

Perfect

Text: Galatians 5:16-24

Hymn: "The Light Is Ever Night"

Whether we realize it or not, we are at war. It is not an overstatement. We are truly at war, but I'm not talking about the conflicts in certain parts of the world right now. I'm not talking about the non-stop political campaigns that pit neighbor against neighbor in competitions for the city's most cluttered yard. I'm not even talking about the [insert favorite college football team] against the rest of the [insert conference to which the aforementioned college team belongs]. All those things are out there, but that's not the war that God's Word is talking about today. As one who has born again by the power of the Word connected to the water of holy baptism, given new life by Jesus Christ, you are at war. And while the enemy may *seem* harmless, the war is real and the potential outcome horrific. The enemy with whom you are at war is your own sinful nature.

"Walk by the Spirit." God's encouragement from the Apostle Paul to you, dear Christian, is walk by the Spirit. You know who you are—You belong to God! You are his prized possession. Jesus says you are in His hands and nothing can snatch you out of them. So, why don't you act like it? God says, "Be holy, as I the LORD your God am holy." So why don't you do it? Why don't you live the life that God calls you to live?

Was God lying when He said, "Be holy, be perfect"? Did He just mean, "Give it your best shot, try really hard"? Or, if He meant it, doesn't that imply I can actually do it, if I just try hard enough? There are many well-intentioned Christians who teach a type of Christian perfectionism, who argue that God would never tell you to do something unless you could do it and so all you need to do is resolve to be a better person.

Eventually you'll get there, if you just try hard enough. But God's Word nowhere teaches Christian perfectionism. You can't do it, no matter how hard you try. God did not lie when He said, "Be holy, as I the LORD your God am holy." But because of our own sin, that Word of Law ultimately works as a mirror, not to show us what we're capable of but to show us our sin and our need for a Savior.

Given that reality, there's a way of thinking completely opposite to perfectionism but no less wrong. The other wrong answer is to say God's law does not apply to me any more. You want to get drunk? Go for it! You want to watch porn? Go for it! You want to vent your anger at your fellow motorists? Go for it! After all, you can always count on Jesus to forgive you. The Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed in his early 30s for opposing Hitler, called this "cheap grace"—taking the grace of God which is really yours in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and dragging it through the mud and instead of trusting in it, taking it for granted. But the Gospel is the forgiveness of sin, not permission to sin. Either sin is so bad it needs forgiving or it isn't. And if it isn't, what was Jesus doing hanging on a Cross?

So how do we sort it all out? We know we have new life in Christ. We know what God's Word teaches: We have been born again through the waters of holy baptism. So why don't we act like it? Why don't we live it? This is the question God is answering for us through the Apostle Paul in Galatians 5.

But before getting into the details, I want to pose a question. The question is, Do you need to be perfect in order to get into heaven? It's a serious question. Do *you* need to be perfect in order to get into heaven? Wrestle with that; we'll come back to it.

In verse 16, Paul writes, “Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.” Now I don’t know about you, but whenever I read laundry lists of sins like this in the Bible, I like to focus on the ones I’m actually good about. For example, and I don’t say this to brag or come across as self-righteous, but yours truly has a perfect record when it comes to sorcery. I haven’t even read all the *Harry Potter* books. Perhaps you hear the list and come away thinking, I’m good to go on about 80% of these things. That’s a solid “B,” right? Only one problem, God doesn’t grade on a curve. With Him it’s not even pass/fail. It’s perfection or fail. As the Apostle James writes, “If you sin in one tiny spot, it’s the same as breaking all of the law” (2:10). The whole world has been mourning her death, but, trust me, if you ever tracked mud on Queen Elizabeth’s carpet, you would never be invited back to the Castle. We get that— her standards are high; she’s the queen. Well, God is God. Every trespass against His will is an offense to His infinite majesty. Our sin and His holiness cannot co-exist.

And so the sins Paul lists are to be taken seriously. They are real and damnable. If these sins are your god, repent, stop right now; you have the wrong god. God calls us Christians, who have been redeemed by the blood of God’s own Son Jesus, to live a holy life. But you can’t do it. No matter how hard you try. This isn’t, however, a cruel joke on God’s part. I ask again, Do you need to be perfect in order to get into heaven?

Paul goes on: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, etc.” *Fruit?! Where did that word come from?* All the way through in Galatians 5 it’s been works—the works of the flesh, the things we do according to our sinful nature. Now all of a sudden, Paul

talks not about the *works* of the Spirit but the Spirit's *fruit*. Why does he do that? Work is what *I* do. Fruit is what *God* does through me. When you pluck an apple off the tree, what did you do to produce that fruit? Nothing! The tree produced the fruit. Likewise in our life, the fruit we bear is produced by the fruit-bearer, the Holy Spirit in our lives. And be honest: Is there any one of you that doesn't want more of this fruit? Can you sincerely say you don't want to be a more loving person, a kinder person, a gentler person? Any one of you who doesn't desire to be more joyful, more self-controlled? God wants it and we do, too. This is the fruit that the Holy Spirit produces in us. There is no law against these things. This is God at work in His children.

“And those who belong to Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” That's you. That's me. When did you crucify your flesh with your passions and desires? When you were baptized. You didn't do it. God did it to you. God killed the old Adam in you and brought forth a new man, a new woman, a new Christian. And in so doing, He put you at war with that sinful flesh, that still clings to you—crucifixion, it turns out, is a slow process—and the war with our sinful flesh, so long as we do not surrender in the meantime, will rage until the day we die.

This battle is real, but Jesus lives, the victory is won. Do you see now the key to the Christian life, this Christian life of perfection and bearing fruit that God calls us, too? It's not your effort, your decision, your commitment; it's the power of God in you, the power of the Holy Spirit. How does the Holy Spirit do this? He doesn't do this by the Law. The Law is good. The Law is wise. The Law is beneficial. But the Law shows us our sin. There is only one way the Holy Spirit produces fruit in you and that is through the Gospel of Jesus Christ—the good news that by the death and glorious resurrection

of your perfect Substitute, your sins are forgiven and your old flesh has been put to death. We fall into all kinds of problems when we think we can control our own sinful flesh, that we can potty train it. No, our sinful self is like a vicious wolf; just when you think you won't get bit, you really get bit. There's only thing that can be done to the old Adam. It needs to die. It needs to die every day. It's called repentance; return to the baptismal font in contrition and repentance and turn the old Adam over to Jesus and come forth a new Christian, a new creation pure and holy in God's eyes and ready to do battle against the devil and the world, ready to do battle because we know who is on our side, Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for us.

So, do you need to be perfect in order to get into heaven? Absolutely. Unless you are perfect, you will not enter eternal life. But thanks be to God, perfection is yours. It's a gift, the robe of Christ's righteousness. When God looks at you, He doesn't see your sin, He doesn't see your idolatry. He sees His precious child, washed clean by the blood of Jesus, perfectly holy and righteous. Also washed clean are all the things you do, which even by the Holy Spirit's leading, are never perfect in themselves. But do not fear—what you are now by baptism and faith will one day be made visible, when the old Adam will be buried once and for all and our risen selves placed forever beyond the reach of sin and temptation. This is your sure and certain hope. And this is God's message for you now. Your sins are forgiven, you have been declared holy, righteous, and perfect. And so now live and love and forgive in the joy of the forgiveness and perfection that God has graciously given you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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