

How to Be “Perfect”

Michael Bischof

April 2006

I became a Christian in the 70's, when the proper way to distinguish oneself was “born-again Christian.” I think this was done to make a statement against other kinds of “Christians” who were different in some way. I had never met any of these other kinds of “Christians” and didn't really know why or how I was supposed to be different, or for that matter, even what “born-again” really meant. But it was in this context that my idealistic teenage mind took a word that I had heard from some Bible teacher or preacher and took it to its logical extreme.

Jesus told people to “be *perfect* as their heavenly Father is *perfect*.” Simple enough. If Jesus said it, it must be something we're supposed to do. And some preachers I had listened to talked as if we were all in pretty bad shape if we were not perfect (which was maybe what “born-again” was supposed to infer). I mean . . . have you ever listened to the way some preachers say the word “sin.” They turn one syllable into several. And you can almost smell their breath as they describe the wretched condition of evil, conniving, despicable people. This is usually followed by a staccato description of many antonyms for sin such as “holy” and “righteous” and “pure” and “perfect.” It was that last one that always got me. Perfect. It sounded so . . . born-again. Such a perfect summary of everything else I was supposed to be. It's hard to be all those things, but if I could just be “perfect,” that would take care of everything. Just think about it for your own life – no more thinking bad thoughts, no more calling others names (or just thinking it), no more lust, no more temptation to order “Senior Citizen” priced movie tickets online because the regular priced ones are too expensive, no more justifying pirated music and software, no more (fill in your favorite vice).

I could be perfect, because a preacher told me I could. But I needed some time to work on it. I needed some space. So I figured summer vacation would be the best time to do this. Much better than the school year with all of its distractions. So I got a big new study Bible to read, a book called something like *The Ultimate Perfect Pursuit of Godly Righteous Holiness*, and set off on my summer adventure to become perfect. I think I made it through the first week without sinning (at least nothing anyone would notice) and felt pretty good about myself. As far as I knew “sin” and “teenage boy” were synonymous. But it was somewhere in the second or third week that things got all screwed up. Summer ended up with me facing far more temptations than during the school year. Having more free time was tougher on my pursuit of holiness than being busy. And I don't even remember what chapter I got to in my book. I arrived at the end of summer feeling more defeated and frustrated about my imperfection than I was at the beginning.

That's the problem with striving for perfection – one has to be perfect to achieve it. So what on earth did Jesus mean when he told his followers to be perfect? From what I can see by reading my Bible, Jesus doesn't like to set people up for failure. He does tell a lot of stories that are hard to figure out (which often makes me feel like a failure), but I think he really wants people to know how to live in this thing he called “the kingdom of the heavens.” And by the type of people Jesus hung out with, I don't think he expected them to be perfect in order to “join the club.”

I think the best context for understanding what Jesus meant is to look at your own life. What's your story? How did God's story intersect with your story? When I look at my story, it is pretty easy to see that there are some missing pieces to my puzzle. What do I mean? Well, let me share a few sound bites from my story that led me to a strong desire to figure out what Jesus meant.

The really good part of the story starts when I got my first full-time staff position in a church. I was a youth pastor with all the prestige that comes from pulling off overnights, scavenger hunts, winter camps, gross eating games, and parent meetings. This was pastoral bliss for a 20-something spiritual leader. Then reality set in and the deacons at my church kicked out the senior pastor (a very long story that isn't relevant to the point I'm trying to make). Because the other staff resigned too, the deacons asked me to run the church. That's one way to grow a youth ministry . . . just add the adults to it! Long story short – I did what they told me to do, and while it went okay on the outside, it nearly killed me emotionally. I ended up going through eight

months of clinical depression. I needed help but didn't know how to get it (more about this next month).

What I learned at the end of this eight months of hell (now I know it is more politically correct to call it my "dark night of the soul" or my "desert experience" depending on what group I'm telling the story to) was that I didn't have any support systems. I thought I did, but I was in denial. I needed friends. I had friends, or thought I had friends, but not the kind of friends one needs in this state. I needed heavy duty friends, all-wheel-drive friends, tough friends. I just had a few wimpy friends who might hang out with me but never asked me what was going on inside. So I learned my emotional life was messed up because my relational life was empty. But it gets worse (or better, depending on your perspective).

I started working on these things, but at some point in the process realized God and I were not doing too well. It was kind of like that feeling you have with your spouse when you know you've done something wrong, but neither one of you have brought it up yet. If I were to be totally honest, I had to admit that I was angry at God for sending me into this dark desert hell thing with no friends. My old friends would have told me I needed to start having a "quiet time" again. For those who are unschooled in evangelicalese, a "quiet time" is what you do every day to make God like you. It involves, as an absolute minimum, Bible reading and prayer and you usually have some place to check a box that you've done your minimum-daily-allowance of spiritual stuff. Needless to say, my spiritual formation sucked! Thanks to a powerful 2-year retreat process that I was invited into, I re-learned what it meant to have a relationship with God.

In fact, I was learning so much great stuff, I had to make a decision about how to share it with others. My depression had pushed me in new directions of emotional formation. My need to heal and apply grace to my life expanded my understanding of and the amount of energy I put into my relational formation. Reconnecting with God and learning about a bunch of ancient practices called spiritual disciplines began to feed into my spiritual formation. And as I took the time to share my story with others, I realized what an encouragement it could be to their lives. The gospel I had been living in my "born again" days didn't seem like very good news any more. I had now learned about a gospel based on something called "grace" that truly is what Phillip Yancey calls "the last best word." I was learning that I didn't have to wait to get to heaven to live the good life. Heaven, at least when Jesus spoke of it, was something that begins right now. Living in God's kingdom, or the kingdom of the heavens, is present as well as future. What a concept! Thus began my life-long journey into missional formation. And what an exciting mission it is.

So what does all this have to do with being perfect? I think if you look at your own life, you will realize that it is often very fragmented. We learn some things as we grow and change but the things we learn are pretty dis-integrated. Then Jesus comes along and says we are to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. The primary definitions in the dictionary for "perfect" are "expert, proficient, being entirely without fault or defect, flawless, satisfying all requirements." I think this is usually what someone thinks about when the concept of perfection comes to mind. The biblical meaning of "perfect" though is somewhat different. The word used by Jesus is the Greek word *telios*, which signifies an undivided wholeness of people in their behavior. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* says it is not the qualitative end-point of human effort, but the anticipation in time of a wholeness in present-day living. This is a very different concept than the perfection some believe they need to strive for in order to please God or achieve the accomplishments that God expects of them.

In a biblical sense, the "perfection" that Jesus taught is a maturity, a completeness, or a wholeness that indicates a person is integrated in all of his or her parts. In other words, there are not parts of oneself split off, in denial, under judgment, or unacceptable. Wuest's translation renders Matthew 5:48: "*Therefore, as for you, you shall be those who are complete in your character, even as your Father in heaven is complete in His being.*"

So rather than talking about perfection, it makes much more sense to talk about becoming whole or complete. This is what I mean when I talk about holistic formation (see last month's article for an introduction to holistic formation). It is moving from that place where my life is fragmented and dis-integrated to a place where all the parts of my life connect in a way that displays God's beauty of creation in the soul of my being. And in case you haven't noticed, God is a great artist.

I encourage you to think deeply about your own formation. Because we all have a formation – it's just a matter of which one? I'd love to hear from you what aspects of your own formation have been the greatest struggle (spiritual, emotional, relational, intellectual, physical, missional)? In what area(s) do you have little or no support? Then, for the next six months, we are going to discuss one area of our formation each month, and how these areas of our lives can come together in a way that helps us not only to see our lives as whole persons, but empowers us to allow Jesus to affect every one of these areas. I hope you join me in this journey through holistic formation.

Michael Bischof is founder and executive director of *Souleader Resources*, a non-profit organization in Southern California whose mission is empowering wholeness in leaders and churches. You can e-mail him at michael@souleader.org.

© 2006 Michael Bischof, Souleader Resources. All rights reserved. Please inquire for duplication permission.