

TREASURES OF THE TRANSFORMED LIFE 6: SATIFYING YOUR SOUL'S THIRST FOR MORE... *“Dangers in the Deep End of Perfection”*

As we come to the conclusion of this series and study of The Treasures of the Transformed Life, I want to thank all the leaders who worked hard to make this a formative experience for the members of your group. I want to thank all the group participants for your commitment to praying, reading, preparing and sharing in your groups. And I want to challenge all of the participants...and all of us. Beginning right now, I want each participant to plan to form your own NEW group for another Lenten Study Small group experience next year.

Our last chapter laid out the challenge to take what we have learned and continue applying that knowledge into our lives, until we finally reach perfection. As you can tell by my title, I want to explore a bit more deeply today, some of what is meant by Christian Perfection; and most importantly to try to help all of us to see our way into the deep end of the perfection God has for each of us. The Gospel of Matthew contains these challenging...and troubling words:

But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.” Matthew 5:48

So, how you doing? All the perfect saints out there today, please stand up. All those of you who know a perfect person, living or dead, please raise your hand. Ok, all of you who are looking forward to being perfect; please nod your head in agreement. Oh, I see...alright, all those who wish someone would explain this apparent contradiction between the Scriptural ideal implored by Jesus; and practical reality of your life and mine, please say AMEN; all those opposed, same sign! Alright, now we're getting somewhere!

Perfection is commanded by God, modeled by Jesus, taught by Paul, studied by scholars, and planted in the DNA of the Methodists by our founder John Wesley who branded us with this imperative to be “entirely sanctified”. So how do we do it? How do we keep from drowning in the deep end of Perfection? We begin by broadening our understanding of what it means. There are three levels of perfection, two of which are unveiled in this one verse:

For by that one offering he forever made perfect those who were being made holy. Heb. 10:14

Do you see it? The offering of Christ’s life on Calvary, which we celebrate most reverently today, this week, on Good Friday, and especially next Easter Sunday; is the catalyst that renders “perfect” all who will acknowledge belief in that resurrection and all who will accept the gift that offering made possible. But notice also the second part; *“He forever made perfect...those who were being made holy.”* There is a difference between perfection and holiness or as John Ed says in the book, there is a difference between perfection and excellence. We’ll get to that, but first let’s consider the Three Stages or Levels of Perfection:

1. THE PERFECT RELATIONSHIP.

We are perfect because of our eternal union with the infinitely perfect Christ. When we become his children, by accepting His gracious gift of salvation, we are declared “not guilty” and thus we are also considered righteous before God, because of what Christ, God’s beloved Son, has done for us. This perfection is absolute and unchangeable as long as we continue to seek to become more and more like Christ. We are perfect in God’s eyes, because when we surrender to His will for our lives; God begins to look at us through the prism of Christ’s life, death and resurrection. God might be looking at us, but He sees Jesus. This is the greatest Treasure of the Transformed life. This is that perfect relationship.

This relationship is where all of us must begin our adventure of faith; we might call it getting into the water, stepping out of the boat, slipping into the pool. Whatever metaphor you like, it is a matter of each of us acknowledging that we can't swim alone, we can't forgive our own sins, we can't absolve ourselves from our guilt, and we can't make one good decision, let alone be perfect in our own strength or power. It matters not whether you are hearing this today for the first time, or have heard it for 50 years. It matters not if your parents or grandparents had this relationship, or didn't. It matters not if you are sitting here today sick of your sin, or stuck in your pride thinking you have no sin. It matters not from whence you've come; a life-long EUB, United Methodist or some other church or denomination, or no church at all. The relationship that renders us "Perfect" in God's eyes is between a saving Jesus Christ, and a sinful you and me! Unless this gets settled in your life...not much else I say today is going to make much sense. But there is a second stage or phase of Perfection...and you got to wade in a little deeper...you better arch your neck, because that's about how high the water is now!

2. THE PERFECT PROGRESS.

After we have accepted Jesus Christ as Savior, we begin the process of progressing toward growing and maturing our new-found faith. We can grow and mature spiritually as we continue to trust Christ, as we learn more about him, as we draw closer to him, and as we consistently obey him. However, our progress is changeable (in contrast to our relationship perfection, above) because this progress depends on our daily walk. We don't produce our own growth, but we are responsible for our own growth and at times in life we mature more than at other times. But we are growing toward perfection if we "press on".

Here is how the Apostle Paul considered it:

I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. Phil. 3:12

Notice that he states he has not achieved this entirely or completely. Does that mean He is in disobedience to the command: *"you shall be perfect as your father in Heaven is perfect?"* No, it simply means he has not finished growing. In verse 15 of this same chapter he writes: *But let all of us who are spiritually mature ('perfect') agree on these things...*Phil. 3:15 How can he be saying in verse 12 he is not perfect and in verse 15 that he and others are? He uses the same Greek word in both verses.

He is illustrating exactly the point I'm trying to make. He settled the issue of His relationship with Christ on the road to Damascus, and somewhere between the saddle and the sand, he inherited Christ's perfection. But throughout his life, we hear of his *thorn in the flesh, his wrestling with doing what he knows he shouldn't and not doing what he knows he should.* He is illuminating the truth; that making Jesus Savior may settle the legal question of our perfection; but making Jesus Lord of our life...well, that's a long...a life long struggle. I think it was this same Paul who spoke of becoming a living sacrifice. I think he knew first hand that the trouble with living sacrifices is they have a tendency to crawl off the altar!

Wesley understood and teaches us this same thing. He spoke of being made perfect in the ways that we love, having perfect intentions, even though sometimes our actions don't match our intentions. John never claimed he was made perfect in this life, though he believed it possible, and he couldn't think of anyone he knew who was perfect either! There is a third stage of perfection:

3. BEING COMPLETELY PERFECT.

When Christ returns someday, to take us into His eternal Kingdom, we will be glorified and made completely perfect. All 3 phases of perfection are grounded in faith in Christ and what he has done, not what we can do for him.

We cannot perfect ourselves; only God can work in and through us to “*continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.*” Phil. 1:6

But until that day, we have two responsibilities; 1- to receive Jesus as our Savior and begin our perfect relationship. 2- Continually grow our lives deeper into Christ as the Lord of our lives. When we do those things and finish this life, either in death, or at His return, our perfection will be complete. Do you understand it a bit better now? I hope so.

Before we leave this subject, I want to explore a few of those dangers I mentioned earlier. Out in the deep end, you can't see to the bottom, we don't always know what dangers might lurk under the surface, there might be sharks in the pond, or piranhas in the water, or other creepy creatures. Here are a few of the dangers of pursuing perfection in the deep end of life:

1. IT'S AN UNATTAINABLE GOAL

Some folks struggle with the concept of perfection as an unattainable goal, and when measured with the sinfulness of their lives, they just give up and quit trying. Some who began full of faith, have a train wreck or two along the way, and think that might eternally disqualify them from ever reaching this perfection we have been discussing. It's not true. It is all about your intention. God will never give up on you, as long as you don't give up on God, and don't give up on yourself!

2. IT BECOMES LEGALISM

Some people in their well-intentioned search for this illusive perfection, fall in love with the forms and start placing more focus on keeping the rules, than growing to be more Christ-like. Rule keeping is easier sometimes than dealing with the messy starts, stops, re-starts and do-overs. Some people find great satisfaction in keeping rules, while ignoring Jesus' warnings to Pharisees and other religious types to beware the power of pride.

3. IT CAN BECOME JUDGMENTAL

Some people get off on the wrong path thinking that as long as their search for holiness, their dealing with their sins, their progression toward perfection; is better than “so and so”; then they are alright. “Well, I’m not as bad as John Smith; he paid government money to pay for prostitutes.” Our perfection has only one standard. Matthew 5 doesn’t say: *you are to be as perfect as your pastor in the pulpit, or your governor in the capital or your neighbor in the next pew.* No, our standard is Jesus, and coming up short in the struggle can’t be justified or rationalized by comparing ourselves to any other human being. Be careful.

4. IT CAN BE MISUNDERSTOOD

This is what I’ve been trying to clarify all morning; perfection at any level is hard to get a handle on, because we are all so “anything but” perfect. Some people are drowning in the deep end of the psychological trap of thinking they have to be perfect to be accepted by God. No, no, a thousand times no. We don’t have to be perfect to be accepted by God. All who desire it...have already been accepted by God. When we understand that, then we can be made perfect by entering that perfect relationship, grow that life long perfection pursuit, and one day celebrate that perfection complete.

I want to modify a quote from John Ed as we conclude:

“As Christians, God lives within us. And God is perfect in every way. As such, the bigger we allow Him to be in our thoughts...our desires...our behaviors...and in our lives...the more perfect we will become.”

Anybody in this room want a more soul-satisfying...dare I say it...
”PERFECT”...life? Then let us pray!

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THE THREE LEVELS OR STAGES OF PERFECTION:

1. THE PERFECT _____

2. THE PERFECT _____

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But let all of us who are spiritually mature ('perfect) agree on these things...Phil. 3:15

3. BEING _____ PERFECT.

"continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns." Phil. 1:6

SOME DANGERS OF PERSUING PERFECTION IN THE DEEP END:

1. IT'S AN _____ GOAL

2. IT BECOMES _____

3. IT CAN BECOME _____

4. IT CAN BE _____