

Living with Imperfection

By Rev. Derek Elphick

Introduction

The human mind craves...

- order
- symmetry
- it scans the landscape, looking for things to be in their proper place

Our mind doesn't like loose ends

- unresolved issues
- if something breaks - we fix it
- things like "ambiguity" and "uncertainty" avoided at all costs

And yet...no matter how much we try to

- create an environment that keeps things in order...

We nevertheless find ourselves surrounded by "imperfection"

- not always the "perfect" spouse, parent, or friend
- not always proud of our choices
- don't handle ourselves well at workplace or in resolving conflicts
- challenges w/job, health, money, etc., leaves us anxious, unsettled

[Pause] When building a house, there is a Chinese tradition to leave three tiles off the roof to represent how even heaven isn't perfect...

In the making of Persian rugs, an "imperfect stitch" is sown into every rug to represent a similar idea...

Imperfections are built into this beautiful cathedral...

Our eye expects to see straight lines and perfect symmetry,
but the columns, arches
and walls are not actually symmetrical,

again, to represent the fact that no one is perfect but the Lord.

1. An Impossible Goal?

Part of us rebels at the idea of perfection being beyond our reach.

We want things to be neat and tidy...

- it goes against our sensibilities to have loose ends,
unresolved issues
- the human mind is looking for SATISFACTION
 - wants things to be "just right" so that we can move on...

So, is the pursuit of perfection something of a fool's errand?

What is the point of setting goals...

of establishing high standards,
of aiming for the ideals of heaven...

...if none of these can be achieved perfectly?

How is that satisfying?

And what is the alternative?

What should we settle for?

- mediocrity?
- half-hearted attempts?
- compromise?
- second-best?

We live with this seemingly unresolved "tension" between two opposites -
of expecting our goals and dreams to be fulfilled...

and knowing that we will fall short and fail...

2. Beauty in Imperfection

In today's sermon I would like us to consider the possibility that there's beauty in imperfection...

- beauty because the rough, frayed edges of
 - human effort
 - & trial and error
 - of misunderstanding and hurt

...stand, not as a monument to failure,
 ...but as a testimony to all good people who sincerely desire to follow
 the One who IS Perfect

And so the goal today is to see how we might learn to live

- more comfortably
- maybe even at peace with the "imperfection" in and around us...

And rather than getting depressed or "deflated" by the reality that our lives don't always match up to the ideal...

- maybe we could view the ideal in a different way, as a MOTIVATING force
- as a "contrast" or "opposite," a HEALTHY tension that keeps us...
 - moving forward
 - inspires us to keep on trying
 - improving
 - getting better
 - live more and more in the image and likeness of God...

3. Fear of Failure

Winston Churchill said, *"success is the ability to go from failure to failure with no loss in enthusiasm."*

Human failure is not a curse.

It's not something to be embarrassed about or hide from either.

In fact, the Lord's Word invites us to get comfortable with it...

because ALL human progress and development,

spiritual growth,
can't happen in a vacuum,

without tension between opposites,
without trial and error,
without making mistakes...

The Lord spoke to this when He said, *"Those who are well do not need a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Lk. 5:31-32).*

4. Life isn't about Winning

Still, no one wants to look weak, vulnerable

- have their mistakes advertised to the world

We live in a society that puts a premium on WINNING

- the world is divided into winners and losers
- if you're not doing AMAZING things, something is wrong w/you
- & in this fierce world of COMPETITION
 - if you don't come out on top, someone else will
- in the eyes of society, we need to look like we "have it together"

(Note: this is what the Scribes and Pharisees specialized in: they presented themselves as the ones who had it all together, who were living a religious life the "right way, "meaning the perfect way...)

The pressure to think we should be free of problems, free of constraints, is a pressure that doesn't come from the Lord or His angels.

The hells are the SOURCE of this pressure and, of course, it's a TRAP

We're taught that evil spirits are the ones to insert the idea that we should be "perfect," pure in thought, pure in intention...

- because as soon we think this they...

...THEN "accuse" and "condemn" us for falling short, for not meeting those false EXPECTATIONS (see AC 761, 5386).

In the Word, the Lord turns this idea of "winners & losers" upside down...

After He sat down, Jesus called the twelve, and said to them, "If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all" (Mk. 9:35)

"So the last will be first, and the first last..." (Mt. 20:16).

Here's one of our first lessons:

The desire to be "first" (first in being right, first in winning, in being on top) gets us into all sorts of problems because it places our own stubbornness and pride in the primary spot, and humility and serving others in the secondary slot.

And as long as we put self 1st and others 2nd we will view life through the lens of winners & losers, those who are "doing it right" and those who are not.

[Friend's answer to this: *"I'll take the bronze"* = I'm happy not to be first].

5. Heaven isn't Perfect

A word about angels...

- tend to put them on a pedestal

- in some religions, angels are thought to be a separate creation (not even from this world)

- even in the New Church, angels get put on a pedestal as "perfect" or as people we have no hope of possibly being like...

But in our reading today...

Angels go through changes of state like us.
 They have their "ups" and "downs"
 They have a proprium or self like us

...but the most telling, important truth/lesson, is that they aren't perfect, pure, w/out blemish, fault...(see HH 158)

[I invite you to pause and sit with this revelation about angels for a moment]

What are we using as our measurement for success?

How are we pacing ourselves?

Is life in this world a race?

Spiritually speaking, what do we imagine the "finish line" to be?

Because if no one, including angels, achieves perfection then maybe...

...we need to tell our spirit, our anxious mind, to slow down...

(Regeneration, while critically important, is not a race!)

6. A Shift in Expectations

The Lord's Word, from beginning to end, is an invitation to us to make small, incremental changes - Lord to the Israelites "*Little by little I will drive your enemies away from you...*" (Ex. 23:30)

When it comes to pacing ourselves, let's make sure our hearts & minds are aligned with the EXPECTATIONS of the Lord,

- unlike the EXPECTATIONS of the world/society and the FALSE promises of the hells...
- the Lord does not expect perfection from us, not in this world or the next

The Lord obviously wants us to set goals...

- strive to do the best...
- shun evils - not settle for mediocrity
- hold ourselves accountable to the highest standards...

These are all necessary goals

- the fuel that keeps us going...

[Planning for the future - it's what makes life enjoyable]

But expecting or demanding "perfect" results from ourselves and others, leads to

...frustration,

...disappointment and hurt.

When the Lord said, *"You shall be perfect, just as Your Father in heaven is perfect,"* (Mt. 5:38) it was in reference to one's effort.

The Greek word for "perfect" is *Telios* which means "whole" or "complete"

- a whole, complete effort to shun evil and do good is what the Lord asks of us...

- nothing more, nothing less.

7. Living comfortably, at peace, with Imperfection

The Lord said to the Rich Young Ruler:

"If you want to be perfect, go sell what you have and give to the poor, and come, follow Me..." (Mt. 19:21).

This is such a beautiful prescription for our happiness...

(1). "Sell" = letting go/shunning unhealthy attachments (anger, resentments, unforgiving thoughts & feelings)

(2.). "Give to the poor" = serve others, look to use

(3). "Follow Me" = strive to follow the Lord in His Word

Our efforts in this regard won't be perfect...

but they will be "whole," sincere

This is why we don't need to be ashamed of or embarrassed by imperfect results because:

"...there is no point in time when anyone can say, 'Now I am perfect'" (AC 894).

We live in a world that promotes

an unhealthy pursuit of perfection

- advertising companies spend millions of dollars promising the perfect look
- TV shows & movies reduce life into winners and losers, those who are successful and those who are not
- and if something isn't "perfect" in your life, throw it out and start again!

The Lord in His Word presents such a refreshingly simple alternative:

Our peace, joy, happiness, sense of accomplishment rests in the little things...

- in small acts of everyday thoughtfulness and kindness...
- in seeing our own imperfection and the imperfection of others as a testimony to human effort, of the desire of the good, sincere people around us striving to live in the image and likeness of God

Let us let go of the ILLUSION that life should be a race to...

- rid ourselves of all problems and challenges
- rid ourselves of constraints
- rid ourselves of imperfection

Let us appreciate the gift of life the Lord has given us.

Let us live comfortably, at peace, knowing we are *"not,"* as we learned today, *"...regenerated in a single space of time but are being regenerated throughout [our] entire life, and even in the next life."* (AC 3200).

AMEN.

Lessons: Luke 5:27-32; Matthew 19:16-22; HH 158; AC 3200