

Perfectionism: A Biblical Analysis

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“Perfectionism.” The word has a nasty ring to it, doesn’t it? And, like many “isms,” it has sometimes earned the reputation. Perfectionism may be defined as “The teaching that moral or religious perfection (in some cases sinlessness) is not only an ideal toward which to strive, but a goal attainable in this life.”¹ The problem with this point of view is not so much the claim that “perfection” is attainable as it is the negative results which occur in the life of a person who becomes consumed by “perfection” as life’s central goal. Such an individual can become focused on behavior in an unhealthy and anti-Christian way. Instead of a joyful, Christian lifestyle rooted in an attitude of thanksgiving for the salvation God has given in Christ, one’s focus turns inward. Small, trivial issues may attract far more attention than they deserve. Abstinence from this or that may become the measure of one’s righteousness. As in the related deviation, legalism, rule-making and rule-keeping may become one’s hobbies.

Someone, defending skewed and perfectionistic understandings of the Christian life, might appeal to Jesus pronouncement in Matthew 5:48, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”² If such an appeal is made, we may remind that Jesus’ command, part of the Sermon on the Mount, is offered in the context of His earlier mandate to “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:44). The command, offered as much to the Christian community as to individuals, invites no narrow, rule-based standard. Christians are to be perfect in love and satisfied with no mundane measure of love, but are to take their cue from God’s own surpassing love for humankind. This point of view is confirmed by the passage which immediately follows Jesus’ command to “Be perfect.” In it, Jesus says, “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven” (Matt 6:1).

Sometimes, though, in a bid to avoid the elitism and narcissism of a heretical perfectionism, we Christians divest ourselves of all interest in whether or not our behavior comports with the Gospel we profess. To do so, we might argue, is to practice perfectionism. Any concern for weighing our behavior and the motives behind it becomes suspect. From this perspective, attention to the Law of God or the Word of God as a source for detailed guidance for Christian living becomes anti-Gospel. Christ has saved us and, standing in His forgiveness, we have no need or desire to consider our behavior which is covered by His blood.

¹ Donald W. Dayton, “Perfectionism” in *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, rev. ed., ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), p. 765. Dayton provides a brief survey of the various individuals and movements that have advocated perfectionism, especially the laudable views and work of John Wesley. As will become obvious, my focus here is more on experiential rather than historical perfectionism.

² All Bible quotations are drawn from the New International Version.

I have been blessed to see developing within evangelical Christianity a reaction to such a truncated understanding of the Christian life. I recently returned from the 2004 meeting of the Fellowship of Evangelical Seminary Presidents, meeting at Marco Island, Florida. The guest speaker was Dr. Dallas Willard, author of *The Divine Conspiracy*, who exhibits the fresh interest in evangelical Christianity in Christian discipleship.³ In his presentations, Willard noted that all too often today “there is no assumption that a Christian will be a disciple.” To treat this ill, Willard offered stout tonic: “Christian spirituality is a life of obedience to Jesus Christ. It is routinely and easily doing the things Jesus said.”⁴ There is, Willard argues, a healthy, appropriate, and necessary interest that Christians should take in growing in discipleship and character:

A crucial question for us is always: Does the gospel I preach have a natural tendency to produce disciples of Jesus in kingdom living, resulting in people who actually live in the character and power of Christ? Or is discipleship, character transformation, routine obedience to Christ, something that is not a part of “the deal” we are offering—something we at most try to tack on as an option?⁵

Willard’s perspectives comport well with those offered in a classic essay on biblical views of the Christian life written by David Wenham.⁶ Wenham examines two passages, Gal 5:17-24 and Rom 7:14-25, sometimes taken to indicate that Paul believes the Christian life to be one of consistent failure. Against this view Wenham argues that the context of Gal 5:17-24 “is a confident call to live by the Spirit, and the assumption is that it is possible and proper to live by the Spirit and not by the flesh.”⁷ Similarly, Wenham believes that Rom 7:14-25 “is describing the state from which we are delivered, and not something that continues side by side with the life of the Spirit.”⁸ For Wenham,

Paul would never admit the inevitability of defeat in the Christian life. His conviction is clear that ‘with the temptation God will also make the way of escape’ (1 Cor. 10:13). The power of the Spirit is the power that raised Jesus from the dead and will give us newness of life in the present as well as in the future. For Paul this is the most important reality of Christian experience, and he would not subscribe to the melancholy view that Spirit and flesh are two almost equal contestants within the believer’s life.⁹ To summarize, two features of New Testament perspectives on the Christian life stand out as important to our theme: 1) The New Testament has an aversion to an inward-focused spirituality that has its own spiritual credentials as its goal; 2) The New Testament offers an upbeat assessment of the power of the Gospel in our lives, asserting that we have the privilege of drawing on resources offered by our risen Lord and of living in direct engagement with Him.

³*The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

⁴ For these quotations I am relying on notes I made of Dr. Willard’s presentations.

⁵ I draw the quotation from p. 4 of a set of handouts provided by Dr. Willard, “Five Interactive Sessions on: Teaching the Teachers of the Nations.”

⁶“The Christian Life: A Life of Tension? A Consideration of the Nature of Christian Experience in Paul” in *Pauline Studies*, ed. Donald A. Hagner and Murray Harris (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 80-94.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

As this suggests, biblical descriptions of normative, Christian life stand in opposition to an aberrant perfectionism. One of my favorite of such biblical descriptions is found in Paul's prayer report of Colossians 1:9-14. In my view, it attractively and challengingly summarizes a biblical perspective on the Christian life.

It may be of interest to remind ourselves that, in Colossians, Paul is concerned that some believers may be drawn away from true Christian faith to a "hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (Col 2:8, NIV). Advocates of this "philosophy" generate "human commands and teachings" and their own rules and taboos (2:20-23). So Paul's prayer report (1:9-14), with its winsome description of the Christian life, occurs in a context that relates to our theme.

Paul writes:

⁹For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. ¹⁰And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, ¹¹being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. ¹³For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

It seems to me that Paul's and Timothy's prayer for the believers at Colossae centers on two requests: 1) That they might know God's will deeply and thoroughly . . . and God Himself as well (vv. 9, 10); 2) That this deep knowledge of God might be lived out in lives marked by a) Pleasing God and doing good works—living a vigorous, joyful, Christian, and ethical life (v. 10); b) A dynamic, personal strength, nourished through constantly drawing on divine resources, and yielding the qualities of endurance and patience (v. 11); c) Their own life of thanksgiving to God for His marvelous deeds on their behalf (vv. 12-14).

What a marvelous summary of what should be our deepest desires! Here we see a clear sketch of God's destiny for the believer, of the kind of person God wants you and me to be. Not focused inward on our own petty issues but outward on God and all that He offers us in Christ Jesus. Not a life of misdirected perfectionism and legalism but a life of thanksgiving to God for transferring us to the kingdom of His Son and for the redemption and forgiveness we find in Him.