

CAN A CHRISTIAN BE MADE PERFECT?

The other day I had a conversation with a man with whom I was working on a building project. He is a believer and attends a popular, charismatic congregation. As we were working on a particular part of the job, I jokingly said if we did a certain thing wrong, it would be a sin. This comment prompted him to begin talking about what he believed concerning sin. He said something like this: "Well, all Christians sin. We sin every day. We always sin and there doesn't seem to be any prospect of not sinning, so a person just accepts it and asks for forgiveness all the time."

The next day, while meditating on this conversation I realized that this brother is in bondage. He is in bondage to sin and has no hope of escape. He believes that he will keep on sinning until Jesus comes again or he dies and he is finally free from this evil which comes from his human nature. I'm sure that he thinks he shouldn't sin or that God can help him to not do some really "evil" sins, but essentially becoming free from sin seems impossible to him. This poor man is a slave to sin and has no hope of being free.

Many, if not the majority of Christians, seem to think in a similar way. They don't believe that anyone can be made perfect. They think that perfection in this life is impossible. They are resigned to a life of bondage to sin. Perhaps they think that some who have an extremely strong will or are "especially dedicated" can sin less, but a life of continual sinning seems inevitable to them.

The great majority of Christians seem to have no hope of a complete victory over sin. Instead of looking at what Jesus said to us and what the scriptures teach, they base their conclusions on the lives of those they see around them and their own failures in their efforts to quit sinning.

They form their conclusions from the preaching they hear, the books they read, their own experiences and the general attitude of the great majority of believers with whom they associate. They appear to accept their bondage to sin in this world and just hope for something better in the future.

Yes, there are Christians who keep trying. Some believe that if they do their best to be good and try their hardest not to sin, God will understand their weakness when they do sin and be gracious toward them and forgive them. I have heard someone say these very words.

Others have striven for years and years to conquer sin, yet without success. They have become discouraged with the idea of ever being free. Their tendency, after a long time, is just to adjust their thinking and accept some sin in their lives. For such individuals, the forgiveness of God becomes the focus of their faith and their hope of a complete deliverance fades away.

Yet what does the Bible teach us? Peter says in his first letter to the believers: "But as he who is calling you is holy, you too be holy in every aspect of your living because it is written: 'Become holy, for I am holy'" (1 Pet 1:15,16 FLNT). We also read: "In this way, he can establish your hearts *to be* irreproachable in holiness *when you stand* before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones" (1 Thess 3:13 FLNT).

You see, God genuinely expects us to become holy. This is one of His objectives for His work in our lives. This is not an option. It is not something which can be discarded. It is not something which only exists in His mind or from His viewpoint. God's purpose for us is to be conformed to His very own image. Without a doubt His image is completely, utterly holy.

We cannot excuse ourselves. We cannot wish away this divine command. We cannot just hope that God will not notice our unholy

condition or that He will just keep on forgiving us. It is necessary for every child of God to become holy.

Yes, this is a very high standard. To become as holy as God seems to be impossible. Of course, if it depended upon our abilities, strength, determination or self-control, it would be impossible. However, this is not the case. Becoming holy is a work which God Himself will do in us. He can and will make us holy. Our part is to be willing, open, yielding and obedient.

Although this work is not done by us, it does require our cooperation. God will never force His will upon us. He will never do anything inside of us unless we are completely willing for Him to do it. If we are fearful, if we are resistant, if we are reluctant to give up some sin or habit that is standing in His way, He will go no further. His work in us in that area stops until we bow to His will and become willing. When we love ourselves, desiring to retain who and what we are, we can never be transformed into His image.

This is very important. We do have our part in God's work. We must be willing for Him to change us.

But how can this holiness be obtained? If it is not dependent on our determination, "consecration" or effort, how can we reach it? The secret is that it is a result of God's own holy life living in us and growing up inside of us. This is very important! True holiness is achieved by God's holy life filling us and expressing its holy nature through us.

You see, God is absolutely holy. He never sins. Sin is repugnant to Him. He cannot even be tempted by it (Jas 1:13). When we are "born from above" (Jn 3:3 FLNT), the life of God Himself is born inside of us. God's plan is that this holy, sinless life would grow up to maturity within us and fill us completely. His idea is that His holy life would substitute for our own sinful one.

We read in 1 John 3:9, “That which is begotten of God [i.e. the new spiritual man] does not sin because *it is* his [God’s supernatural] seed *that* has come to live in him. In fact, he [the new spiritual man] cannot sin because it something which is begotten by God *who is perfectly righteous*” (FLNT).

Although the outward “shell” of our human body will not be changed until the coming of the Lord Jesus, we can and should be experiencing a radical, inward change right now. We read that we should be being changed from glory to glory into that same image (2 Cor 3:18). Furthermore, from the end of this same verse we learn that this work is being done by “the Lord, the Spirit.”

Yet many still seem to believe that complete perfection is not possible. They seem to think that, although we can be freed from some of the “grosser” sins, a genuine, total holiness is not possible in this life.

When we think in this way, we deny the power of Jesus’ death and resurrection. If we insist that perfection or holiness is not possible, what we are really saying is that Jesus’ work on the cross and his resurrection from the grave was inadequate. It was not powerful enough to do the job completely. Therefore, it must have been a sort of half-baked effort which fell short of God’s goal.

Please think about this a moment. Can it be that Jesus’ work was incomplete? Is it possible that all that he did was just partially effective? Is the reality that we can only be made a little better, but not truly perfected? Is God’s power in us limited or restricted? If it is, it is certainly not limited on His part!

Could it be that Jesus didn’t really die completely, or that He wasn’t truly dead when He was buried or even that, at His resurrection, He left some of Himself in the tomb? Is it possible that our co-death and resurrection with Him was only partial and didn’t completely do the job? Of course, it is foolish to imagine such things.

The truth is that Jesus' work on our behalf was complete. He said, "It is finished {or, completed}" (John 19:30 FLNT). Nothing was left undone or just partially finished. This means that a complete salvation – a total deliverance from who and what we are – is available to every believer.

Hebrews 7:25 teach us that, "Therefore, he is able to save completely {absolutely, entirely} those who are continually drawing near to God through him" (FLNT).

Paul, the apostle, had the full and intense expectation of being perfected. He writes, "Not that I have already fully obtained *it* or have already been perfected but I press on so that I may take possession of that for which the Anointed one, Jesus, also took possession of me" (Phil 3:12 FLNT).

This should also be our hope. We are no different from Paul. We have the same God. He has given us all His same divine life and it is this life which can grow up in us until we are like Him.

Adding to this idea, let us read together from Ephesians 1:7, "*It is in him that we have our release by ransom through his blood, even the release from bondage to our sins, according to the liberality of his grace...*" (FLNT). Also in Colossians 1:14 it is written, "*And it is through his Son that we have the release by ransom – the liberation from our sins – through his *shedding his blood**" (FLNT).

This word translated here "release by ransom" in the Greek language is APOLUTROSIS which means "to pay the ransom price in full." Now when someone is held captive (in our case it means to be held captive to sin) and the full ransom price is paid for them, then that person is set free. They are no longer held in captivity.

Therefore, since Jesus paid the full ransom price for us, it means that we too can be set free. We too can be released completely from the bondage of continually practicing sin. Please notice that the ransom price was

not partially paid. It was paid in full. Therefore, we can be and, in fact, should be being liberated completely from our bondage to sin.

If, then, it is true that we can be perfected, why don't we see many, if any, really holy Christians? Where are the real "saints?" Why are so few believers escaping from the bondage of sin?

One sad reason is that very few believe in and, therefore, are seeking to arrive at this Christ-like state. Their unbelief blocks them from ever arriving at the goal. They have no expectation of liberation from their sins and so they can never be set free.

Another reason we don't see many perfect Christians is that the truth is hidden from them. They don't understand how this perfection can occur. They don't see that it is the holy life of God growing up in them through Christ which is the key to perfection. So they keep trying by their own efforts and inevitably fail. The lack of light keeps them from pressing on to maturity. Furthermore, as we will see later on in this article, sometimes the cost seems too great for them.

Still another reason we don't see many perfected believers is that God doesn't allow the "fruit" to rot on the vine. For example, when you go to your garden in summertime and there you see the first, really ripe red tomato, you don't leave it there. You harvest it and take it into your house.

God often operates the same way. When the fruit is ready, He takes it home. The few believers who have the faith and willingness to press on to perfection are not left here on earth when they have become "ripe."

WHERE DOES SIN COME FROM?

Sin is a spontaneous product of the Adamic life which we inherited from our ancestors. The scriptures of the New Testament call this the "soul-life" or *PSUCHÊ* in Greek. This life has a sinful nature which means that it produces sin naturally and spontaneously.

Let's be very clear about this. Sin is the product of the fallen nature. It is an integral part of the makeup of every human being. We sin, not because we slip up once in a while, but because it is part of the nature of who and what we are by birth.

Now there is no way for this to change. There is no way to alter the inherent nature of this PSUCHÊ life. In the same way that a leopard cannot change the spots on its skin, we cannot change the nature of our fallen life. Please notice this fact.

The nature of any life is inherent in it. It cannot be changed. There is absolutely no possibility for the nature of our Adamic, soul-life to be altered. Although many Christians may hope that they can make themselves better by Bible study, following certain religious practices or teachings, obeying some leader or other, or even being very hard on themselves, this is not the case.

Please pay careful attention to the following fact. The only way to become free from sin is to die. Only dead people don't sin! That's right, the only hope for our soul-life to be free from sin is for it to be killed. Even though, through Jesus Christ, we can be forgiven for our sins, the only way to be liberated from our human tendency to sin is through death. This truth may seem very harsh, yet it is true. There simply is no other solution.

But, glory be to God! He has provided a way for us to experience death and yet not be completely eliminated. You see, when Jesus died on the cross, we died with Him. In some divine way which we do not fully understand, we were included in this death (Gal 2:20).

This means that there is a real death available to believers. We can genuinely experience the death of our old life with its sinful nature. Through the Holy Spirit, our co-death with Jesus can become real in our lives. His death can be applied to our soul-life so that it ceases to live and so stops producing the sin that so constantly grieves us.

However, this death requires our willing cooperation. We must be willing for this death to occur. God will not force this experience upon us. He will never push us. He always completely respects our free will. Until and unless we are completely willing to experience the loss of our soul-life, it will not happen.

When we still love ourselves, when we still imagine that we are basically good people, when we still appreciate things about ourselves, then we can never be free. We can't be liberated from who and what we are. This death has a cost. It will cost us our own natural, Adamic life (PSUCHÊ).

Our experience of a genuine death to our soul-life demands our willing obedience. We must submit ourselves to God's judgment. We must recognize our sin and agree with His judgment upon it. This is called "repentance." This means agreeing that our own life must die because of its sinfulness.

Such deep repentance, which results in our willingness to die, is a result of supernatural light. When God shines His light on us, we see ourselves as He sees us. We understand our condition in the light in His holy nature. We realize how ugly our human nature is compared to His righteousness.

When, through His mercy, God reveals our sin, then we have the privilege of being free from it. We can agree with His judgment upon our old life. This then opens the way for Him to apply the death of Christ to us. This is the way, the only way, that we can be freed from sin.

Not only can we enter into the experience of Jesus' death, but we also can be included in His resurrection. That's right. We can also experience our co-resurrection with Him. This is something which every child of God can and, in fact, should be knowing for themselves. This is a wonderful thing. To experience the resurrection of Christ in our own

lives is to live in victory over sin. It means to know the power of God operating in us to a greater degree.

Here we encounter an important truth. No living person can resurrect. This is only possible for the dead. Therefore, to know this great liberty, to experience this wonderful freedom, it is first necessary to us to pass through death.

Paul teaches us in Romans 6:5, “For as we become united together with *him* in the form of his death, *to that same degree* we will also be *like him* in his resurrection” (FLNT).

Also in Philippians 3:10,11 we read Paul saying, “*I want to know him and the power of his resurrection – which comes through participating in his sufferings and becoming integrated into his death – so that in this way I may be experiencing the resurrection from the dead*” (FLNT).

So we see that our liberation from sin and our being made holy are the result of the death and resurrection of Jesus operating in our lives. Our co-death with him puts an end to our sinful, Adamic life and our co-resurrection with him fills us more and more with his own holy life.

This should be the experience of every Christian. If it is not your experience, you need to seek God for his grace and mercy so that this blessing can be yours. No one is too weak. No case is too difficult for God. When we are willing, calling out to him for his liberating work to be done in our lives, he will lead us in the way of his cross and our liberation.

Will this be easy? No. Will it involve pain and suffering, sometimes even very intense? Yes it probably will. But there is no other way to be holy. There is no other way to be free from who and what we are. There is no other way to be perfected by being transformed into his glorious image. Dying to our self is never easy, but it’s well worth the price.

God's holiness, which can be ours through a walk of faith in the way we have been describing, is the most valuable, precious, beautiful thing. It is an expression of God's own life and nature.

Please do not shrink back from this. It is worth everything through which you must pass to obtain it. Don't settle for less! Make God's own holiness your aim! You will have all of eternity to enjoy its benefits.

THE HUMAN BODY

It seems important to add here that our human body is also full of sin. It too has fallen appetites and desires. The body has yearnings for food, comfort, pleasure, sex and other things. These things may not be sinful in and of themselves since they are natural needs, yet the body often desires these things in excess or at times and in situations which are not holy.

Yet our body is not changed in this life. This perfection which is ours does not reach to the physical body before the resurrection of the dead. This "part" of us will only be changed later on.

For this reason Paul teaches us that our new spiritual man should rule over our physical body. We must not let our physical appetites dominate us. He says: "But I treat my body severely and bring it into subjection..." (1 Cor 9:27 FLNT).

We must be constantly on guard so that our fallen body does not motivate our behavior and so bring us into sin. Instead our lives must be guided by the life of God in our spirit – our new spiritual man.

God's solution for this part of our being – our body – will only come at the time of our resurrection. It is at that moment our body will be glorified. The effects of the fall will be eliminated completely and Jesus' victory over sin will be gloriously revealed.

In the meantime, however, we must never imagine that we could not sin anymore. Even if our soul-life is being crucified and our new

spiritual man is leading our daily living, it is always possible for the fallen body to trip us up. We must constantly be vigilant.

Included here are some verses which speak to us about how much God desires us to be – and expects us to be – holy. These verses are taken from the New International Version:

“To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 1:7).

“To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ – their Lord and ours” (1 Cor 1:2). “...to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Eph 5:26, 27).

“May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones” (1 Thess 3:13).

“For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life” (1 Thess 4:7).

“Those who cleanse themselves from the latter will be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work” (2 Tim 2:21).

“Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters” (Heb 2:11).

“Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14).

“But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do...” (1 Pet 1:15)

“Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives” (2 Pet 3:11)

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