



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 12.8 – The Doctrine of Sanctification

Perfection and Perfectionism

There is no Christian in this world who is all “new man” without having any of the “old man” in them. For this reason, there is no Christian who has reached or can reach perfection in their life as a Christian. What Paul confessed of himself is true of every Christian: **“I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members”** (Romans 7:22-23). Thus, the good works of Christians are deficient in quality and quantity because of their sinful flesh. This is why Christ’s apostles continue to admonish and encourage Christians to walk worthy of their Christian calling.

Because of this constant struggle against the flesh, the Christian may at times be tempted to give up the effort to walk according to the Spirit. There are so many failures and so many setbacks. But Paul encourages us to keep going: **“He who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart”** (Galatians 6:8-9).

Sometimes Christians even fall away from the faith temporarily or even permanently. When the falling away becomes obvious, the Christian community may even need to excommunicate a sinning Christian who is impenitent in their sinning, even as the apostle Paul directed the Christians in Corinth to put out of their congregation a man who was guilty of adultery with his father’s wife. Paul wrote: **“Deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus”** (1 Corinthians 5:5). The purpose of such an excommunication is to bring the impenitent sinner to repent of their sins and restore them to faith in Christ and Christian fellowship.

The fact that perfection is impossible in this life does not mean, however, that we should set a lower standard for Christian living so that it becomes attainable. Jesus’ words teach us that the perfection of God Himself must remain the standard for Christian sanctification. For He said: **“Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect”** (Matthew 5:48). Our goal as sons and daughters of God is to imitate our **“Father in heaven, for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust”** (Matthew 5:45). So Paul writes: **“As we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith”** (Galatians 6:10).

The standard for Christian sanctification is the holiness of God Himself. The apostle Peter calls on the Christians in his care to be **“obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, ‘Be holy, for I am holy’”** (1 Peter 1:14-15).

The apostle Paul tells us that the grace of God teaches **“us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works”** (Titus 2:12-14).

There is no sin we should not strive to overcome; there is no quality of goodness that we should not strive to attain. Paul says: **“Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God”** (2 Corinthians 7:1). And

again he writes: **“Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering, bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection”** (Colossians 3:12-14).

Some Christians have interpreted these passages that call for perfection and holiness to mean that Christians can actually attain perfection in this life. But the fact that God commands something does not mean that it is necessarily something that we are able to do. The main purpose of God’s commands is to make us realize how sinful we are so that we will turn to Christ for forgiveness. The more we strive to live the kind of life that God wants us to live, the more we become aware of the sinfulness within us that makes perfection impossible. Nevertheless, God’s forgiveness in Christ moves us to a life of love and gratitude for His blessings – a life that at least begins to imitate the holiness of our God.

But perfectionism, the idea that we can actually attain perfection in our Christian life here on earth, is not taught in the Scriptures. The apostle John plainly says of us Christians: **“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ... If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us”** (1 John 1:8-10). The apostle Paul said of himself: **“Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended, but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call through Christ”** (Philippians 3:12-14).

Despite these clear words from God’s Spirit, individuals and church groups have taught that it is possible to obtain perfection in this life. The Roman Catholic Church has officially adopted perfectionism, saying: “If anyone says that it is impossible also for a justified man and for one who is established under grace to keep the commandments of God, let him be anathema” (Council of Trent, Sixth Session, Canon 18).

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, taught that perfection of a certain kind is attainable. His teachings on perfection have been adopted by the many holiness church bodies, such as the Church of the Nazarene, the Wesleyan Methodists, and various groups calling themselves the Church of God. But God’s Word clearly condemns such perfectionist notions. We read in Proverbs 20:9: **“Who can say, ‘I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin’?”** Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 7:20: **“There is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin.”** The prophet Isaiah declared: **“We are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags”** (Isaiah 64:6).

The very fact that Jesus taught His followers to pray the Lord’s Prayer indicates that perfection is not possible in this life. If it were possible, we would not need to pray the Fifth Petition: **“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors”** (Matthew 6:12). In fact, some perfectionists have taught that Jesus taught this prayer only to His followers at that time, but since the Holy Spirit has now come to make us holy and perfect, we no longer need to pray the Lord’s Prayer because we no longer need to ask for forgiveness of sins.

Church history shows that those who teach perfectionism as attainable have very clearly not attained perfection in their own lives; they were guilty of the same kinds of sins that the rest of us are guilty of. Those who teaching perfectionism often lower of the standard of perfection so that the goal has supposedly been reached by them. Their definition of sin generally omits sins of the mind or sins of weakness or ignorance. Even then they are generally unable to attain perfection according to their own lowered standard.

Jesus did not sin at all according to God’s high standard. **“In Him there is no sin”** (1 John 3:5). Nor do we ever find Him asking God to forgive some personal sin. But the Bible is filled with prayers of God’s people in which they confess their sins and ask for forgiveness. David prayed: **“I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and**

You forgave the iniquity of my sin” (Psalm 32:5). David prayed: “Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no one living is righteous” (Psalm 143:2). Another psalmist wrote: “If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared” (Psalm 130:3-4).

There are three Old Testament chapters that contain national prayers of confession: Ezra 9, Nehemiah 9, and Daniel 9. Confession of sin is a daily occurrence for Christians and Christian groups. **“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). James says: “Confess your trespasses to one another” (James 5:16). Paul confessed: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief” (1 Timothy 1:15).**

Jesus had many disagreements with the Pharisees. The problem with the Pharisees was their lack of recognition of their sins and their failure to confess them. On one occasion **“Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, “We see.” Therefore your sin remains”’ (John 9:41). In other words, if the Pharisees had admitted their blindness and confessed their sins, they would have been forgiven. But since they claimed to have no sins to confess (that is, they said they could see), they remained in their sins. As the proverb says: “He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy” (Proverbs 28:13).**

Questions

1. Why is it impossible for a Christian to attain perfection in this life?
2. What are the two forces struggling against each other in the Christian?
3. What should Christians do when someone is impenitent in their sinning?
4. What is the standard for Christian behavior and attitude?
5. Why do many Christians attempt to lower the standard?
6. List some passages that declare that perfection is God’s standard.
7. What is the main purpose of God’s commandments?
8. What is meant by Christian perfectionism? What is wrong with it?
9. If there are any religious groups in your locale that teach perfectionism, name them.
10. How should Christians handle the sin in their lives?
11. What was the chief problem with the Pharisees?
12. How does the Lord’s Prayer teach us not to promote perfectionism?