

# The Sin of Perfectionism

by Stanley D. Gale\*

[Abstract: In this article Rev. Gale confronts the problem of perfectionism, finding its source in the self-righteous attempt of counselees to become perfect by legalistic means.]

A young man came in for counseling, his brow tightly furled, the corners of his mouth drooping low, his facial muscles pulsating with tenseness. Clearly he was in great distress.

As we talked, it became more and more evident that his face reflected an acute anxiety and that he was gripped in the downward spiral of depression. All of the classic symptoms were there: worry, anger, bitterness, self-pity.

What was not so quickly apparent, however, was a major contributing factor lurking behind these symptoms, something that must be dealt with if counseling was to succeed. This root factor was the sin of perfectionism. It had so taken captive this young man that his entire life was colored by it, and it affected him personally as well as in his interpersonal relationships. It robbed him of his joy and peace in the Christian life and seriously debilitated him.

Perfectionism is a common problem and is often found to a greater or lesser degree as a part of a counselee's problem matrix. But what exactly is perfectionism? How are we to frame it biblically? And, so doing, what remedy does the Word of God give us?

Our first task is to define perfectionism. The term itself is not found in Scripture. Operationally speaking, perfectionism can be described as allegiance to and occupation with becoming perfect. Included in this definition are a heartfelt commitment and life investment in pursuit of a state of perfection. Here I have in mind a state of moral perfection—a perfection in respect to the revealed will of God.

You might be thinking at this point, "Where's the problem? It seems to me that most people aren't nearly as concerned with pleasing God as they should be. I wish all the members of my congregation had this 'problem.' "

## **"Be Ye Perfect"**

At first glance it does seem that there is hardly any problem at all. Does not

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our Lord say in the Sermon on the Mount, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48)? Surely striving for perfection is the pursuit of a biblical mandate, and, therefore, something necessary and admirable. In fact, the very presence of this injunction suggests to us that striving for righteousness is the exception rather than the rule.

The apostle Paul, addressing the marriage union of the believer and nonbeliever, the clean and the unclean, concludes in II Corinthians 7:1:

Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, *perfecting holiness* out of reverence for God (emphasis added.)

In like manner, Paul closes his letter to the Corinthian church, a church fraught with problems, saying that “our prayer is for your perfection” (II Corinthians 13:9). His summary statement in II Corinthians 13:11 includes the appeal to “aim for perfection . . . and the God of love and peace will be with you.”

This last statement is interesting. The young man to whom I referred earlier was greatly deficient in love and peace as a result of his perfectionism and its complicating factors. Yet this verse seems to indicate that aiming for perfection will be accompanied by the love and peace of God.

No doubt that this brief review of some relevant passages bolsters you in asking, “Where’s the problem?” Assuredly, the Scripture is replete with admonitions for covenant obedience to the law of God and for striving after holiness.

### **The Problem Exposed**

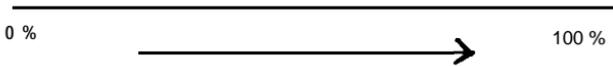
Confusion is cleared away when you see that aiming for perfection is not the same as perfectionism. Our definition of perfectionism is “the allegiance to and occupation with becoming perfect.” What problem do you see with this definition with respect to the passages we just surveyed? More specifically, what is lacking from our definition that would make it conform to the Bible? The answer is Christ.

Let me explain the dynamic difference between aiming for perfection and perfectionism as it revolves around the person and work of Christ. We are called to be perfect—to be holy. We might illustrate this (see figure 1) by a horizontal axis where 0% is the absence of righteousness and 100% is perfect righteousness in respect to the revealed Word of God.



**FIGURE 1**

The perfectionistic person is zealous for pleasing God and for working diligently, even compulsively, toward that end. The arrow along our horizontal continuum (see figure 2) represents his commitment and movement along this axis.



**FIGURE 2**

The problem is, however, that he always falls short of his goal, the implications of which are lack of joy, a heavy heart, despair, worry, etc. As he looks about him, he sees others, who seem to have a peace, smile, and he concludes that these Christians are not taking their Christian life seriously. They are sober in respect to the gravity and heinousness of their sin. How dare they be joyful. This conclusion may lead to anger, bitterness, loneliness, etc. In addition, his Christian walk is stymied for fear that he is not making decisions consistent with the will of God. Is he allowed to indulge in recreation? After all, isn't it detracting from Bible reading and prayer? Is it God's will to go to the store now? Should he wait? You can see, left unchecked, the disastrous effect that perfectionism can have.

The problem lies not in the goal of perfection; that is biblical and right. Rather, the problem resides in the isolationism of the horizontal axis, and it is at this point that we uncover perfectionism for what it is. The root of perfectionism is legalism and the root of legalism is self-righteousness.

In speaking of legalism we are not referring to the legalism of the Pharisees whose standard for righteousness was lowered so as to be attainable by human

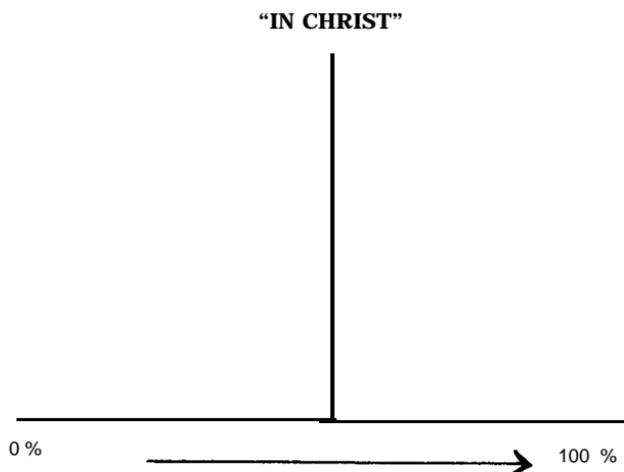
effort and punctiliousness. No, the legalism manifested here is the holding aloft of a standard that is impossible to meet: God's standard.

"But wait a minute," you protest. "Isn't that supposed to be our standard? Remember, 'Be perfect . . . as your heavenly father is perfect.' " Yes, and that is precisely where the problem is located. We cannot be perfect in ourselves. We are sinners. We have no business marooning ourselves on the forsaken island of that horizontal axis, which is nothing other than a hopeless attempt at self-righteousness.

### **The Problem Resolved**

Where then is the solution? The goal of perfection for which we are to strive must be in the context of perfection in Christ. The work begun by the Spirit we cannot seek to perfect by the flesh (Galatians 3:3).

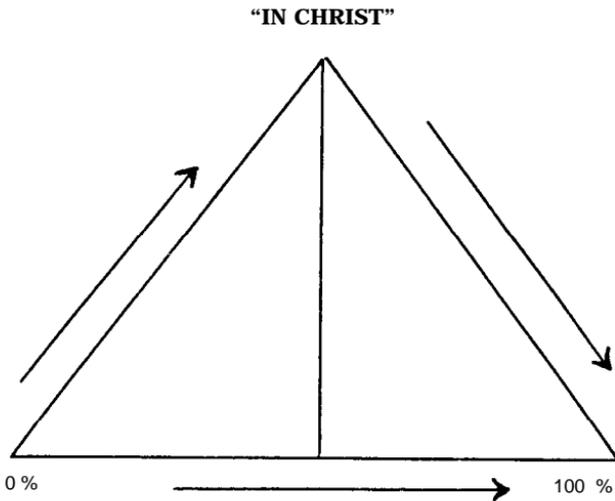
Let us return to the horizontal axis. While the goal of perfect righteousness is good and appropriate, we must recognize that perfect righteousness cannot be attained by human effort. That is the Christian gospel. Our righteousness is found in Christ (Galatians 2:16, 21) and in Him alone. We gain righteousness by being united to Him (Ephesians 1:3f.; II Corinthians 5:21). Thus we can add a vertical axis to our horizontal axis (see figure 3). The vertical axis represents our union with Christ as the source of our perfection.



**FIGURE 3**

How, then, do we live the Christian life? How do we pursue holiness, to the perfection of which we are called? We look at the goal, we live out our Christian lives along the vertical axis from the location of our representative and vital union with Christ. We positionally are in the heavenly realm in Christ (Colossians 3:1-4) and this position mandates and empowers us to live the Christian life in Christ (Colossians 3:5f). We are dead to sin (Romans 6:6); therefore, let us acknowledge the fact (Romans 6: 11) and live accordingly (Romans 6:12-14).

We can diagram this (see figure 4) since we view our goal (i.e., perfect righteousness) as we have achieved it by union with Christ. So our perspective is neither earthly nor fleshly but heavenly, spiritual. There is all the difference in the world in these two perspectives. The perfectionism perspective leads to despair; union with Christ, while pursuing the same goal, empties us of our own righteousness and results in love, joy, and peace — all fruits of the Spirit. Instead of being taken captive by the ravages of despair, we are driven to the cross in joyful exhilaration for what our merciful God has accomplished in Christ.



**FIGURE 4**

### **Counseling the Perfectionist**

What steps should you take to help counselees in the grips of perfectionism? At least seven lines of approach may be braided into a rope of rescue.

1) Call perfectionism sin. If it stems from legalism (legalism stems from self-righteousness) then it is sin. The counselee is either a believer who has lost sight of the cross in his sanctification (Galatians 3:3) or an unbeliever who has not repented of his own righteousness (James 2:10; Romans 3:28). Of course, sin is handled by confession, repentance, and the bearing of fruit in keeping with repentance. In the case of unbelief, evangelism is in order.

2) Hold aloft the gospel banner of righteousness in Christ. Passages such as Philippians 3:4-16 can be employed here to distinguish self-righteousness and the righteousness of Christ. Notice also the mandate accompanying this fact in verses 15 & 16.

3) Contextualize the horizontal axis of holy living in respect to the vertical axis of union with Christ. Many portions of Scripture serve this purpose well, including Romans 3:31, Romans 6:1-14, and Colossians 3:1-17. One passage that I have found particularly helpful is Hebrews 12:1-2. In this passage it is clear that the race is to be run and to be run wholeheartedly; yet, while running, the focal point is to be Christ. Beyond that, it is Christ in His messianic work, Christ in His humiliation and his exaltation, that is in view. As messiah, Jesus accrues righteousness not for Himself but for those He came to save.

4) Put on love. Part of the sin of perfectionism and its effects on life is an extreme self-focus, along with fear for self and judgmentalism toward others. Love, particularly as it is expressed in the cross, must be taught your counselees. They must learn to love as they have been loved. Actually it is appropriate that all the fruits of the Spirit be cultivated here along with a reminder of the reality from which they have come (cf. I Corinthians 4:7, which cannot help but foster a spirit of humility.)

5) Teach a biblical response to sin. Such counselees must have a biblical concept of sin, leading them to respond in grief since sin offends God. They must come to hate sin because God hates sin. The best way to elicit this response to sin is to help them to know God's person with greater clarity (cf. Isaiah 6: 1-7). Such an awareness can only drive them to the cross and away from their own righteousness.

6) No secular engagement. Often the perfectionist sees a bifurcation between the secular and the spiritual. Only that which involves explicitly 'religious' activity is 'spiritual' for him. However, a pillar of the Christian faith is that all of life is lived in reference to and in service of God. Therefore, all become spiritual and are to be directed by the Word of God and done for His glory. Unbiblical attitudes of segregation must be torn down and replaced by biblical concepts.

7) Enjoy life. The Christian life is an abundant life. The believer awakens each morning to face a day in which he can commune with, glorify, and enjoy God. Worldly pleasures become consecrated to God and are a gift from Him. Assigning 'fun' activities can help the counselee to break the drudgery and moroseness of the life that he has made for himself. It is extremely important, however, that his erroneous conceptions be replaced with proper biblical teachings so as to obviate the plague of guilt which comes from violating one's conscience.

Such counseling at times may be difficult and painstaking, but it is extremely important. As with the young man I mentioned in the beginning, problems of anxiety and depression cannot be addressed biblically for essential change without first razing the base for perfectionism and raising a foundation for true righteousness in Christ. The results of your labor in the Spirit will be exhilarating liberation and joy in a genuine pursuit of godliness for your counselees.