

## Is Perfection Possible?

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"Mr. Wilson:

My pastor just finished a four-week series of sermons called, "Be ye perfect." His theme was taken from the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:48, "**Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**" To be honest, I had not given much thought to the necessity of perfection until I heard his sermons. My pastor says that we must overcome *every* sin in order to be saved. What do you say? Do you think it is possible to live without sinning? Thank you in advance for your response.

Terri"

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Dear Terri:

Thank you for your e-mail. I am happy to respond to your question. Even though entire books have been written on this question, I will be as brief as possible. You may already know that Christians have debated the topic of perfection for centuries. There are more than 200 different Christian denominations in the United States and each one claims to know the way to Heaven. It is no wonder that people are confused about the requirements for salvation. I find that when it comes to the topic of perfection, Christians range between two extremes.

At one end of the spectrum, some Christians have no concern for perfection. They believe that our ticket to Heaven comes through performing rituals and/or sacraments. For example, some people believe that salvation is as simple as this: ". . . **if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.**" (Romans 10:9,10) This approach is similar to that of becoming a Moslem. To become a Moslem, a person has to sincerely say three times, "There is no deity but Allah and Mohammed is His messenger."

At the other end of the spectrum, some Christians insist that salvation comes through rigorous obedience to God's laws. They claim that a person must overcome every sin (Matthew 5:48; 1 John 3:6-9, Hebrews 10:26) and that person can live without sinning if he or she is properly connected to Christ. When everything written about salvation in the Bible is put on the table, I believe that victory over any sin is possible, but sinless living is not possible until the carnal nature is removed. (Hebrews 8:8-11, 1 John 3:2)

God has a very practical and inspiring way of saving sinners which can be compared to a coin. "The coin" of salvation has two sides. One side of the coin is our ticket to Heaven (justification) and the other side of the coin is our preparation for Heaven (sanctification). We respond to God's love when we accept His offer of salvation and we show our gratitude to God by allowing the Holy Spirit to test us, discipline us, teach us, and prepare us for Heaven.

The Father has made the coin of salvation available to the whole world through the blood of His Son, Jesus Christ. The Father wants all human beings to accept the coin of salvation, but there is a caveat. (Isn't there a caveat when accepting a free kitten?) Before people can receive the coin of salvation, their whole orientation to life has to be changed. This transformation is so dramatic that it is called "rebirth." **"In reply [to Nicodemus] Jesus declared, 'I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.'" (John 3:3)**

In other words, a person cannot enter the kingdom of God by being "a good person" or by doing good deeds. Human goodness does not impress God. Jesus said that even the pagans do good deeds! (Matthew 5:47) The root problem is not sinlessness, but it is selflessness: **"Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God."** (Romans 8:5-8)

Man's number one problem is his sinful nature. (The devil holds second place.) Parents do not have to teach their children to lie, cheat or steal. Sinning comes naturally and when a person experiences rebirth, the carnal nature does not go away. In fact, the carnal nature becomes aggravated by the presence of the spiritual nature and it constantly wars against the spiritual nature which God places in every born again heart. (Romans 7)

Some people believe that it is possible to silence the carnal nature and be free of its sinful tendencies. I believe these people are misled. Paul had been a Christian almost thirty years when he wrote, **"I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate, I do."** (Romans 7:15)

Consider this scenario: At a point in our lives, the Holy Spirit begins working on our hearts, trying to get each of us to surrender to the gospel of Jesus Christ. If a person stops resisting and surrenders his life to Jesus (a surrender to Jesus means a willingness to go, to be and to do whatever Jesus commands in His gospel), a real miracle called rebirth will occur. The evidence of rebirth is a complete change in orientation. The things we once hated, we now love and the things we once loved, we now hate. (1 John 2:15-17)

The Holy Spirit tirelessly promotes the gospel of Jesus because it contains several important truths about God and man. For example, the gospel reveals a sinner's true state before God. The gospel declares the penalty for sin and it reveals the good news that man has a Savior in Jesus Christ. The gospel of Jesus also declares that God freely offers every submissive sinner "a robe of righteousness" which Jesus Christ Himself created when He lived on Earth. (Matthew 22:1-14)

The righteousness of Christ is also illustrated as a wedding robe because God will clothe our lives of sin with the perfect life of Christ in exchange for our totally submissive hearts. When a sinner receives the robe of Christ's righteousness, the sinner is justified in God's sight (this means, justice has been served, the sinless life of Christ has been exchanged for the sinful life of a sinner, and God's law which demands "a life for a life" is fully satisfied).

This legal standing occurs in Heaven's court at rebirth and this is the ticket that enables sinners to enter through the pearly gates. Tickets to Heaven are not available through any other means than justification. (Romans 1:17)

Meanwhile, down here on Earth, the born-again sinner is a different creature. Every born-again person is changed by God's divine power. Each day, a new infusion of power is available to each born-again sinner so that he or she can maintain an attitude of love toward God and man.

In addition to this power, God sends a willingness to serve others and a desire to be honest, forthright, generous, fair, and forgiving. (These are God's attributes.) Of course, our ability to use this power to glorify God in words and actions is not perfect and our deficiencies will be noticed as we undergo tests at various times and in different ways.

The Holy Spirit uses a variety of tests to reveal to us our flaws, defects of character, wrong attitudes, and inherited weaknesses so that we might grow up and spiritually mature in Christ. Because God is preparing us for eternal life, the process of sanctification is an ongoing process until we die or experience the removal of the carnal nature.

In reality, after a few years of intensive sanctification, a spiritual plateau is reached. The sinner has gone about as far as possible in terms of learning and doing God's will. The remainder of his life will be spent applying the things that he has learned, making amends for his mistakes as they occur (1 John 2:1), and praying for strength to do what is right as tests come and go. Learning to love God and others, in every possible way, takes a lifetime. This is why sanctification occurs and this also explains the limits of sanctification. However, a thousand years of sanctification will not silence the carnal nature. (Romans 7)

When most people hear Matthew 5:48, they don't stop to realize that verse 48 is preceded by 47 other verses! Jesus said, "**Be perfect, therefore, even as your Father in Heaven is perfect,**" within a specific context. Review Matthew 5:1-47 and remember, this passage is called "The Beatitudes" (the be-attitudes) for a reason. Jesus summed up His sermon saying, "Be perfect, therefore. . . ." because it is possible for us to be perfect in our grade even as the Father is perfect in His grade!

The school of sanctification is similar to a school of education. First graders and twelfth graders are schoolmates because they attend the same school! They may not be in the same class, but they are in the same school. The same is true in the school of sanctification. Some people are in the first grade and others are in the twelfth grade and the Father has a graduate degree. The playing field in school is level because the tests and responsibilities for each grade are commensurate with the abilities of the students.

Using this example, you can see that a perfect score in handwriting for a first grader is quite different than a perfect score in calculus for a senior, but a perfect score is a perfect score regardless of the year in school! Of course, if a student does not pass his tests, he has to stay in that grade until he does. Once the student reaches a certain age, he can choose to drop out if he wants. If a person chooses to drop out of the school of sanctification, that is his choice, but remember, he cannot keep his ticket to Heaven.

When a person returns to a life of rebellion he loses his ticket because there is no place in Heaven for one rebellious saint. God has purchased tickets for every person on Earth through the blood of His Son, Jesus Christ, and God wants every human being to accept a free ticket, but remember, there is a caveat. We have to enter and remain in the school of sanctification to keep the ticket. (Ezekiel 18) If we stay in school, we will be blessed. If we cooperate with the Holy Spirit, we can perfectly maintain the attitudes that Jesus defined in His sermon. Bad attitudes stem from everything the carnal nature produces: selfishness, injury, abuse, etc.

Born-again people can and do fall into sin, but Jesus offers forgiveness if the sinner will confess his sin and allow the sanctifying process to continue. (1 John 1:9) Because born-again Christians are carnal, they are special targets of Lucifer. Jesus knows that no Christian can live very long without slipping into some kind of sin. (1 Peter 5:8; 1 John 2:1; 5:17) However, born-again sinners know that we have an advocate with the Father and Jesus will speak in our defense if we are repentant (willing to make things right and forsake our sin).

If anyone says that he is without sin, he is a liar. (1 John 1:10) Remember, sin comes not only through deeds of commission, but also through deeds of omission. (James 4:17) Therefore, there are only three ways we can be set free from sin:

1. If we persist, Jesus will set us free from a particular sin – but this freedom is not necessarily permanent. In other words, we can fall back into that same sin if we are not careful. (Matthew 12:43-45)
2. At death, our choices end so there is no further temptation to sin. Death seals the record of our life and this record is used when we stand before the Judgment Bar of Christ. (Ecclesiastes 12:14, Daniel 7:10, 2 Corinthians 5:10)
3. During the Great Tribulation, those passing tests of faith will have their carnal natures removed and they will be sealed in a state like that of Adam and Eve before the fall. The first to have their carnal natures removed will be the 144,000. (Revelation 7:3, see also Chapter 6 in my book, *Jesus: The Alpha and The Omega*)

Terri, the only person to ever live without sinning is Jesus. (Romans 3:23, Hebrews 4:15) Sinless living for born-again people is not possible. However, we can still experience victory over sin. While victory is possible, sooner or later, the devil and our ever-present carnal nature will ambush us and cause us to sin through commission or omission. Fortunately, the Bible says these types of sins do not bring death. (1 John 5:17)

Think about this. The two people most likely to achieve a sinless life would have been Adam and Eve, but God separated them from the Tree of Life because He knew they could no longer live without sinning again! God sees our hopeless dilemma. Therefore, God Himself made "the coin" of salvation.

Whosoever will, may come and receive the coin. (John 3:16) Ongoing sanctification is our preparation for eternal life and justification is the ticket to eternal life. **"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness**

**and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ." (Titus 2:11-13)**