

# “Be Perfect”

*Among Christ's most amazing statements, this is one of the hardest for us to comprehend.*

By DAVID LANGFORD

THE CHRISTIAN  
**Appeal**

## Preface



RRRRich B

**“Be perfect . . . as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). During his ministry, our Lord made many amazing statements, but perhaps none that confuses our modern ears more than this one. Questions abound. Is perfection possible? What does “perfect” mean? Can it come? How can it come? The world’s answers, and Christ’s answers, are very different. In this issue, Consulting Editor David Langford points us toward our Lord’s gracious will and his marvelous power in our lives.**

By Dr. David Langford

Among Jesus’ many amazing statements, this one may be one of the hardest for us to comprehend.



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“If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? . . . Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Jesus  
Matthew 5

“Be Perfect”



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# Be Perfect

Typically at the beginning of each new year we reflect over how we might reassess our lives and make needed improvements. This reassessment leads to resolutions, and each year we tend to make the same resolutions: lose weight, save money, get fit, eat healthy, manage stress, reduce, reuse, and recycle. These are the most popular because they are the most repeated and the least accomplished.

Well, in the spirit of resolution-making, I'd like us to consider one given to us from Christ himself: "Be perfect . . . as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

If you took a survey of the definition of the word "perfect," you would probably get the following kinds of answers. Perfect means blameless, sinless, without fault, absolutely right or correct, without error.

This is how we most often use the word: "He made a perfect score on his test," or "That

singer has perfect pitch.

Because of that definition we are prone to say things like, "Well, nobody's perfect." In other words, we presume perfection is a standard accessible on occasion to some exceptional students or extraordinarily talented individuals perhaps in academic settings but that such a high standard is generally beyond humans as a realistic goal for life.

## Understanding "Perfect"

If we understand the word "perfect" in this sense, a verse like Matthew 5:48 is hard to understand. And so is Matthew 19:21—"If you want to be perfect, sell all you have and give to the poor." Or 2 Timothy 3:16—"All scripture is inspired and profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished to do good works."

# Be Perfect

Are these scriptures telling us that God expects us to be perfect in the sense of being "without sin or fault in our behavior"?

Is that the purpose of the instruction of Scripture? To show us what perfect people would look like so that, once we know, we will be able to meet that standard?

Of course, nothing is wrong with our trying to "perfect" our lives, in the sense of striving to live better and more disciplined lives.

Early in the Church there was a movement among Christians called monasticism. These monastics

were believers who made a very serious attempt at being



John Gulley

"perfect" by retreating from the world and all worldly pleasures, an approach they



# Be Perfect

believed would help them aspire to a higher standard of spirituality than most of those living around them.

Later in church history would come Christian movements like the Pietists and the Wesleyans who made the pursuit of perfection a serious part of their Christian walk as they were sure that genuinely focusing on trusting in the Spirit would bring power to overcome sin.

Surely all Christians would agree that any effort to move toward greater perfection in our spiritual walk is a worthy effort indeed. Frankly, we live in a time when Christians are far too indulgent of sin. We see grace only as forgiveness and forget that grace is also divine

empowerment through the Holy Spirit for greater righteousness to be produced in us.

## What Did Jesus Mean?

But when Jesus admonished, “Be perfect,” did he mean for us to be sinless, to be without any faults, failures, or mistakes in life?

If so, there are other passages difficult to reconcile—pas-

sages like Hebrews 2:10: “It was fitting that God . . . should make the pioneer of their salvation [Jesus] perfect through what he suffered.” Was Jesus not sinless, without any fault before his suffering?

Or what about Christ’s words in Luke 13:32? “Go and tell that fox [Herod], ‘Behold,

*Surely  
any effort to move  
toward greater  
perfection in our  
spiritual walk  
is a worthy effort  
indeed, but . . .*



# Be Perfect

I will keep on casting out devils and healing people today and tomorrow, and the third day I shall be perfected.”

If the meaning of “perfect” is to be without fault, sinless, then in what sense was Jesus ever *not* perfect? If Jesus ever needed to be perfected, or anticipated becoming perfect, does that mean at some time in his life he was imperfect in the sense of not sinless?

I think not. If we define the word “perfect” in this sense, then when it comes to Jesus’ command to be perfect, I suspect we will usually either dismiss the command or,

worse, despair in our attempts to obey it.



John Gulley

So what does this word mean and in what sense are we to be perfect, as the Scriptures

# Be Perfect

clearly expect us to be?

The original Greek word that is translated “perfect” in English is the word *teleios*.

It belongs to a fascinating word family. The root word in that family is the word *telos* which means “the goal, the end, or the conclusion.” The word is often translated by using words other than “perfect.”

In some passages, *telos* is translated as “the result or destiny” of something.

## Some Examples of *Telos*

“What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result [the *telos* of those things] in death!” (Romans 6:21).

“Their destiny [*telos*] is

destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things” (Philippians 3:19).

Sometimes the word *telos* is used to suggest “the purpose or reason for something.”

“Christ is the end [*telos*] of the Law” (Romans 10:4). “You are receiving the end [*telos*] of your faith, the salvation of your soul” (1 Peter 1:9).

“You will

hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end [*telos*] is still to come” (Matthew 24:6).

“I tell you that this must be fulfilled [*telos*] in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment [*telos*]” (Luke 22:37).

*When Jesus admonished, “Be perfect,” did he mean for us to be sinless, to be without any faults or failures?*



# Be Perfect

In all these passages the idea is that anything that has accomplished its purpose, reached its conclusion, fulfilled its destiny, is *telos*, perfect.

Originally, the word was used in a developmental sense, recognizing that life is lived through stages. Adulthood is the *telos* of childhood. Children are not perfect until they grow up. Childhood is not a state that we are expected to stay in; childhood is not perfect.

Graduation is the *telos* of schooling. Students are not perfect until they graduate. There can be no perfect students as long as they are still in school because schooling is not the end; it is only the means to the end.

Death is the *telos* of life. A

life cannot be perfect until it reaches its final days when the culmination of that life can be revealed.

When the Bible speaks of our perfection, it refers not so much to where we are right now as to where we are going.

What is the goal of our life? What is the purpose, the chief end, of our life?

Are we moving toward that *telos* or is our

life off track?

Our spiritual life is not unlike a classroom. We face many tests. Some we pass easily; others we fail miserably. But all of them help us move to the end, to the purpose of it all, graduation. The *telos* of the student is to finish, to not drop out, to learn and become educated.

*When the Bible speaks of our perfection, it refers not to where we are but to where we are going.*



# Be Perfect

The Scriptures warn of various kinds of mistakes we can make in our understanding of perfection. One problem is mentioned in Hebrews 5.

The writer opines, “We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again.”

And he continues, “You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature [*teleion*], who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil” (Hebrews 5:11-14).

The writer is describing a person who is a perpetual student, always learning but never knowing. This is a person who needs to grow up,



John Gulley

to mature, to reach *telos*. A person like this has no goal or purpose in his life. We are familiar with the ethical dilemma, “the end justifies the means.” Here the dilemma is

# Be Perfect

illustration again of a student, this is the student who very much wants a good grade but has little or no love for learning. He wants a report card filled with A’s more than he wants a mind filled with knowledge.

This is the problem Jesus addresses in our Matthew text, a part of his Sermon on the Mount. The Pharisees had figured out ways to get an A in the Law without really changing the character of their lives. They were making the grades but missing the lessons. Jesus tells them it is not enough to simply refrain from killing or committing adultery or responding to evil justly.

That may get you an A technically, but God wants to teach you not just to not kill; he wants you not even to hate. He doesn’t just want you to avoid adultery, he wants you not even to lust. Not only does he want you to be fair in retribution to evildoers, he wants you to love your enemies and

that “the means is justified” without any end at all.

## A “Perverted” *Telos*

Scripture also speaks of a “perverted *telos*.” Using the

# Be Perfect

completely forgive them. The purpose, the end, the *telos* of the Law is for you to learn how to love. And so Jesus ends that section of his sermon, “Be perfect even as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

In other words, don’t just get an A in English, learn to be a writer and fill the world with great stories. Don’t just get an A in Math, learn to be an engineer and fill the world with great structures. Don’t just get an A in music, learn to be a musician and fill the world with great symphonies.

## Another Caution

Scripture also cautions us against demanding a premature *telos*. While it is important that we not let each other remain

in spiritual kindergarten all our life but to grow up, it is no less important that we not be too critical of others and of ourselves when we have trouble in our first attempts at spiritual graduate school. A student shouldn’t be criticized for not knowing advanced trigonometry when he hasn’t yet completed his work in elementary mathematics. While the

previous passage we read from Hebrews criticizes believers still drinking milk when they should be eating meat, Peter says something very different: “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk so that by it you may grow up in your salvation” (1 Peter 2:2).

Why the difference?

*The Pharisees had figured out ways to get an A in the Law without changing the character of their lives.*



# Be Perfect

Believers are at different stages of growth. As we grow and mature, the problems of life grow more complex, the choices more difficult, and the impact of our choices more influential on others. The responsibility to make good choices grows as we grow. Life is hard and it gets harder, and sometimes that’s frustrating.

## The Hardest Part

I was asked once to speak to a campus ministry at the university. The campus minister asked me to answer this question: “What is the hardest thing about being a college student?”

I thought about it and came to this answer. The hardest thing about being a college student is exactly the same as

the hardest thing about being a high school student, or an elementary student, or, for that matter, being a new parent or a parent whose children have left home or a retired person or an elderly person with only a few years left to live. The hardest thing about all of these is that about the time you figure out how to be “it,” you’re not “it” anymore. When

I finally learned how to be a good teenager, I wasn’t a teenager anymore, and I was now trying to figure out how to be a young adult. And on it goes.

Life is hard and gets harder because we’re growing, learning, facing new challenges. The important question isn’t so much if we’ve mastered where

*About the time we figure out how to navigate in one stage of life, we find ourselves sailing into new seas.*





# Be Perfect

we are at, but if we've figured out where we are going. That's what perfection is about: the direction of your life, the purpose of your life.

Why are you here? What are you living for? What is your *telos*? When you come to the end of the road you are on, where will you be?

If perfection means being sinless—no mistakes, no failures—then, of course, none of us is perfect. But that's not what *telos* means.

When Jesus commands us to be *telos*, he is not telling us that every decision we make in life has to be right; he is telling us to make the right decision on the purpose of our life. Be perfect. Decide to go in the direction you were made to go

in. Make decisions that correct any steps that take you away from your divine destiny.

Don't get distracted by pride or wealth or pleasure or anger or bitterness or anything that would take you away from the perfect end God intends for you. Make decisions every day that enable you to grow up into Christ. Take all the tests life gives you. Pass every test you

can, learn from the tests you fail, don't drop out, keep learning, finish, graduate.

Wherever we are in life, it is important that we understand we are not finished yet; it is no less important that wherever we are in life, our desire be to finish well.

Don't be content to live in school all your life. Don't be

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# Be Perfect

interested in just making a grade. Recognize that sometimes failure is the best teacher.

It may not look good on a report card, but in the end it may be the most valuable class in your life's education.

## An Apostle's Experience

I suspect Paul understood this as well as anybody. He certainly had his share of failures, before and after his conversion to Christ.

He made mistakes in his relationship with Barnabas that led to a hurtful separation. He misjudged John Mark's value to the work of the Kingdom. His letters imply that he struggled at times with people.

Paul knew he was not sinless. He was not flawless. But

he was perfect. He knew his life was headed in the right direction, dedicated to the right purpose.



John Gulley

He knew that in the end he would be where he was supposed to be.

So I end pointing toward the way I hope we'll begin this new year. Paul wrote to the Philippians (3:10-14), "I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings,



# Be Perfect

becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.”

He goes on, “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.”

Paul’s eyes are wide open to present reality and future hope: “Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward

what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ

Jesus.”

I believe Jesus would encourage us to begin this new year no less passionate about forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, pressing on toward the *telos* of our lives, the prize for which we have been called heavenward, our purpose and destiny.

Jesus gives us the best resolution we could have for this new year. Be perfect!

*If we understand Christ's word for "perfect," we'll find that striving in his power for "perfection" is incredibly freeing.*



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# Christ's Sacrifice Is Indeed All-Sufficient



**By the one sacrifice made once for all for all time, God's people are perfectly clothed in him.**

A friend e-mailed me a few days ago for help in finding the source of a quotation from C. S. Lewis.

It is from *Mere Christianity*, and it's vintage Lewis: “When a man is getting better, he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still left in him. When a man is getting worse, he understands his own badness less and less. A moderately bad man knows he is not very good; a thoroughly bad man thinks he is all right.”

Another Lewis quotation stands well alongside the one above: “Of all bad men, religious bad men are the worst.” Jesus was speaking to this latter class of bad person when he said, “You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are” (Matthew 23:15).

You see, the aim of religion is to make us like the God we serve, and if our God, Jehovah—the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses,



Jim Shelburne

Paul, and all of our forefathers in the faith—is the one true God, then our religion is all about how we can be made like Jehovah.

Okay. But what is God like?

According to the Scriptures, our God is absolutely holy, absolutely loving, absolutely just, absolutely gracious, absolutely—well, absolutely perfect. That sounds absolutely wonderful, until we realize that no human can reach that standard. We have an absolutely perfect God. But imperfect as we are, we can in no way stand before that kind of holy perfection.

We were in a pickle, and no way out—until God did for us what we could never do for ourselves. “When the time had fully come,” God sent his perfect Son, to live with us, to die for us as the perfect sacrifice for sin, to literally take away all of our sin and guilt on the cross, and to be raised to new life by the Spirit of God. Because he died, we live. Because he was raised to new life, we live new lives filled with his Spirit and we become heirs of life eternal. Note clearly: God does this all. We can neither add to nor take away from what Jesus has already done for us on the cross in his once-for-all sacrifice.

And now, back to those quotations. If our religion is, at heart, all

about us—all about rules, all about rituals, and very little at all about relationship with God—our religion becomes what we use to keep God away. Sadly, it will work. Convert someone to that kind of religion, and you’ve not blessed him.

But if our religion is about the relationship the Father longs to have with his children, the relationship he gave his own Son to make a reality, then the wonderful news of the gospel is that we can indeed have that relationship. And so can everyone else.

The more like Christ you and I become, the more clearly we’ll see how very far we have to go to be completely transformed into his likeness. It’s a far longer trip than we’d imagined. But it’s also far more joyful because God is the one holding our hand as he leads and empowers for every step, one at a time.

We could never “get there” on our own. But God’s people are never on their own. Those who make Christianity just one more self-help program understand neither the power of the cross, the love of Christ, nor the depth of their own need.

 **Curtis Shelburne**

**“Grow up!**

**You are kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.”**



**Jesus**

**Matthew 5 (The Message)**

Curtis Shelburne

*An inspiring look into the  
winsomeness of our Lord.*

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*by*

*Dr. David Langford*

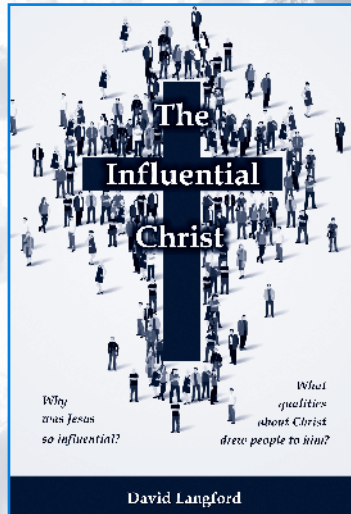
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