

The Attainment of Perfection

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Perfection, righteousness, self-righteousness, do-gooders, lots of different terms are used to talk about what it takes to be in alignment with God. We think sometimes that the more righteous someone is, the more likely that they will do well.

Some friars decide that they no longer want to be involved with their monastery and instead want to get into their true passion: flowers. Now they were very, very good men. They open a flower shop and people come flocking to it, as these are the flowers of truly righteous men. The other florists in town begin to become distressed because they are losing business. They all come together to talk about how to get their customers back. They try all sorts of things: sales, new flower types, even clowns to entertain the kids, but nothing works. At one of the late-night meetings they all sit in the back of one of the florist's shops and hang their heads in despair. Then one of them pipes up "We could always try Hugh." The others look in confusion and ask, "Who's Hugh?" The first florist replies "He's, look, he'll work." So the florists go to find Hugh and ask for his help. Hugh agrees and goes to the friars' shop. He walks out 5 minutes later, and the friars are putting up a 'Permanently Closed' sign. The florists are flabbergasted except for the one who suggested Hue.

It goes to show, only Hugh can prevent florist friars.

We often assume that there is some kind of standard of morals, of uprightness, that is "good enough." When we reach the end of our lives, we tend to take stock of ourselves. Did the good we accomplished outweigh the bad that we did?

Early in the history of the Hebrew people, God instructed Abraham to be "blameless." What did God mean by that? That doesn't quite sound like good cancelling out evil. The later Pharisees took this very far, very far indeed.

We hear about the Pharisees all the time in the New Testament, particularly in the four gospels. We pretty much universally look at them as the villains in the story of Jesus. After all, weren't they part of getting Him crucified? But when we look at Jewish history, a very different picture of who the Pharisees are becomes apparent.

About 175 B.C., Hellenism – that is, Greek society, was on the rise in Israel. Militant Hellenizers had even gotten control of the high priesthood, and among other things, had even published a decree recognizing the divinity of the Olympian god Zeus. Just another name for Yahweh, right? The ruler of the time, Antiochus Epiphanes, looked to the temple coffers as a rich source of income for himself. He used it to continue Hellenization.

“The outcry from the people was deafening. Perhaps even Antiochus could hear it, far away in his Syrian palace though he was. The Hellenizers were now revealed to be not only enemies of Jehovah but willing tools of a greedy, tax-happy foreign imperialist. There was tremendous popular resistance, and there were many martyrs. Open revolution broke out in the small town of Modin, located not far from the site of the modern Tel Aviv airport, when one of the “reformers,” an agent of the Hellenizing government, was killed by an aged priest named Matthias Hasmon. The old man’s five sons, led by Judah the Maccabee (“the Hammer”), perhaps knowing that they now had very little to lose, launched an astonishing guerrilla campaign that crushed the Hellenizers and won the Jews’ virtual independence.”

The Hasmoneans, as the followers of this old priest and his sons were known, became the new royalty of Israel. They were pious – even to the point of eliminating foreign religions and unorthodox sects. If necessary, any who hesitated would be slaughtered.

With this revolution, reverence for the Law, or Torah, became once again prevalent. As part of this, there was a group known as the Hasidim, or “pious ones.” They were deeply devoted to Jewish law and joined this Maccabean revolt. It is believed that the Hasidim were the precursors to the Pharisees, first known as the Perushim. As such, they were heroes of the Jewish people.

The Pharisees were not only known for their strict observance of the written Law, but they also accepted what was known as the “oral tradition.” These were additions to the Law that had been passed down, they believed, all the way from Moses himself. So not only was the Torah meant to be strictly followed, but many other extra rules were included. For example, you may remember that Jesus criticized the Pharisees for how careful they were to properly tithe even their

spices, while missing the point of mercy and compassion. This would have been something from that oral tradition.

This Pharisaical tradition became the foundation of what is today's rabbinical Judaism, which encompasses a broad tradition beyond what is in our Old Testament. The Pharisees who began this, worked from a conviction that personal righteousness was the way to salvation.

Now enter Jesus, and the Sermon on the Mount. Using examples such as adultery and murder, which the Pharisees felt they were free from, Christ made clear the lengths you would have to go to for true righteousness. Lust in the heart was equated with adultery, and even calling someone a "fool" was considered murder. (The word translated "fool" is *rhaka*, which is actually a transliterated Hebrew or Aramaic word. It meant senseless, an empty-headed man. It carried the connotation of utter worthlessness. So this is what was equated with murder.)

At the beginning of our passage from Matthew today, Jesus says that He had not "have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." This word "fulfill" is from the Greek word *plēroō*: To make full, fill up to the full. To render something fully, to make it complete in every way. In other words, Jesus is claiming that He is able to fully honor the Law and Prophets. He was fully human and divine, and as such He never swayed from the written law. Note that He leaves out the oral tradition. He considered that as useless as lipstick on a pig. He perfectly stayed true to what we now know as the Old Testament Law and Prophets.

So what is the point of what Jesus is saying here? It is that if you truly want to be considered righteous by works, by what you do, then you have to do it perfectly. It is not only outward compliance, but every thought must be kept captive to the Law. The Pharisees went too far in one direction, by adding the oral tradition. They didn't go near far enough in the right direction, which is not only to be visibly righteous, but to have every thought and emotion in compliance as well.

Do you really think that Jesus meant that we should be cutting off hands, plucking our eyes out, or other wild actions? Some in Christian history have actually done that. But His only point is to show the lengths that one must go to for true righteousness.

Righteousness by works has become a pretty big deal now, right? Let's go back and look at some of our initial assumptions. Does "good enough" cut it? If the good we do outweighs the bad, does that mean we're righteous, and in league with God? I'm sorry to say that this just doesn't fly. And quite frankly, it is not the good news of Christ. It actually is in almost direct opposition to the gospel! Yet it remains one of the fallacies still held by church-going people. No, if you are going to be righteous by what you do, then you have to do it perfectly.

Matthew 5, verse 48 sums it up: "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." The word perfect is from the Greek *teleios*. It means finishing something to the very uttermost, wanting nothing necessary to completeness. It means that if you are perfect, like God is perfect, you are complete, have come to your full aim or purpose.

Woe is me! Is righteousness impossible, then? To which Jesus says, "Now you're beginning to get the point." This is what He was teaching against in the Sermon on the Mount. The example of the Pharisees was held by many as the "gold standard" of behavior and morals. Jesus has proven it corrupt and non-sensical. Frankly, anyone who subscribes to this belief is probably deserving of the term "*rhaka*," or fool. So now what do we do? What is there left for us to try to be righteous? Once again Jesus says, "Now you're getting warmer. You are closer to the truth now!"

We have already seen that Jesus claimed to be the perfect completer of all of the Law and Prophets. He is righteous! No other human, past, present or future, has done this, or ever will. And in this is the crux of the Gospel – the righteousness of Jesus is available to us. Paul in Ephesians teaches us that God, unlike the Pharisees, is rich in mercy. He is full of what the disciple John called "perfect love." The argument can even be made that God IS this perfect love. Because Christ has accomplished all righteousness, all perfection, we don't have to. Paul tells us that we are joined to Christ and raised to new life with Him. We are made alive together with Jesus.

And this is the good news, why we call the core of Christianity the Gospel: we don't have to do anything – our relationship to God is based on Christ's perfection, not ours. The gift of God in Christ to us is this. He has done everything perfectly and shared His perfection with us. Let me say this again a

little differently: Because Jesus is righteous – perfect in every way – He can give this perfection to us freely, without charge. The price of righteousness is doing everything perfectly, which we can't pay. Jesus did.

I love this little one-liner that Paul throws into Ephesians: “And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” We can't do good works to be righteous, but being righteous enables us to do good works. Seems like a bit of a crazy conundrum, right? Our imperfection makes us eligible for Christ's perfection, which then allows us to become more perfect. Wow!

You may ask, “How do I take advantage of Christ's perfection, to attain perfection myself?” Well, that's easy, and Paul tells us the answer to this question. “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” Faith! Through grace! We hear those two words all the time, and I encourage you to get the meaning of them now if you haven't yet. Grace means it is freely given – the attainment of perfection is God's gift to us. And this is through faith – the believing in our heart that Jesus is who He says He is – perfect in every way. Jesus even created and gives to us that faith – we don't have to come up with it ourselves.

We are soon going to be coming into the Advent season, the celebration of the coming of Christ to earth as a baby. What better time could there be to appropriate Christ's perfection as your own! Believe that Jesus is God, that He did all things perfectly, died on the cross and rose again to new life. I invite you to visit with any of the pastors here, and they can assist you in praying for this. You become one with Christ – His perfect life, His death, and yes, His resurrection to new life.

This is all yours by the grace of God through faith. Hallelujah!

Amen