

Perfectionism

A Sermon by Rev. Derek Elphick

The *desire* for perfection is a good thing.

We've been created in the image and likeness of God which means there's a deep impulse within all of us to *seek* perfection.

We wouldn't have any goals,

any hopes or dreams,
or any sense of wanting things to be "just perfect..."

...if it wasn't for the Lord's life flowing into us.

This is why the Lord says in the gospel of Matthew:

"You shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Mt. 5:48).

The Lord's greatest desire is to share His life with us.

Our infinite God wishes to share His *perfect* love and His *perfect* wisdom with us because these Divine gifts, once received, promise to bring us peace and contentment to all eternity!

But we know life is far from perfect.

In fact, there's a huge difference between *striving* towards an ideal and actually *embodying* it.

It's one thing to *pursue* perfection and another thing entirely to claim we achieved it!

As the teachings of our church say, *"No point in time ever exists when anyone is regenerate enough to say, 'Now I am perfect.'*" (AC 894).

And yet, this does little to stop us from thinking that things *should* be perfect.

Whether we say it out loud or think it privately, we expect "perfection" in almost every arena of life (even though we know it's an impossibility).

We want...

our country, our government, to be "perfect"
 our church organization to be "perfect"
 our schools to be "perfect"
 our family and friends to be "perfect"
 our home life to be "perfect"
 our relationships - friendships, marriages, work-life - to be "perfect"

Now, you might object to these sweeping generalizations and say,

"I don't have these expectations..."

"I'm a realist."

"I don't expect perfection from myself or anyone else!"

There is, however, an easy way to determine whether or not we're being honest with ourselves...

Have you ever experienced *disappointment* in your life?

I'm sure the answer is, yes, and likely *many* times.

The reason we experience disappointment, and often *deep* disappointment and sorrow, is because we have...

- ideals
- standards
- high hopes and dreams
- a sense of right and wrong
- a vision of the way things are *supposed* to be...

And the point is this: when these expectations don't match our reality we *suffer*.

We suffer because there's a collision between what we want (or at least what we think we want) and what we get.

On the surface, this seems like a strange dichotomy...

Why would expecting or wanting someone (or something) to be perfect cause suffering, or disappointment, or a sense of failure when it doesn't happen?

If the Lord implants a *desire* for perfection in each one of us, why would the absence of it cause such distress, such sadness?

It's not unusual for people who've experienced broken dreams and promises to conclude that the ideals of heaven (whether in marriage or any other relationship) are an illusion, a phantasy.

I'd like to offer two perspectives that help put this idea of *perfectionism*, this desire for perfection, into its proper context.

The first has to do with the Lord's direct teachings on the subject, and the second has to do with way the hells distort our expectations.

Let's start with the Lord's teachings.

In the New Testament, the Greek word for perfect is **TELIOS** which means "whole" or "complete."

When the Lord says, "*Be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect,*" it literally means let your words, your deeds, your efforts be "whole" or "complete."

Unlike the hells, the Lord isn't expecting or demanding perfection.

Think about that - the Lord doesn't expect perfect results from us, ever.

Not in this life or the next.

If you've ever felt like a fraud or that you just aren't doing things the "right way" (i.e. perfectly) just remember that that accusation is not coming from the Lord or His angels.

The Lord is looking for something different for as the Scriptures remind us:

"...the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (I Samuel 16:7).

When it comes to wanting things to be perfect, we simply need to ask ourselves,

Is my effort, my intention, to do or say the right thing "whole" and "complete?" (No one can answer this question except you).

This is what the Lord is asking of us.

And when our effort to shun evil and do good is **TELIOS**, that is, *whole* and *complete*, it's also "perfect" in the Lord's eyes.

Now we'll see in a moment that the hells are constantly trying to shift our focus to appearances, to a focus on externals, which is what causes most of the pain and suffering we were talking about earlier.

This is why it's so important to get *clarity* on what the Lord is saying in His Word about perfection.

We're taught that few people actually realize that life in this world serves simply as an *introduction* to perfecting one's life to eternity (see AC 9334:3).

In other words, you don't have to be "perfect" or "have it all together" to go to heaven.

(How often do you hear a message like that?)

We need to be reminded over and over again that "*a person can never be perfected*" (see AC 3200) and that in the next life we are being "*perfected all the time...*" (see AC 894).

So from the Lord's perspective, perfection is the process of *becoming* perfect, not *being* perfect (this may be obvious, but it's also hard to accept).

Perfection, in the Lord's eyes, is the *process* of engaging in spiritual growth and development,

...and one we're invited to savor and enjoy, now and to all eternity.

Still, there's a part of us that gets impatient. We want results. We want to arrive at a final destination some day and simply stop and be done with all this "growth" work.

It's true that good people in this world will go to heaven and "arrive" at their particular heavenly society, but they don't stop growing and learning or developing and changing (see HH 158).

This is because heaven is organic, alive - not static or linear.

The angels of heaven never think of themselves as having "arrived" at anything and actually become quite indignant if anyone suggests they might have "arrived" at perfection (see AC 4295).

So let's turn now to the way the evil spirits of hell *distort* our idea of "perfection" since this is where people experience the most confusion and disappointment.

The first thing to remember about the hells is that they are *fixated* on externals, on appearances.

We see evidence of their work in the Scribes and Pharisees of the New Testament who specialized in "looking good" (see Mt. 23).

During the time of the Lord's life on earth, these leaders of the Jewish Church in Jerusalem had set themselves up as the "perfect Jew." All of their laws, their rules and regulations, focused on shaming and bullying people into keeping up appearances, into keeping up a pious, holy external. It was a fake model of "perfection" because underneath the charade lay all sorts of adulterous, murderous, blasphemous thoughts and feelings.

The Lord called out this hypocrisy, saying:

"Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence" (Mt. 23:25).

The story of the Rich Young Ruler which we read today illustrates the same mindset, this focus on externals, on appearances (see Mt. 19:16-22).

The young man wanted to know what he needed to do to go to heaven.

The Lord said, keep the Commandments.

The young man said I've done this from my youth. What else do I need to do? And this is where the Lord says, "if you want to be *perfect* (Telios) - whole, complete - go sell what you have and give to the poor and come follow Me.

After hearing this, the man went away sorrowful because this was something he wasn't prepared to do.

This young man was a product of the Scribe and Pharisee culture. He only knew how to "look good" on the outside.

The path toward *true* perfection, which the Lord was talking about, was something he couldn't grasp.

We have a modern-day version of this superficial perfectionism in the advertising and entertainment industry which pours billions and billions of dollars into trying to convince people that their looks and status and physical possessions and accomplishments will lead to a perfect life.

The hells join right in pushing this illusion, this lie.

It's sad and disheartening because so many innocent bystanders,

especially the young (but all of us in one way or another) fall prey to the *illusion* that life should be yielding "perfect" results!

Last Sunday's sermon dealt with the devious ways in which the hells work in our lives. One of the points made was that the hells are very good at what they do and should not be underestimated.

They do some of their best work in demanding perfection from us and then mocking and condemning us when we inevitably fall short (see AC 761, 5386).

They also set us up against each other by infusing unrealistic expectations. Think of how many times we expect...

our spouse
or children
or friends and co-workers
or this church or the community
or the country...

...to act in a certain way, and when our "perfect" standards are not met, we feel let down, hurt or angry.

Well, the Lord has a wonderful answer in response to the challenges surrounding our understanding of perfection.

If you want to be perfect, He says, go sell what you have and give to the poor and come follow Me.

The Lord invites us to "sell" the lies, the unhealthy notions of perfection that we pick up from the world around us, and which the hells amplify.

Let us "sell," that is, let go of, the idea that we or the people around us should be perfect. No one is perfect but the Lord.

Let us "give to the poor," that is, serve others with humility.

Let us "give to the poor" by not holding each other to impossible standards. As a church community we have incredible ideals, a high moral and ethical code, a beautiful vision of the Holy City New Jerusalem.

Let us cherish that vision, that dream,

while *also* holding each other gently.

And let us "come follow" the Lord by making sure our *efforts* are Telios, whole and complete.

Let us remember that we are "perfect" in the Lord's eyes when our *effort* to shun evil and do good is "whole and complete."

In this way we can be more peaceful about our hopes and dreams.

And we can live content like the angels of heaven who "*are being perfected all the time...*" and this to all eternity... (AC 894).

Amen.

Lessons: Psalms 18:28-30, 19:7-14, Matthew 19:16-22, AC 894, 3200