Felt Need

More often than not, life’s journey feels like one step forward, two steps back. “When people hear the words ‘Christian’ and ‘perfection’ together, the word ‘Impossible’ immediately jumps to mind”(9).

Key Idea

God’s prevenient grace pursues us; God’s justifying grace redeems us; and God’s sanctifying grace refines us that we might become a whole, complete human being made in the image of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Key Verse

“Therefore, just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.”

— Matthew 5:48 (CEB)

Suggested Scripture for Worship

Matthew 5:{38-}43-48, Hebrews 6:1a

Supporting Readings

Introduction to A Perfect Love: A Plain Account of Christian Perfection by Steven Manskar, pp. 9-10.
INTRODUCTION

Perfect. Its synonyms are flawless, ideal, faultless, exemplary, without equal.

There are perfect diamonds. A flawless diamond that is perfect color, clarity and cut is truly rare, estimated to represent a miniscule .001% of world diamond production.

There’s a perfect score in bowling (300). In baseball, a pitcher can throw a perfect game by allowing no opposing batter to reach a base. Students (and parents) strive for a perfect report card of straight A’s. And it is probable that someone in your congregation watches Dancing with the Stars religiously, waiting for the first perfect score of the season.

It would be telling of the age of the preacher to reflect on the first perfect gymnastics routine in Olympic competition – a perfect 10 by Nadia Comaneci in 1976, first on the uneven bars and then 6 more times in the Montreal Olympics. Even the scoreboard didn’t think perfection was possible and showed “1.00,” unable to represent a perfect score.

That 10 meant perfection, that elusive ideal that everyone chases. To see Comaneci achieve it was so momentous, because though everyone knows it doesn’t exist, that doesn’t stop us from striving for it, whether in competition, the classroom, the workplace, or daily life, even our life of faith.

Let’s face it – the whole perfection thing is a big can of worms that makes us feel uncomfortable and/or overwhelmed. Some of us spend a lifetime seeking perfection and feeling frustrated when we fall short. Others shrug our shoulders and declare, “I’m only human,” as a way to justify the failure we are unable to overcome on our own. And then we hear Jesus tell the disciples “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48, NRSV).

CONNECTION TO SCRIPTURE

Why does Jesus expect the impossible of us? “Turn the other cheek.” “Go the second mile.” “Love your enemies.” “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

In the closing verses of Matthew 5, during Jesus’ foundational teaching known as the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus provides a new interpretation of the law given on Mount Sinai. The Word-made-flesh provides an authentic interpretation of the word of God, culminating in the primacy of the love command as the key to Scriptures. Love that is as much about action as feeling. Love that is never a weapon or a tool. Genuine love that “has no ulterior motive, its purpose is simply to benefit the one loved, regardless of the response.”

These verses in particular, and the Sermon on the Mount in whole, provide “a portrait of the very heart of God, one who loves the unlovable, comes among us in Christ, suffers our worst, and rises to forgive us. Turn the other
cheek, give the cloak, go another mile, lend, love the enemy – because that is how God loves. If you want to follow this God, fleshed in Jesus, you will be adopted into a life in which you find yourself loving this way before you know what you are doing.”

Any capacity for this kind of love is due to the empowering love given by God, who is love. As children of God, formed in the image of the One whose nature is love, we are shaped by God's prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace. We don’t have to, and aren’t supposed to, figure out perfection and how to be “perfect” on our own. God works in and through us, not so that we can get everything right, but that we might love as God loves, love like Jesus who is God’s concrete example of that love.

“Perfection does not mean always choosing the right fork at the dinner table, nor does it mean attaining to such divine attributes as omniscience. It means loving as God loves, with every breath God gives us. Impossible? Too much? ‘God well knew how ready our unbelief would be to cry out, This is impossible! And therefore stakes upon it all the power, truth, and faithfulness of God, to whom all things are possible.’”

**CONNECTION TO WESLEY READINGS**

John Wesley expected the same (seemingly impossible) perfection. Christian perfection is one of the most distinctive doctrines of the Wesleyan tradition. John Wesley preached and taught and fought for it most of his life. He published A Plain Account of Christian Perfection in 1767 as a reasoned defense of the doctrine that came to define his life and the evangelical movement that came to bear his name (9).

Consider this explanation by Steven Manskar, in the introduction to A Perfect Love:

> [Today, the meaning we associate with] the English word perfection is that of the Latin word perfectio. This term is the perfection of the gods. It means one who is [flawless] in all regards – in thought, word, and deed. Human beings are, of course, not capable of such perfection. But this is not the meaning of Christian perfection.

> Wesley, and others who addressed the doctrine, took the meaning of perfection from the Greek words teleios and teleosis. When these words appear in Scripture, the English word frequently used to convey their meaning is perfect, perfection, or to be made perfect. This interpretation is especially true with the King James Version of the Bible, which was the English Bible used by Wesley. He [Wesley] also read the Scriptures in the original languages, Hebrew and Greek.

Several words are used today to convey the meaning of teleios: whole, complete, mature, grown-up, perfect. These words give us a more complete and accurate understanding of the meaning of Christian perfection. … Christian perfection is not perfectio, the perfection of the gods. Christian perfection is the work of divine grace that, through faith in Jesus Christ, restores the human soul, damaged by sin, to wholeness and help babes in Christ to grow up to maturity in faith and love. Christian perfection is nothing more, or less, than growing up in love and becoming a whole, complete human being made in the image of God as revealed in Jesus Christ (10).

Wesley's teaching of Christian perfection does not stand on its own, but is complemented by his teaching on the
way of salvation: God’s prevenient grace pursues us; God’s justifying grace redeems us; and God’s sanctifying grace refines us that we might become a whole, complete human being made in the image of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. John’s sermons and Charles’s hymn texts are filled with this good news of grace upon grace.

APPLICATION

“‘Be perfect’ is not an indictment; it is a promise that carries the possibility that we may love the world as God has loved us – fully, richly, abundantly, and completely.”

What are the examples in your community and experience of imperfect (i.e. flawed) persons who have grown to “be perfect” (i.e. love as God loves, love as revealed in Jesus Christ)? Share these (with permission) as examples of the fulfilled promise to “be perfect as God is perfect.”

It may seem the “Christian” reaction to the idea of perfection, even Christian perfection, should be one of humility – How dare I think that I could be perfect? How dare I imagine that I could love as God loves?

Yet, is it not God’s desire that every one of God’s children become whole and complete and restored? Do we think it not possible for God to restore in us a pure heart, created anew and formed in God’s own image?

Challenge the congregation to each name for themselves the relationship or situation in which they have been striving for human perfection and to confess this to God, asking God’s grace to grow in them a Christian perfection. Where have they had opportunity in the last day, even in the last few hours, to love as God loves but found themselves unable to do so? Recognizing our need for grace is God’s prevenient grace at work in us. Asking God to forgive us and restore us to love is an opening for God’s justifying grace to work in us. Choosing to love as God loves, when the next opportunity presents itself, is a manifestation of God’s sanctifying grace at work in us.

[There is a Prayer of Confession included in each week’s Worship Helps. Consider, especially if this series is preached during Lent, to invite the congregation to respond to the message by sharing in the Prayer of Confession as they journey on to perfection.]

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