



"Matthew 5:48, states, 'Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect'. The question is: How can we be perfect, like God?"

This question is based on the verse as it stands in the 'Authorized Version', where the first four words suggest that 'perfection' is a goal that we are urged to attain. The later revisions, however, offer us renderings in which the language is not only much plainer and therefore easier to understand, but which also reveal that the verse relates to an imperative – to something that is to be *obeyed* – and is therefore much more daunting!

The Revised Standard Version, for example, reads, ***"You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect"***. In other words, what we are facing is not a request or an exhortation, but a command that is as plain as any other command found in the Word of God. What this month's question is asking, therefore, in essence, is this: -

- Can we possibly obey this command, or is it a demand that is too exacting?
- Does it impose upon us a standard that is unrealistic?
- In short; is this something we can never realize this side of Heaven?
- Or is it, perhaps, not meant to be taken seriously?

I suspect that we are inclined to take the latter view! Whenever we encounter difficult verses we are likely to tell ourselves that they are not meant to be taken literally – and then we hurry on to look at something in the scriptures that is less demanding!

Idealistic? Or Perfectionist?

Not surprisingly, Matt. 5:48 has prompted a wide range of interpretations and explanations.

At one extreme there is the 'Idealistic' explanation of those who tell us, *"It is not to be taken seriously"*, whilst, at the other extreme, there is the view of those who teach that believers are required to attain a state of '*sinless perfection*', in which they do not – and even cannot – commit sin. I have met people who have claimed that they have reached a stage in their spiritual growth when they never sin. And, of course, the notion is utterly ridiculous! It is summarily dismissed by the apostle John in 1st John 1:8, which reads-

"If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."

And verse 10, ***"If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us"***.

You will, however, find that the response that the 'sinless perfectionists' make to this argument is – erroneously - based on 1st John 3:9: -

"No-one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin....."

But, when they use this verse, they fail to recognize that the words '*cannot sin*', in the Greek text, represent the '*aorist tense*', which is the tense that describes something that is '*ongoing, continuing, or incomplete*'.

For this reason, some translations read, '*he cannot keep on sinning*'. In other words, the child of God does not *habitually* sin. Whilst he may be exposed to temptation and may even fall, he does not continue to commit the same sin over and over again. Sin is not his normal way of life. He does not *practise* sin. He does not *live* in sin. And, what is more, when he realizes that he has been '***overtaken in a fault***', to use Paul's words in Gal. 6:1, he knows that, because he is sincerely repentant, he may seek the forgiveness that is always available (1st John 1; 9).

1. Two Important Words.

Look carefully at what the Lord says. He does *not* say, "*You must be sinless as God in heaven is sinless*", because, at that time, He was not discussing either sin or sinlessness.

There are two words in the verse that are supremely important; the words '*Father*' and '*perfect*', and we need to look at them in that order.

First: the word 'Father'.

This is the more important of the two, because '*Father*' is the word that immediately speaks to us of *relationship*. What Jesus tells us in this verse rests on the principle that *every new relationship brings new responsibility*.

Test this statement! Examine it from whatever angle you please. Consider it in connection with any human relationship into which we may possibly enter, and you will find that the principle remains true and unshakeable.

In the 'Sermon on the Mount, from where our text is taken, Jesus has been speaking to His disciples about their relationship to the heavenly Father. He has said, in effect, "God is your Father, and because this is so it follows that you bear the responsibility of children, to be like your Father".

Notice, that He says, '*as your heavenly Father*', or '*like your heavenly Father*'. He presents the Father as our model, our example. Now, this is the essence of true worship. It has been said that '*the sum of true religion is to imitate the God whom we worship*'. This is why Paul wrote: - "***Therefore be imitators of God as beloved children***". Eph.5: 1.

Second; the word 'perfect'.

There are four New Testament words which have been translated by this word, and, unfortunately, we often make the mistake of failing to understand its true, biblical meaning.

How often have you heard it said, '*There is nothing perfect in this world!*' Such expressions have become almost proverbial, and we are inclined to accept them as though they express an infallible truth – which they do not!

There are things in this world that are '*perfect*' in the sense that they cannot be improved upon. And there are certain matters in which we may become perfect, if we have the desire.

Think about the meaning of that word. We all know the meaning that we attach to it today. The modern definition of '*perfect*' means, '*without flaws or faults*'. But, when the New Testament was written, the word had a quite different meaning.

In Matt. 5:11, '*perfect*' is the translation of the Greek word '*teleios*', and means, '*full-grown, mature, or complete*.' Sometimes it means '*an end*'.

- i) Do you remember the story of The Rich Young Ruler who came to Jesus asking about eternal life? He had done so very much and was admirable in so many ways, but he was conscious of a lack in his life. Jesus said to him, **'If you want to be perfect...'** In other words, *'If you wish to be complete...'*
- ii) **Referring to Teachers And Teaching, James 3:2 uses the same word when it reads,** *'We all make mistakes, but if any one makes no mistakes in what he says, he is a perfect man'*. **This means fully mature in this respect.**
- iii) 1st Cor. 2:6 reads, *'Yet among the mature (Greek- 'perfect') we do impart wisdom.'*
- iv) Other passages to look at are Heb.5: 4 and 1st Cor.14: 20, and, especially, 1st Cor.13: 10. *'But when the perfect comes...'* The word, again, is *'teleios'* – *'the complete'*. (Incidentally, ask yourself if this verse can possibly refer to the Lord Jesus Himself, as some people suppose!)

In all of these passages the word *'perfect'* does not mean, *'perfect'* in the sense of *'sinless'*, but means *'fully-grown, mature, or complete'*, so, with this in mind, let us return to Matt. 5:48 and look at it in its original context.

The verse in its proper setting.

You will notice, I am sure, that Jesus speaks these words as He deals with the Christian law of forgiveness. He is speaking about Love, and we must, once again, pay special attention to the name He uses for God. It is the name *'Father'*. He is saying that, as a Father, God is our example, our model in the exercise of love, and, as His children, we must be complete, full-grown, mature, in this aspect of our own character.

He is saying, in effect,

"It is easy for you to love those who love you! But for you who call God 'Father', the standard is much higher. I say that, because of the love of your Father, and with His help, you must not only love your friends, but those, also, who even hate you. And when you have reached the point where you can love those who are unkind to you, or speak evil about you, or treat you badly, you will, in this aspect of your character, be like your heavenly Father. You will have become spiritually mature. Perfect!"

You see, then, that the principle presented by the Lord Jesus in this verse, applies to every possible aspect of human life. But, here it is expressed in connection with the great law of love.

**To love only those who love us, is to be *imperfect* in love.
But to love those who do not love us in return, is to be *perfect* in love.**

May I again say, in conclusion, that, when we read such words of the Lord Jesus, we must not turn away from them as though they have no message for our time, or as though they demand that we attempt the impossible.

It is fatal at any time, to read His words and then say, *"This is demanding perfection from me – and perfection is impossible"*.

We should read the New Testament scriptures with this fact fixed in our minds; THE LORD, JESUS, ALWAYS MEANS WHAT HE SAYS! AND HE NEVER DEMANDS THE IMPOSSIBLE!

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