



Conducted by
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“Jesus said in the sermon on the mount ‘Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father who is in heaven is perfect’ (Matt. 5:48) What does the word ‘perfect’ mean?”

LAST month in “Q.B.” we discussed the manner in which Jesus was made “*perfect*” through suffering. We all have our own ideas as to what perfection is and so, very often, the use of the words give rise to misunderstanding. Most people use the words as if they meant faultlessness, flawlessness of character *i.e.* moral perfection. When a fault lies at our door we usually retort by saying “Well, I’m not perfect”, or “nobody is perfect”.

In actual fact the word perfect in the majority of cases, means “complete”, “entire”. The Greek word is *teleios* which means “complete or finished (ended)”. Very often the word has no reference to matters of morals at all (Deut. 25:15) The rich young ruler who came running to Jesus to find what he must do to inherit eternal life was a very good man morally: but Jesus said to him “If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor.” His morals were good, but his goodness was *incomplete*—and we know that he walked away sadly because he was not prepared to extend or *perfect* his goodness. And so the word “perfect” in Matt. 19:21 is the same as that used in Matt. 5:48 (Sermon on the Mount) and means “complete”. Good moral standards are very much involved in spiritual completeness, of course, but the word encompasses more than moral matters. Speaking on this much misunderstood word and on Matt. 5:48, R.C. Trench wrote, “The Christian shall be “perfect, yet not in the sense in which some of the sects preach the doctrine of perfection, who, as soon as their words are looked into, are found either to mean nothing which they could not have expressed by a word less liable to misunderstanding, or to mean something which no man in this life shall attain, and which he who affirms he has attained is deceiving himself, or others, or both.”

How can we be perfect?

This injunction to perfection on the part of man, given by Jesus, was not a new one. We find God saying to Abraham “Walk before me and be thou perfect”. (Gen. 17:1). In Deut 18:13 Israel and the Levites are enjoined thus, “Thou shalt be perfect with the Lord thy God.” And there are many similar examples.

It is interesting to note that in the parallel passage in Luke 6:36, Luke does not mention perfection at all, but quotes Jesus as saying, "Be ye therefore merciful (compassionate), as your Father also is merciful."

In what sense then did Jesus mean us to be perfect? I suggest that, as always, the context of the word provides us with the answer. Verses 38-42 of chapter 5 deal with how we ought to receive injury from our fellow men. Verses 43-48 tell us how we ought to deal with those who injure us. It is in this connection that we are to show our spiritual perfection, our completeness, our spiritual maturity. Prior to Christ's sermon the accepted attitude was to love your friends and hate your enemies. Jesus points out that there is no virtue whatsoever in this. Any sinner could do that. Jesus says, rather, "love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you", and spend time in prayer on behalf of those who persecute you and despise you. In this there is virtue. To do this shows a spiritual maturity. Many of us are not "big enough" to do this — we are as yet incomplete (imperfect), we lack the spiritual capacity (v.44). We are not "perfect". To do these things, says Jesus, enables us to manifest that we are indeed children of the Father. After all, God does these things all the time. In this God shows His absolute perfection (completeness). Does not God make the sun to rise on the just and on the unjust, and send His rain upon the evil as well as the good? says Jesus. God is not mean or narrow: He is high minded and completely magnanimous. Jesus says that we ought to try to emulate God in this, so that we may truly be children of our Father in heaven (v.45). If we love those who love us we are no better than the sinners, for even they love those who love them. If we salute our brethren only we are still no better than such as they, for they salute their brethren. If this is as far as our righteousness takes us then we are spiritually poorly off (immature) and we require to strive towards the perfection to be seen in God. The word "therefore" in v.48 confirms the view, I think, that the kind and quality of perfection required of us has direct reference to the contents of verses 43 to 47.

"As your Father is perfect"

God has set the standard in that He continues to love all mankind in spite of their rebellion and the countless times they reject Him and sin against Him. If we are to be truly the sons of God then we must strive to attain to similar heights of spiritual excellence. Some of us respond by saying that such attainments are impossible. It is true that we shall always be aware of our own limitations and weaknesses: surely no man will ever claim to have reached full perfection. Jesus, however, in Matt. 5 as elsewhere, indicates that we should spend our lives in striving towards such a goal. The apostle Paul expresses it thus (in Phil. 3:12-15): "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect; but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended; but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded..."

Perhaps I can sum up by saying that Jesus is teaching that there is no virtue, honour or praise in loving those who love us, being good only to those who are good to us or blessing those who bless us. The men of the world accomplish those things. Our excellency of character must transcend standards that worldly men attain to: thus we must love our enemies, return good for evil, pray for and bless those who would like to injure us. God continually displays such a disposition towards mankind. He does not withhold His benefits (sun and rain) from those who are evil. We ought to emulate God in this. If we do this we shall reflect a spiritual maturity or perfection

(completeness) in keeping with the perfection seen in God the Father. Then shall we truly be sons exhibiting the traits of the Father.

It is said that man cannot attain to so much. But we must realize that God cannot ask for less. If man cannot possess all the traits of God, he can by loving his enemies possess at least *this* virtue in common with God. If he does he is complete, *at least on that score*, and hence as perfect as the Father is in heaven.