

# Spiritual Growth Lessons from Christian Ambassadors

## Lesson 81 – Perfection – Who Can Attain It?

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I get goose bumps just thinking about Jesus' earthly ministry and its magnitude. Wherever Jesus went, the multitudes flocked to hear Him. And why shouldn't they? The only *standard of righteousness* they had heard at that time, was laid out by the religious leaders, the scribes and Pharisees. All the Pharisees had to offer was a shallow, superficial religion based on the observance of external rituals. Jesus' teaching was worlds apart from their teaching. Jesus understood their deepest spiritual needs and taught what real happiness was all about, a right relationship with God.

### Instructions from the Sermon on the Mount

It was the custom of the Rabbis to sit as they taught, so Jesus who was always eager to teach, went up on a mountainside, found a suitable spot, and sat down to teach his hungry listeners. Jesus taught what is commonly called "*the Sermon on the Mount*", because it was delivered on a mountain. Jesus used His precious time with the people to counter what they had heard before from the false teaching of the Pharisees.

*Matthew 5:43-48 (NIV) – "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."*

In these verses of scripture, Jesus shared the *degree of perfection* He requires of His followers. The perfection Jesus spoke about has *love* at its very core. Of course, it is not the world's kind of

love, where people love only those who love them. Jesus called attention to God's full, all-encompassing love that is intended to be expressed through the lives of His children. Love your enemies and pray for them? The world cannot fathom that degree of love; a love that has at its center an active concern for *all people*, saint and sinner alike. Moses declared,

*Deuteronomy 10:17 (NIV) – For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes.*

The Lord God, mighty and awesome, could not set an imperfect standard of righteousness, for to do so would compromise His own perfection.

The Greek word for *perfect* is *teleios*. A thing is said to be *teleios (perfect)* if it fully realizes the purpose for which it was designed and made. Similarly, for a person to be perfect, they must realize the purpose for which they were created.

### Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect

Just hearing the word "*perfection*" makes people nervous. We tend to get anxious about things we do not understand, or that appear too difficult to accomplish. Yet, we need not be disturbed by that word when we learn what perfection really means. The Bible uses the word "*perfection*" to describe a spiritually "*mature*" believer. A spiritually mature person is someone who has developed a spiritual appetite for the things of God; a person who hungers and thirsts after righteousness (see: Matthew 5:6). Someone who is spiritually mature, yearns to *grow up* into His image, into the image and likeness of God (see: Genesis 1:27). However, because we live in a fallen world, it is impossible to *attain* this standard of perfection this side of Jesus' return to earth. But, Jesus does not excuse us from continuing to strive toward it! Thank God for the marvelous truth of the Gospel.

## **Jesus has met the standard on our behalf!**

**II Corinthians 5:21 (NIV)** – *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

Jesus bore *our* sins on the cross, so we could bear His righteousness. God treated Jesus as if He committed believer’s sins; and God treats believers as if they did only the righteous deeds of the sinless Son of God.

Jesus bore our sins on the cross once for all time (see: I Peter 3:18), but that does not mean we repent once and that keeps God’s grace flowing automatically. God’s grace is granted as a blessing and should never be treated lightly. Living in God’s grace is a privilege, but it does not give us license to drift along, living life irresponsibly and independent of God. Our loyalty cannot be divided between God and the world. Remember, God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble (see: James 4:5-6). Living humbly in God’s grace is what brings us closer and closer to God, that we might *become* the righteousness of God.

## **The cleansing power of repentance**

Knowing we would fall short on our journey toward perfection (maturity), God provided us with the gift of repentance so that He might train us in righteousness. Make no mistake, brothers and sisters, we *all need* this valuable *training* in righteousness.

**Romans 3:23-24a (NLT)** – *For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard. Yet God, in His grace, freely makes us right in his sight.*

In our relationship with Jesus it is important to understand that He is not focusing on our sin so that He can hold it against us. Of course not! God’s love for us is so great, His focus is on what we are *becoming*. He views us as righteous sons and daughters even *while* we are changing. When we recognize we are doing something that is contrary to the Word of God, we simply need to humble ourselves, turn to God and repent.

**I John 1:9 (NKJV)** – *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

As sons and daughters of God, we are in a unique position in Christ. Having accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, we must now hold our ground, our righteous position in Christ. We must never forget, however, that our righteous position comes *through Jesus*. We do not earn righteousness. Jesus met the standard on our behalf. But we do have a part to carry out. Jesus expects us to *grow up* in His righteousness.

## **We must persistently press toward the goal**

The apostle Paul describes it this way,

**Philippians 3:12 (NLT)** – *I don’t mean to say I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me.*

Paul goes on to say in verse 16, “*But we must hold on to the progress we have already made.*”

Jesus wants a solid relationship with each of us, not an up and down relationship; up when things are going well, down when things are not going so well. If we stop praying or reading our Bibles when things aren’t going well, perhaps what we are really saying is, “*God I don’t trust you to take care of me.*” Cutting off communication with God, only serves to open the door to Satan’s domain. Jesus is calling us to grow up!

**Colossians 3:10 (NLT)** – *Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like Him.*

## **Questions for Personal or Group Study**

- 1.** If spiritual perfection (maturity) is impossible to attain, this side of Jesus’ return, what incentive do we have to strive for it?
- 2.** What gift has God given us to become cleansed of all unrighteousness?
- 3.** When the pressures of life come against you, do you continue to put your trust in God, or do you stop praying and reading your Bible?