

Perfect

“You’re really going places kid.”

I John 4:4-12

Fifth in the series, Xtreme Love: lessons from the Methodist heart

Rev. John H. Hice
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First United Methodist Church of Royal Oak, Michigan

Severity

There’s a pastor in Seattle making headlines bold enough to get him a feature article in the New York Times Sunday Magazine. One of our church members stuffed a copy in my hands and said, “Here, read this and tell me what you think.” So I read about a preacher who has attracted a lot of attention and a lot of church members with a new version of an old message that says human beings are totally corrupted by original sin and that God has predestined each of us to either heaven or hell and there is nothing you can do to change God’s mind.

If you were to ask him what he thinks of us, he’d probably tell you that we have made Jesus into a wimp and the Christian church into little more than a self help group.¹

It was interesting reading! But it’s a hard word he delivers. And if you take the message he delivers seriously, you might wonder what God really expects of you in the end. He might say, “Nothing. It’s all a matter of God’s grace and that has already been determined. Everything that happens in your life and everything you say and do has already been mapped out.”

Do you think that’s what you were born for, though? Is all there is to life a matter of living out a script that was already written, and you don’t have any say? Or is it true that God is Love for everyone, desires for all to be saved, and has a higher purpose for your life, at least if you’re open enough to work with God to make it happen?

Calling

I read things in the Bible like, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,”² and “Go therefore into all the world and make disciples of all nations,”³ and this passage from the First Epistle of John we read today, “...let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.”⁴ Then I get convinced all over again that God hasn’t been orchestrating some kind of resettlement program since the beginning of time, dividing us up to populate heaven and hell. In Jesus we discover a God who loves the whole lot of us, all 6 billion people living now plus all of

our ancestors and all of our descendents and has a higher purpose in mind for you and me and everyone else.

God wants us to go places. God wants to make something out of your life. I'd say to the man in Seattle that Jesus was not being a wimp when he fought for your release from the power of sin and death. And lessons from the Methodist heart reveal that it's not the effect of a self-help program to be awakened by the shaking hand of God's Spirit to see the elephant in the room – that you're not acting like the child of God that you are.

God wants you to go places. And what God has in mind for you is: *perfection*.

You might have read the scripture. Jesus was in the middle of his Sermon on the Mount and had just been talking about loving your enemies and must of looked at them in the eye when he said, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."⁵

Then, if you've been paying attention, you might wonder, *What? How can I be perfect? If Jesus is serious, does he expect me to get all A's, always sing on key, never do something unless it's done right? Can he be serious?* The writer of 2 Corinthians says, "This is what we pray for: that you may be made perfect;" is he just using that as a lofty figure of speech, or does he mean that you should never drop a dish? Are you and I expected to be measurably perfect?

When the founder of the Methodist movement John Wesley started saying that we need to expect to be made perfect in this lifetime and even wrote a book on it⁶, he got a backlash of opposition because it just sounded impossible. But a study of the Greek language taught him that there are different ways of understanding what *perfection* means. It turns out that the Romans tried to measure perfection, saying that it's that state of something which can no longer be improved. The Greeks were different. Perfection, in the Greek language, means "*complete or whole*."

This is the kind of perfection you see when you walk outside and the temperature is 70° and there's a gentle breeze, the sun is hanging high in a deep blue sky and shining its rays through the new green leaves of spring shaking in the trees; and you say to yourself, "This is perfect!"

It's the kind of perfection you mean when you've been taking care of your sister's children for a few hours. You've played games and read stories, eaten some hamburgers and laughed a lot all day. Never mind that one of them spilled grape juice

on your white carpet or that they wanted to play on the Wii during the final quarter of the Super Bowl. The day could have had its improvements. But when they're getting picked up and little arms go around your neck and you hear, "I love you" coming from a little voice, what else can you say than, "These kids are perfect!"

Perfect indeed, when something is just right, whole, complete (even though a there still might be a mess to clean up and a measurement couldn't verify it). So Wesley simply said that you are perfect when it becomes wholly true that you love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength; and your neighbor as yourself. You are made perfect when you love God above everything and everybody else; and then love all things and all people in God. You are perfect, whole, complete, when you trust God with everything you've got, and really do unto others as you would have them do to you. This is God's higher purpose for you.

And he said that all this is possible because it's not something that you do on your own. It's something God's Spirit does in you if you decide to let the Spirit in and do your part of cooperation. Then, little-by-little you grow up in Christ. Pieces of resentment and hatred get transformed to forgiveness and toleration. Bits of selfishness get changed to generosity. Tendencies toward prejudice and blame get turned into compassion. Spiritual immaturity is turned into true discipleship. This is called *sanctification*, becoming more holy in your heart and in your life, more loving, more like Jesus. And in the end you might just experience it: your higher purpose – to be like Jesus in all you are and do.

This is what I understand from the Bible and the Methodist heart: the script is *not* prewritten for you, with you just playing it out. God's grace is not reserved for some and withheld from others. God loves the world. God loves you. And you're so precious God wants you to go places in this life where, as the author of I John says, God's love will be perfected in you.

Grace

The first time I went mountain biking my son James' gave me permission to take his new bike and I joined a friend for an adventure on a very rugged trail; first time and we predictably chose an area that was probably professional level. It was 90° and in-between some violent thunderstorms that left the steep trails good and muddy. We worked hard and fast, splashing through the mud, winding down steep trails and up impossible hills. The flies were out so when we slowed down enough they would catch us and they would bite. If we took a down-hill stretch too fast we might slide and maybe crash at a sharp turn in the trail...into the mud. One time half-way up a hill the gears

slipped and the pedal swung and caught the back of my leg with its sharp teeth. But the more we rode, the better it seemed. And when we got off the trail we looked at each other, covered with mud and blood and fly bites and sweat; but with great smiles on our faces because it was some of the best fun we'd ever had. There we were: messy, but totally into it. As far as the experience of mountain biking was concerned, you might say, it was perfect.

It's a good thing you can't measure perfection. And it's a good thing Jesus loves you so much that God aim for you is to be complete in love. *Messy, perhaps, but totally into it*: this is your higher purpose; this is the perfection God wants, whoever you are.

References

- [1] Molly Worthen, "Who Would Jesus Smack Down?" *The New York Times Magazine*, January 9, 2009. pp 20-23
- [2] John 3:16
- [3] Matthew 28:19
- [4] I John 4:7
- [5] Matthew 5:48
- [5] John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. (Written London, England, 1777). Kessinger Publishing, LLC (July 25, 2007)