) There are, of course, some things in [Paul’s] letters that are difficult to understand, and which, unhappily, ill-informed and unbalanced people distort and bring disaster on their own heads. But you, my friends whom I love, are forewarned, and should therefore be very careful not to be carried away by the errors of wicked men and so lose your proper foothold.

If we keep our faith pure and simple and remember that God leads us through His word, we will grow up as fully mature new creatures who will be given an abundant entrance into the heavenly kingdom. And the scriptures are the most important tool in our development:

2 Tim. 3:16,17 All scripture given by inspiration of God is profitable ... that the man of God may be perfect!

When I was a child I thought as a child, but when I became a man I put away childish things.

“Be ye therefore perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect!”

Closing Hymn: #296 (only verses 1,3,5 if time is short) – “Search and See”

*[First delivered in Los Angeles, December, 1971]*