“Completely Perfect”
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Matthew 5:48
Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Matthew 22:34-40
When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, an expert in the law, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “’You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

"Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that, as the Scriptures have been read and your Word is proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today"

So, this morning how many of you are saints? And how many are sinners?
As challenging as it was last week to consider yourself saints – today we look at being perfect which isn’t any easier.

In my ministry setting before I came to Church of the Saviour, I served on East Ohio Conference Staff working with persons who are called into and preparing for ministry.

Once someone had answered the call, been to seminary, met with church committees, met with committees on ministry, were commissioned, served a provisional period, served in a ministry setting, went through 2 years of additional continuing education, received recommendations, met with the committee on ministry again, and were approved – then they were able to be presented to and approved by the clergy of the Annual Conference. Only then were they eligible to be Ordained.

But there is one of the last steps before someone is Ordained and that is answering the Historical Questions. The same Historical Questions used since John Wesley’s time. These questions, which are asked by the Bishop, are aimed at determining a candidate’s faith, discipline, character, and commitment to the work of God.

Two questions that cause much unease among the new Ordinands are: “Are you going on to perfection?” And “Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life.”

In fact, the only other question that causes more unease is “Are you in debt so as to embarrass you in your work.”

Is perfection even possible for flawed humans? Have you ever met a perfect person?

Perfect is defined as being entirely without fault or defect. Our faith tells us that only one human was perfect – Jesus the Son of God.

So, what does Jesus mean in Matthew 5 when he tells us to “be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect?” Is that even possible?

The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, considers Christian Perfection to be one of the cornerstones of faith. The doctrine of Christian Perfectionism is at the heart of who Methodists are as a people and as a movement. Even so it is often misunderstood and was even dismissed throughout history because people have tried to understand it from a human perspective. It was considered very controversial and Wesley wrote volumes defending it.

Christian Perfection is not the same as Human Perfection. It is not about being entirely without fault or defect and it’s not actually attainable by humans on their own.

In the book, A Perfect Love, Steven Manskar gives this definition: Christian perfection is the work of divine grace that, through faith in Jesus Christ, restores the human soul, damaged by sin, to wholeness and helps babes in Christ to grow up to maturity in faith and love. Christian perfection is nothing more, or less, than growing up in love and becoming a whole, complete human being made in the image of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

That seems like an easier definition of perfection to accept then flawlessness, but what exactly does it mean?

What Christian Perfection looks like is defined in our other scripture reading from Matthew. When asked what the greatest commandment was Jesus replied: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

The law found in Leviticus in the Old Testament tells us to love our neighbor and to hate our enemy. Jesus came to give us a new understanding of who our neighbor is AND told us to “love

your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you."

Christian Perfection is love! Christian Perfection is not sinless perfection but rather it is an obedience of faith.

Clearly, this is not in alignment with the realities of the world around us today where it's OK - and even encouraged - to hate someone who looks different than you. Someone who disagrees with you. Someone who worships differently. Someone who loves differently. Someone who challenges you. Someone who comes from a different country. Someone who is hungry. Someone who is without financial resources. You get the point – I could go on and on.

If we are so full of the love of God, there is no longer room in you for hate or evil thoughts. If your faith in Jesus does not align you with God's love something is clearly missing in your relationship.

Remember Adam Hamilton's words that Andy shared a few weeks ago, if your religion does not make you more loving, then you chose the wrong religion.

Loving our neighbor is not always easy and God expects us to do more than give it lip service. It can be hard. People aren't always lovable. Loving your neighbor requires sacrifice. Loving your neighbor means feeding the hungry, helping those in need, standing up for the oppressed, showing compassion, kindness and respect. Not because good works earn us a place of honor but because God's love simply overflows in us.

Sometimes it can seem impossible to love our neighbor. Earlier this year I told the story of Corrie ten Boom. She is one of my heroes of the faith. The story I told was about when she and her sister were in the concentration camp and God brought them to be thankful for fleas because they caused the guards to leave their building alone and they could study scripture and pray in peace.

There is another story about Corrie. There was a time when Corrie's desire to love her neighbor was put to the test.

Each had something to forgive, whether it was a neighbor who had turned him in to the Nazi authorities or a vicious camp guard or a brutal soldier.

In mid-May 1945 the Allies marched into Holland, to the unspeakable joy of the Dutch people. Despite the distractions of her work, Corrie was still restless, and she desperately missed her

beloved Betsie. But now she remembered Betsie's words: that they must tell others what they had learned.

Thus, began more than three decades of travel around the world as a "tramp for the Lord," as Corrie described herself. She told people her story, of God's forgiveness of sins, and of the need for people to forgive those who had harmed them.

Corrie herself was put to the test in 1947 while speaking in a Munich church. At the close of the service, a balding man in a gray overcoat stepped forward to greet her. Corrie froze. She knew this man well; he'd been one of the most vicious guards at Ravensbrück, one who had mocked the women prisoners as they showered. "It came back with a rush," she wrote, "the huge room with its harsh overhead lights; the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor; the shame of walking naked past this man."

And now he was pushing his hand out to shake hers, and saying: "A fine message, Fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!" And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course — how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women?

But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. I was face to face with one of my captors, and my blood seemed to freeze.

"You mentioned Ravensbrück in your talk," he was saying. "I was a guard there… But since that time," he went on, "I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein" — again the hand came out — "will you forgive me?"

And I stood there — I whose sins had repeatedly been forgiven — and could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place — could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking? The soldier stood there expectantly, waiting for Corrie to shake his hand. She "wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do. For I had to do it — I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us." Standing there before the former S.S. man, Corrie remembered that forgiveness is an act of the will — not an emotion. "Jesus, help me!" she prayed. "I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling." Corrie thrust out her hand.

For Corrie, forgiveness was an extremely difficult act of love for her neighbor.

We sometimes lose sight of what real love is. We say we love our sports team or a particular athlete, our pet, our favorite food, a book, the flag, a political leader, etc. But those are not Christian Love. Those are simply preferences. 1 John 3:16 reminds us that real love is about being willing to lay down your life for another.

One description of Perfection I find most helpful is, the love of Christian Perfection arises because we've allowed God's grace to settle in, to flow, and to shine through our cracks and wounds, polishing our rough edges and corners as we walk the journey of faith with the Holy Spirit as our guide and companion.

But it's a journey. Remember it's not about being flawless or never making mistakes. It's about giving ourselves and our lives to the working of the divine. It's about the surrender and not about the achieving.

It's about finding the God-created essence within each of us. Christian Perfection is an on-going process. Remember the Historical Questions. "Are you going on to perfection?"

It is a process of growth. Christian Perfection is the love of God, poured into our hearts that leads us in the direction of larger good. As we daily seek to love God and to love out neighbor character is built. We are going on to perfection. Michelangelo, the great artist, was once putting what appeared to be the finishing touches on a sculpture when a friend dropped by for a visit. Days later, the friend dropped by again and was surprised to find the artist still working on the same statue. "You haven't been working on this statue all this time, have you?", asked the friend. "I have," said Michelangelo. "I've been busy retouching this part and polishing that part; I've softened this feature and brought out that muscle; I've given more expression to the lips and more energy to that arm." "But all those things are so insignificant," said the friend. "They're mere trifles." "That may be so," replied Michelangelo, "but trifles make perfection, and perfection is no trifle."

Michelangelo was known for continuing to tinker with his creations until he got it perfect. As God's creation, God continues to tinker with us until we are made perfect as well. Our role is to lean into spiritual disciplines and engage in the 5 practices – worship, grow, serve, give, invite – and create space for God to work in us.

As we are willing to continue to answer God's command to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind God will continue to lead us to perfect love of our neighbor and to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.

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