

Perfection...Piece By Piece

by Mike Ford

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As a society, we have become so fearful of success and achievement that we bend over backward to reward sloth and incompetence. It is "politically incorrect" to say, "You failed," or "You blew it," or "Go back and do it over." Our culture is teaching our children that simply trying is "good enough," and achieving is optional or unnecessary.

My divorced neighbor has a seven-year-old son, who visits us every weekend. This is one wired kid! His mom stokes his fire with sugar, and he ricochets from house to house up and down our block, irritating one and all. A few months ago, she bought him new rollerblades. His mother gushed praise and adulation for every move he made—from lacing his skates on to standing up to putting one foot out. She cooed and clapped and encouraged him at a high decibel level, making sure that his self-esteem was good even if his skills were not!

In my son's Youth Baseball League, every player receives a "Participation Trophy." The league and teams have no Most Valuable Player or Most Improved Player, just participants. Where is the incentive to achieve or to improve?

With such non-existent standards, kids grow up and enter the workplace thinking mediocrity is a valued asset. Instead of praising and encouraging hard work and achievement, we have gone the other direction. We have even coined a new phrase to describe it: "dumbing down."

Three years ago, a Department of Education study showed that more than half of American college graduates cannot read a bus schedule (*U.S. and World Report*, April 21, 1997, p. 12). What a sad indictment of our educational system! Instead of working to raise students' standards, we lower the bar so that no one's self-esteem suffers. If we do not reverse the trend, America will be nothing more than a nation of hamburger flippers with high self-esteem!

This "dumbing down" is not restricted to our physical lives. Lowering standards has also invaded our spiritual lives. Have we not seen a church decide that keeping the commandments was too hard? To make it "easier" for the people, decision makers not only lowered the standards, but they totally removed them! If these "compassionate" leaders want to be consistent, they should change the Parable of the Talents to show that, when all is said and done, Christ will give everyone a Participation Trophy.

"Just as I Am"?

Harold S. Kushner, a rabbi, recently published a book titled *How Good Do We Have to Be?*, which shines some light on this world's thinking on self-improvement:

[A] lot of misery can be traced to one mistaken notion: We need to be perfect for people to love us. We may have gotten this message of perfection from parents who genuinely loved us and demonstrated that by correcting our every trivial mistake and by constantly urging us to do better. We may have gotten this message from teachers who praised only perfect papers and showed impatience when we did something wrong. . . . Saddest of all,

we may have picked up this same kind of message from our religious leaders—that God holds us to strict standards of right and wrong, that he knows every nasty thing we do, even our secret thoughts. . . . Yet why would God set us up for failure, establishing a standard that not one of us could possibly meet? He knows us all too well to demand perfection of us.

Rabbi Kushner's attitude—that God knows better than to expect perfection from us—is more commonly associated with Protestant thought: "All you need is Jesus in your heart." "Just as I am."

What about perfection? Should we strive for it? Is it obtainable? If we are to be God's firstfruits, those whose examples others will follow, then we need to know the answers to these questions.

God tells Abram, "I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless [*perfect*, KJV]" (Genesis 17:1). If Mr. Kushner is right, God should have known better than to tell Abraham that he should be perfect! Notice that God's instruction here is part of a conditional covenant with the man. If Abraham would walk perfectly before Him, God would multiply his descendants, make nations of them and produce kings from them (verses 4, 6). God did all these things. Is it reasonable, then, to assume that Abraham fulfilled his part of the bargain? That he walked before God perfectly?

"But this was Abraham!" one might say. "Surely, God would not hold the rest of us to that standard!"

Matthew 5:48 says otherwise: "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect." He wants all of us to become perfect, not just the "father of the faithful"!

Is this possible? Most of us feel that perfection is well beyond us. We quote Romans 3:23 and Ecclesiastes 7:20, which say that we are all sinners. Can sinners like us become perfect?

What Is "Perfect"?

Most of us misunderstand what God means by "perfect." We think of it as the opposite of sinful, but this is not what it means. As a human being walking this earth, Jesus was sinless and perfect. Abraham, however, was not sinless, but God considered him perfect. How can that be?

The Hebrew word rendered "blameless" (NKJV) or "perfect" (KJV) in Genesis 17:1 means "entire, complete, full, without blemish." The Greek word found in Matthew 5:48 translated "perfect" means "finished, complete, having reached its end," and implies being fully grown or mature. The definition of the English word *perfect* is "lacking nothing essential to the whole, without defect, complete." All three definitions contain the word "complete."

My daughter Kelly has been in a "puzzle mood" lately; that is, in her free time, she likes to put puzzles together, most of which have hundreds of pieces and take days or weeks to finish. She constructs them on the floor of the living room next to the fireplace. As I go by now and then, I see them lying there in various stages of completion. And then one day I pass through the living room and notice that she has finished her latest puzzle. It is complete. All the pieces are in place. It is perfect.

This is analogous to what God is telling us when He requires us to become perfect. He wants us to be spiritually mature in His character. He is saying, "Become complete—have all the pieces in place."

Paul puts it another way in I Corinthians 14:20, "Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature." The word "mature" is the Greek word *teleios*, translated "perfect" in Matthew 5:48. Just as we were once physical children who grew and matured, so are we to grow spiritually. As Paul says in Hebrews 5:13, we are not to continue for long on a diet of milk, but graduate to "solid food."

Notice how the J. B. Phillips' translation brings this thought out in Ephesians 4:11-16:

His "gifts unto men" were varied. Some he made his messengers, some prophets, some preachers of the gospel; to some he gave the power to guide and teach his people. His gifts were made that Christians might be properly equipped for their service, that the whole body might be built up until the time comes when, in the unity of common faith and common knowledge of the Son of God, we arrive at real maturity—that measure of development which is meant by "the fulness of Christ."

We are not meant to remain as children at the mercy of every chance wind of teaching, and of the jockeying of men who are expert in the crafty presentation of lies. But we are meant to speak the truth in love, and to grow up in every way into Christ, the head. For it is from the head that the whole body, as a harmonious structure knit together by the joints with which it is provided, grows by the proper functioning of individual parts, and so builds itself up in love.

This section of Scripture adds another factor to the spiritual maturity we must aspire to. As human beings, we tend to consider ourselves mature—we cannot imagine ourselves to be anything less! And so, while we agree that God wants us to become perfect or spiritually mature, we "dumb down" even that when we measure ourselves against our own definition of maturity.

God has not left defining the standard to us, however. Paul states it in verse 13: "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ"! Our Savior set the example of spiritual maturity, and *He did not sin even once!* II Corinthians 10:5 says we are to bring "every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ." Thus, though our goal is spiritual maturity or completion, the standard by which we gauge our progress is **absolute perfection!**

Though it is far too late for any of us to live a sinless life, we can, like Abraham strive to be "blameless" or "perfect." We will probably not reach "perfect perfection" or "absolute spiritual maturity" until our change comes, but that is the ultimate goal. We *will* ultimately reach it, for in the spirit-inhabited Kingdom of God, our every thought will be under control. Until then, the best way to reveal any remaining immaturity is by comparing ourselves against the absolute perfection of Christ.

Spiritual Grownups

Should we strive for perfection? Is it obtainable? The answers become more obvious if we rephrase the questions: Should we strive for spiritual maturity? Should we try to be complete Christians? Can we become spiritual grownups? Of course!

By making the effort to grow, working to become complete, we are not "earning" our salvation, but rather carrying out our responsibility. Yet, for us to become firstfruits, we *must* do this—and not like this world, but in a Christian way. We must overcome and grow, striving for excellence in all we do, working with our might to become the complete, mature, perfect Christian.

"Dumbing down" will not work in this endeavor. A life of overcoming and growth is not an easy one. And because of that, at Christ's return, a "Participation Trophy" will not do! Our trophy will read "Eternal Life"!

We will make mistakes. We will commit sins along the way. Even so, we can still become perfect:

When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, my brothers, don't resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends! Realise that they come to test your faith and to produce in you the quality of endurance. But let the process go on until that endurance is fully developed, and you will find you have become men of mature character [*perfect*, KJV], men of integrity with no weak spots. (James 1:2-4, Phillips)

As yet, we are unfinished puzzles. All of us are missing pieces, and God, as the Master Puzzle Builder, is working to fill in the empty spots. As that process continues, our love and concern for each other should help us endure our present imperfections:

As, therefore, God's picked representatives, purified and beloved, put on that nature which is merciful in action, kindly in heart, and humble in mind. Accept life, and be most patient and tolerant with one another, always ready to forgive if you have a difference with anyone. Forgive as freely as the Lord has forgiven you. And, above everything else, by truly loving, for love binds all the virtues together in perfection. (Colossians 3:12-14, Phillips)

Our love for each other is the glue that holds the pieces of our puzzle together. As we build character, we add other pieces. Trials pass and still other pieces are added to our puzzle. To keep the pieces from becoming separated, maybe even being lost, this true, godly love "binds all the virtues together in perfection."

So, when anyone says, "God knows us all too well to demand perfection of us," do not believe it! We indeed can, and must, become perfect!