

Matthew 5:48 – Is It Possible to Be as Perfect as God?

“Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in Heaven is perfect.”

This saying by Jesus Christ in His Sermon on the Mount may intimidate those who think it is impossible to be as perfect as God. Many assume that “perfect” (*teleios*) refers to total sinlessness, and worse, that achieving perfect sinlessness is required for eternal salvation. Most Christians believe it is impossible in this life to have sinless perfection. So what did Jesus mean? We will examine some different views then seek the best view supported by the context.

Mormonism (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) believes it is the future of their faithful followers to be as perfect as God. They teach that they are now in an embryonic but eternal progression on the way to exaltation as gods. This might imply perfection is possible in this life, but it is ultimately realized in their future final state. By making covenants with God to obey Him and in spite of failures, obedience will eventually lead to future perfection as a god. In essence, they try to work their way to perfection. Not only is the Mormon view of eternal progression unbiblical, but their Christology is heretical because they teach that Jesus has also progressed to become a god.

Wesleyan Holiness. John Wesley taught that sinless perfection is possible because God enables the Christian to put off all sins and walk as Christ walked. Understanding “you shall be perfect” as a command means perfection must be possible in this life. While Wesleyan theology recognizes the sinful nature of man and the struggles it brings, if Christians walk with Jesus and depend on God’s Spirit, they can attain to sinlessness. However, sinless perfection contradicts the realities of human conduct and the Bible’s teaching on sin (cf. Matt. 6:12; 1 John 1:8-10).

Positional Perfection. Some believe that the perfection of verse 48 is obtained positionally before God by justification through faith in Jesus Christ. In Matthew 5:20, Jesus declares to the disciples, and perhaps a mix of others (Matt. 5:1), that “unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” Therefore, it is implied that those who forsake Pharisaical works righteousness for Christ’s imputed righteousness become perfect in God’s sight. It is true that in justification believers are declared righteous before God through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:22) and can be called washed, sanctified, and justified—positionally (1 Cor. 6:11). Those who are declared righteous positionally will still sin in this present life. This view understands the Sermon on the Mount as primarily an evangelistic message. But that is not consistent with Jesus addressing the disciples as believers who are “persecuted for righteousness’ sake,” are “the salt of the earth,” and “the light of the world” (Matt. 5:10-12, 13-14). They are taught how to pray, give, and fast (Matt. 6:16-18) and they have a Father in heaven (Matt. 6:9; 7:11). Jesus does not preach the gospel to this crowd, although it could prepare unbelieving listeners to see their need for God’s righteousness. If this was an evangelistic message, the emphasis on righteous conduct would promote works as the way to salvation. Even if the narrow way in Matthew 7:13-14 speaks of salvation, Jesus does not explain how to get on that way.

Moral completeness. Another interpretation takes *perfect* (*teleios*) to refer to its essential meaning of completeness, not absolute perfection or sinlessness as in Christ's *perfect* righteousness. Morally, this would equate to being blameless, or mature, or fully developed in a moral sense (1 Cor. 2:6; 14:20; Phil. 3:15; James 1:4).

There is much to support this latter interpretation. It begins by understanding that Jesus is proclaiming the standards of kingdom righteousness to His disciples (5:1). Jesus had not yet presented Himself as Israel's King and the nation had not yet rejected Him. He is teaching the moral nature of the coming Kingdom. In contrast, Jesus declares that the external righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees is inadequate for the kingdom (5:20). The ethics of love and holiness echo the same priorities of the Mosaic Law (Lev. 19:2). Of course, the ethics of the Sermon would apply to all of Christ's followers. God is the standard of holiness and righteousness towards which all believers strive.

The context of the preceding verses 43-47 reflects God's goal for His people stated in Leviticus 19:2b: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" and Leviticus 19:18: "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord." When believers love their enemies, they show themselves to be "sons of your Father in heaven," that is, proper representatives of God their Father (v. 45a). Those who love their enemies who hate and persecute them show the most mature and complete love, the same love God has for all people without discriminating between those who are good and those who are evil (v. 45b).

Jesus meant this to be attainable because perfect or mature is used in a relative sense. In the Old Testament, the Septuagint translation of Deuteronomy 18:13, "You shall be blameless before the Lord your God," uses the word *teleios* to speak of moral rectitude. Likewise, New Testament passages use *teleios* in a moral functional sense of maturity or completeness (cf. Phil. 3:12, 15; Heb. 11:14; James 1:4). Jesus also named other righteous standards that exceed the Law and the Pharisees: Do not hate, lust, deceive, or retaliate (5:21-42). There is no expectation of sinless perfection in the New Testament (cf. Matt. 6:12; 1 John 1:8); instead, we see the possibility of progressive maturity or holiness (eg., 2 Cor. 7:1; Heb. 10:14). Love forms a perfect or mature character with the final goal of complete Christlikeness (cf. Rom. 8:29; Eph. 4:15-16). This is God's ultimate purpose for His people—to be like He is, someone who can love the most unlovely.

The parallel sermon in Luke 6 offers one more insight into the meaning of *perfect* in Matthew. Instead of concluding the part of the sermon about loving enemies with the word "*perfect*" (*teleios*), Luke uses a different word: "Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful" (from *oiktirmos*, to show pity, compassion, mercy; Luke 6:36). This shows yet another aspect of a complete and godly character described as *perfect* in Matthew.

Conclusion

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares kingdom righteousness, not just for the sake of the future kingdom, but as a moral guide for present conduct because the righteous standards of God do not change. We are to love everyone, even our enemies. In God's grace we find help to love those who do not love us back (Heb. 4:16). When we love in this manner, we represent the moral perfection of our holy God. Jesus' command to be perfect is similar to the apostle Paul's command to "be imitators of God as dear children" (Eph. 5:1). While our natural capacity to love is based on merit, God's perfect love is based on grace: "But God demonstrates His own love towards us in that, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).