



God's Perfect Standard

St. Matthew 5:48

Fr. William Klock

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Today we come to the end of the fifth chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel. And as we come to 5:48, I want to remind you of a verse we looked at about six weeks ago. In Matthew 5:20 Jesus said:

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

He told us that unless our righteousness is greater than that of the most righteous men of that day, we cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven. So we might ask, "Okay, Jesus, how much more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees do we have to be? If they hold up to seventy-five percent of the standard, what kind of righteousness do we have to have? Is seventy-six percent good enough? Eighty percent? How good do we have to be to make it into your kingdom?"

I think the people listening to Jesus preach were thinking about just these kinds of questions. The standard of the Pharisees was a hard one, but the Pharisees, after all, seemed to manage it. Someone was no doubt thinking, if the Pharisees can do it, I can do it too – and I can do just a *little bit more*. Like the two men out camping who were awakened in the night by a bear in the camp. One man started putting on his shoes and his buddy looked at him like he was crazy and said, "What are you doing? Shoes or no shoes, you can't outrun a bear." And as he laced up his shoes, the first man said, "No, I can't outrun the bear, but I don't have to – I just have to outrun you!" And so we might think, I don't quite know what the standard is, but all I have to do is outdo the Pharisees by just a little bit!

Jesus gives the answer to those questions in 5:48 and in doing so he crushes any idea we might have of trying to please God on our own – of trying to earn our way into the Kingdom. He sums up everything he's been saying:

You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This is, I think, the most important and the most significant verse in the whole Sermon on the Mount. It sums up everything Jesus has told us so far and everything else he'll tell us follows from it. If you can understand this one verse, you will understand the essence of everything else Jesus teaches. And more importantly, if you understand this verse, you understand the core of the *Gospel itself*.

Jesus says that the requirement for entrance into the Kingdom is perfection. But what is perfection? St. Matthew uses a Greek word here that is used throughout the New Testament and it literally means "complete." It's the word that's used of a legion when it's fully outfitted and ready for battle or for a ship that's fully rigged, manned, and ready to set sail. And when that word is used in relation to morality, it means "blameless" – without fault. It's interesting, because both meanings of the Greek word reflect the meanings of the two Hebrew words used in the Old Testament when it talks about perfection. The first of those is the word *shalem*. You're probably familiar with it, because it's related to the word *shalom*, which has to do with complete well-being and blessedness. *Shalem* itself specifically means "whole" or "complete." The other Hebrew word was used in relation to sacrifices and means "entirely without defect" or "without blemish." Think of the sacrificial animals used in the Temple. They were to be without defect or blemish.

And so the Bible's shows us God's standard: complete and total moral uprightness. The man or woman who wants to get into God's Kingdom has to be free of any and every moral spot, stain, or blemish. Even the smallest spot of stain – even if it's morally microscopic – bars from entry into God's kingdom. He or she must be blameless, just as the Lord Jesus Christ was blameless.

And yet in Romans 3:23 St. Paul tells us, "*all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." There is no man or woman who has ever lived up to God's standard of perfection. All of us fall short. All of us are sinners. In fact, when St. Paul writes about "falling short" he uses a term borrowed from archery – it describes the

arrows that don't make it to the target – the ones that don't have enough power behind them and end up stuck in the grass somewhere between the archer and the target. And Paul tells us that none of us can ever hit the target – let alone the bullseye. All of us fall short. None of us can ever enter the Kingdom based on our own work or effort.

The thing we need to understand here is that God's standard is set by his own perfection. We can't meet it on our own. We can't even hit the target. Nothing we will ever do is perfect. So we need to realise that only God himself is perfect and that if we're ever going to be "perfect as he is perfect" (as Jesus calls us to be), it will only happen when he works for us and in us.

King David understood this. In Psalm 18 he writes, "As for God, *his way is perfect*" (18:30 NIV) and then a couple of verses later he writes, "It is God who arms me with strength and *makes my way perfect*" (18:32 NIV). Who is God? He's the one who is perfect. What does he do? He works in us to perfect sinful men and women. David's point is that it is God who is responsible for his own perfection, but he's also responsible for ours! He makes us perfect in three ways – and here's the heart of the Gospel, the heart of the ministry of the Lord Jesus. The first thing God does is give us a perfect record – he wipes the slate clean. Then he begins working at perfecting us from the inside out. And finally he brings us to complete perfection at the moment of our death.

How does he wipe the slate clean? How does he give us a perfect record? To understand this we have to remember that sin is an offence against God's justice. It can't just be winked at, overlooked, or even just forgiven. God embodies perfect justice and for him to simply overlook our sin would be for him to act contrary to his own being and character. Our sin has to be dealt with – it has to be punished. Justice must be done. That's why God the Father sent God the Son to die on the cross in our place. He who was perfect and deserving of no punishment, bore our sins in his death, paying the penalty we owed, and cancelling all of God's claims for justice against sinners forever. This is the meaning of the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross was the place where God punished sin once and for all and cancelled the debt for all those who come to believe in Jesus and put their trust in

him, not in themselves, for their salvation. The writer of Hebrews tells us, “by one sacrifice [Christ] has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (Hebrews 10:14 NIV).

But notice that the Hebrews passage says that through Jesus’ sacrifice, God has made perfect “those who are *being made holy*. He’s not only purged our record clean, but he is at work within us to make us holy – to work in us to bring us closer to actual perfection in how we live our lives. You see, through Christ we may be made perfect forever in terms of our slate being wiped clean, but we are still far from perfect in our actual thoughts, words, and actions. This is what St. Paul writes about in Philippians 3:12: “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.” Paul understood that his record was wiped clean before God on the basis of his faith and trust in Christ, but he also understood that the practical work of his being perfected wasn’t a done deal.

As followers of Christ St. Paul’s experience ought to be true of us too. No Christian ever stops growing in righteousness. Think about this in your own walk with God. When you first became a Christian you were probably excited and thankful. A lot of people talk about becoming a Christian and suddenly being convicted of some of the sins in their lives and putting an end to them, but the fact is that once things settle down, we all realised that we have a long way to go to perfection. Before we believed the Gospel we had all sorts of wrong ideas about God, about ourselves, and about what God requires of us. We had lots of sinful habits. Even after we put our trust in Jesus, lots of those wrong ideas and sinful behaviours remain. But God doesn’t leave us there. As we study his Word and as we fellowship with and learn from other Christians the wrong ideas and behaviours gradually change. The closer we get to God, the more we hunger and thirst for righteousness. That’s the second aspect of God’s work of perfecting us.

Now there are people out there that will tell you that if you work at his hard enough, eventually you can reach perfection in this life. That was the heresy of the “Holiness” or “Higher Life” movement of a hundred years ago, but that

heresy still has a hold on many Christians today. But it always has and we know that because St. John warns against it in his first epistle where he writes, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). If anybody ever tells you that he’s reached the point that he doesn’t sin anymore – that he’s perfect – you can tell him that he’s at least still guilty of one sin: lying! You see, the Christian who is growing in holiness, growing in Godliness and Christlikeness, rather than finding himself perfect, will actually find himself seeing just how sinful he really is. The Holy Spirit will open his eyes to sins he never realised he had so that he can work to overcome them with God’s help. Trust in Christ doesn’t end the day we’re baptised. The Christian being made perfect learns to lean on and trust in Jesus Christ on a daily and even an hourly basis as he struggles with sin and looks for forgiveness and cleansing.

If we’re not trusting in Christ on a daily basis, we need to ask ourselves whom we’re lifting up. Are you lifting up God, or are you lifting up yourself? Are you thinking highly of God, or are you thinking highly of yourself? In our culture it’s easy to fall into the habit of thinking too highly about ourselves. It’s like a seesaw. If God is up, then we’re always going to be down, but if we’re up, then God is down – and that’s what you don’t want. We need to have a big view of God and a small view of ourselves. That’s how it has to be if we’re going to learn to trust in God. The person who thinks highly of himself trusts in himself – he thinks he can do it on his own – that he can save himself – or at least that he can merit God’s favour, even if only a little bit. And yet Scripture, as we saw last week, paints a sad picture of us. That’s why my goal every time I preach, in the words of Charles Simeon, one of the great Anglican preachers of the 19th Century, my goal is to “humble the sinner, exalt the Saviour, and promote holiness.” Anything less fails at being biblical and anything less will end up with a congregation full of people who trust in themselves. If we understand how big God is and how small we are in terms of righteousness and holiness, God will be everything to us and we’ll grow every day in our understanding of his love for us. The lower we get, the higher he gets and the more we will learn to lean on him for the help, strength, and encouragement that we need so desperately.

Perfection is possible, but only after our deaths – that’s when God perfects his saints. This is why death is no longer a feared enemy for Christians. This is why St. Paul could talk about death as “gain,” and how he could say that life in eternity was “better by far” than this life we have now. He understood that death brings us into the presence of Jesus Christ, and he understood that it results in the Christian finally becoming perfectly Christ-like. In death we become holy as Jesus is holy.

This is salvation. It’s past, it’s present, and it’s future. It touches us in every aspect of our living.

I think, though, that one of our biggest struggles is in the area of assurance – especially in those times when we see our sin and as much as we fight and struggle with it, it doesn’t go away. St. Paul writes in Philippians 1:6, “I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” Paul is saying that if you’ve put your faith in Jesus Christ, God has already begun the work of perfecting you; and because God doesn’t change, his purposes will not change. God never starts something that he doesn’t finish!

We can find great assurance in these words. Are you afraid of falling away from God? These words assure us that we cannot be lost! Were you the one responsible for your coming to faith in Christ? No! It was God. He called you. He wiped your slate clean. If there was ever a time in your life when you were seeking God, it was only because his Holy Spirit was there moving you to seek him – just as the great hymn says:

I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew
He moved my soul to seek him, seeking
me;
It was not I that found, O Saviour true;
No, I was found of thee.

It’s no surprise that that hymn was authored anonymously. Whoever wrote it knew that he couldn’t take credit for his faith and didn’t even take credit for writing the hymn! Without God enabling him, no man, no woman will ever turn to God. It’s God who finds us, God who calls us, God who perfects us – and he never starts anything that he doesn’t finish.

These words in Philippians give us hope when we feel like we're getting nowhere spiritually. They remind us that we *will* one day be like Jesus. Paul wrote, "he who began a *good work* in you will bring it to completion." And in Romans 8:29-29 Paul tells us what that good work is. There he tells us about God's great purpose for calling men and women to himself. His purpose is for us "to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers." God is so delighted with Jesus Christ that he has set the whole course of creation and history in motion just so that he could call out a race of sinful men and women, put his life and Spirit within them, and transform them to be like his Son. We may feel far from Christ sometimes, but we can have assurance that God will complete what he started because our transformation depends *not on us, but on him!*

Even if there comes a time when you or I choose to give up on conforming to the image of Christ, God won't give up on us. We all sometimes find sin our lives that we choose not to give up. We like it. We're used to it. Sometimes that sin has come to define who we are, and when the Spirit convicts us we choose not to give it up. But even then God doesn't give up. He pokes and prods and whittles away at us. Sometimes he may even smack us around spiritually and take us to rock bottom. He will do whatever it takes to get you and me out of our sin and to set us back on the path he's laid out for us.

As long as we insist in doing things our own way, it will get tougher, because God is going to be true to his nature – to who he is – and his nature is to be against sin. He loves you and me. At the same time, he also has to set us straight. The pop-psychologists today call it "tough love." God spoke to Israel through the prophet Hosea. His people had been disobedient. He likened them to a woman who repeatedly left her husband to prostitute herself. God was forced to judge them for their sin, and yet through it all he loved them. At first he said that he would come to them like a moth – gently coming to set them straight and to draw them back to himself. He says in Hosea 5:12, "But I am like a moth to Ephraim, and like dry rot to the house of Judah." But he also says that if his people ignore the gentle proddings

and refuse to repent, "I will be like a *lion* to Ephraim, and like a *young lion* to the house of Judah. I, even I, will tear and go away; I will carry off, and no one shall rescue" (Hosea 5:14). We need to understand this principle. God is determined to lead you and me into righteousness – to conform us to the image of his Son. So when we sin, he will deal with us gently if he can. But we can also be sure that he will also be as rough as he needs to be when we don't respond to the gentle nudging. He will even break your life into little pieces if he has to in order to get your attention.

Think of the image of the potter and the clay. He will mould and make us into vessels fit for his use. But if we get stuck in our ways – if we ignore his hands and push against them – and in time we begin to harden into something other than what he desires us to be, the potter won't stop short of smashing the clay so that he can reassemble the pieces and set it back together according to his pattern. One way or another his purposes will be accomplished for us, but too often we learn the hard way.

Dear friends, learn this lesson. Don't force God to come to you as the roaring lion. Don't let your clay harden so much that the potter has to break you to pieces so that he can put you back together in the image he wants. Learn to recognise the fluttering moth and the gentle hands of the potter – the little inconveniences, the little failures, the times of restlessness, the times when you just can't seem to get things going according to your plans – learn to recognise those things as God's gentle warnings that you're off track. If you and I can learn that, we'll be able to go on from strength to strength, and we'll be able to rejoice that he who has begun a good work in us will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, we give you thanks and praise for the cross of Jesus Christ – for the fact that while we were yet sinners, you sent your Son to die in our place. Thank you for wiping our slates clean, thank you for filling each of us with your Spirit to work in us and to make us more like your Son. And thank you Father for the promise that one day we will be just like him. But in the meantime we confess our continued rebellion against you and against your

standard of perfection. Soften our hearts and humble us. Turn our eyes to your Son and to the work he is doing within us that might become more like him and with each step become more useful to you and to your Kingdom. We ask this through the name of our blessed Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.