

# Biblical Perfection<sup>1</sup>

You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.  
*Matthew 5:48*

Many years ago, Janelle and I took a mission trip to Mexico with a number of other youth groups. One day, me and a high school boy whom I had known since he was a child were out digging a latrine hole for the missions agency we had come to help. It was sweltering, at least 115°. The sun was bright. There was no shade. There were no clouds. The soil was rock and clay. It hadn't rained in weeks. It was incredibly slow and very frustrating work. This wasn't what we had signed up for, was it?

As he and I were both muttering under our breath, while other groups were out doing the “glamorous” work

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon takes parts of three sermons preached in 2006 on Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. The main sermon is on this passage. The other two were on Matthew 5:17-20 and Matt 5:33-37.

of teaching VBS, I looked at him and said, “What do you think Jesus meant when he said, ‘You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect?’”

He put his shovel down, looked up into the hot sun, turned to me and responded, “I suppose it means try your best.”

“That’s not what it says,” I replied back. “Jesus says *be perfect*.”

“That’s impossible,” he said, “Jesus wouldn’t tell us to do something that is impossible. It has to mean something else.”

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The Apostle Paul admitted that he was imperfect. He said, “I have not obtained all of the promises or yet been made *perfect*” (Philippians 3:12). Yet, just three verses later he makes this interesting comment, “All of us who are *perfect* should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you” (Php 3:15). The interesting thing is that Paul uses the exact same Greek word for perfect: *teleios*. He in effect says that he is not perfect yet he is perfect at the same time. What are we to make of this?

James does the same thing using the same word. “We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says he is a *perfect* man, able to keep his whole body in check” (James 3:2). Yet, he began his book with these words, “Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be *perfect* and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:4).<sup>2</sup>

This *strange paradox* is found all over Scripture. On the one hand you have verses about unrighteousness and sinfulness. Proverbs, “Who can say, ‘I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin?’” (Prov 20:9). Psalm 130:3 says, “If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins... who could stand?” Job asks, “How can a mortal be righteous before God?” (Job 9:2). Answer: He can’t! For elsewhere Scripture says, “There is no one righteous, not even one” (Rom 3:10).

On the other hand, you have verses about righteousness and *blamelessness* from or about very same men. “In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was *blameless* and upright; he feared God and shunned evil” (Job 1:1). Psalm 18:23, “I have been *blameless* before him and have kept myself from sin.” Proverbs 11:5,

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<sup>2</sup> While “you may be” (*ēte*) perfect is a subjunctive verb, expressing wish (for the future), the second verb, not “lacking” (*leipomenoi*) is a present participle, meaning that the wish for the future can somehow be a present reality.

“The righteousness of the *blameless* makes a straight way for them.”

This tension demonstrates that whatever the “perfection” is that believers have, it is **not intrinsic to them**. It can’t be. If we continue to sin and yet are somehow viewed as righteous, then this righteousness cannot originate in us, because we are sinful. Also, we cannot be perfect and imperfect at the same time in the same respect because that would be a logical contradiction. The Bible therefore explains the paradox this way. The righteousness we have is an *alien righteousness*. It comes from somewhere else. The Scripture calls it the righteousness that comes from God (**Rom 10:3**; cf. **Php 3:9**).

Far too many people are busy working away to **get God to approve of them**. They are establishing *their own righteousness* through their own idea of good works. **Muslims** blow up infidels to be rewarded by Allah in the afterlife. As a good work that they alone are capable of, **Buddhists** seek enlightenment by realizing that they are part of the divine. **Atheists** do good things to others so that it will not come back to bite them later. Even many **Christians** hold to a form of self-righteousness when they do something, for example “**making Jesus the Lord of their life**” or “**letting go and letting God,**” which becomes the

one smart choice that they made as they improve upon the grace that God gave them. In this way, the world becomes like the Jew who Paul says did not submit to God's righteousness but sought to establish his own. There is a zeal that people have for God, but it is not in accordance with knowledge (Rom 10:2).

Combining zeal for God with true knowledge of God is critical if you hope to inherit eternal life. And so, we come to our text this morning. At the end of Matthew 5 Jesus has this remarkable concluding statement about how kingdom people are to relate to the Law of God. "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48).

This is found in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, perhaps the greatest sermon ever preached on God's Law. And what a summary of the Law it is! When he began this section in 5:17-20, Jesus said that if you wish to enter the Kingdom of God your righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisee (20). Now he is telling us what that righteousness must look like: *You must be perfect.*

The all-important question of course is *what does he mean by perfect?* Whatever our answer is, it must make sense of the tension I've raised. It must be able to explain how we are perfect and yet how we are not perfect at the

same time. So then, **what did Jesus mean?** *First*, you should know that there are **various English words** that we use to translate this one Greek word. For example, there is the word “**mature.**” In **1 Cor 14:20** Paul says, “**Brothers, do not be like children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be *mature.***” Here, the word has a component of **development**: be an adult.

But the word also has the idea of **fullness**, as in **completion or totality.** **Heb 9:11**, “**When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more *perfect* tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation.**” A more perfect tabernacle is not a mature tabernacle, but **a more excellent one**; a heavenly sanctuary; a *perfect* sanctuary.

Now, in **Matthew 5:48** all of the English translations say we are to be “**perfect**” rather than “**mature.**” And I think the reason why is because of the comparison that is made between us and God. Thus, the *second* point. You will notice that this word describes **a quality that God himself possesses.** Be perfect *as your heavenly Father is perfect.* God is not mature in the sense that he grew up. He is perfect in the sense that he is **morally upright** and always has been.

He is the unchanging standard, not some growing and developing standard.

Thus, in the Scripture we find verses like **Psalm 18:30**, “As for God, his way is *perfect*; the word of the LORD is *flawless*.” Note **the comparison** between God’s ways and his word. The *Law* of God is perfect because the *way* of God is perfect. The Law is a reflection of God Himself. God is perfect. Jesus is saying we are to be like God in this way.

*Third*, there is **OT background** that you need to know about where Jesus gets this saying. The form of Jesus’ teaching here is found **Leviticus 19:2**, “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.” Just insert the word “perfect” for “holy” and you have the same thing. Now, the word in Hebrew for “holy” is *qadosh*. The Greek LXX translates it as *hagios*. In Matthew’s account, Jesus uses the word *teleios* rather than *hagios*. And so we are left to wonder, if he is quoting from Lev 19:2, **why change the word?** Peter quotes from Lev 19:2 and doesn’t change the word at all (**1Pet 1:15-16**). Why does Matthew? Apparently, Jesus is not merely as interested in holiness (being separate) at this moment, though that is obviously implied in the word perfect. Instead, he is getting at **something more than even holiness**.

Perhaps **Luke** can help us understand Matthew's point. There is a parallel account of these things in **Luke 6:36**. Luke says, "Be *merciful*, even as your Father is *merciful*." Luke's context is identical to Matthew's. He has just talked about loving your enemies and now Jesus says this. The problem is that once again the word is different from Matthew's. Luke's word is *oiktirmon*. If Matthew meant mercy, he could have used Luke's word. But he doesn't. Again, he uses the word "perfect." While this does not negate the fact that we are to be merciful, it does not really explain the difference between Matthew and Luke.

There is one more OT Scripture that I think can help us out. **Deuteronomy 18:13** says, "You shall be blameless before the LORD your God." The word for blameless is the Hebrew: *tamim*. The really interesting thing about the word *tamim* or "blameless" is that the Greek LXX often translates it as *teleios* or "perfect." For example, God commends Noah as a blameless man (**Gen 6:9**). When it says, "You shall be blameless before the LORD your God," this is also same word Jesus uses.

For this reason, many believe that when Jesus says you are to be perfect, he is saying you are to be *blameless*, like Noah and Job were. I think what is happening in our verse is that while Jesus is using the *form* of **Leviticus 19:2** in the



Sermon on the Mount in the book of Matthew, he is using the *word* of **Deut 18:13**.

In light of this, Jesus is not making up a new command. The change exists because he is pointing out the heart of the Law of Moses that has always existed. Jesus does this throughout his Sermon on the Mount. For example, when he says you have heard that it was said do not murder, but I say **do not hate your brother** (**Matt 5:21-22**), he is not making up a new command, but showing that at the root of murder has always been hate. **Lev 19:17**, “**You shall not hate your brother in your heart.**”

Just as there where the sixth commandment is combined with **Lev 19:17**, here Jesus does this by **combining two ideas** into one. Jesus is telling us what the Law demands and what God demands of kingdom people. It has always been the case that we are to be holy, that is perfect.

Yet, **this does not explain the paradox**. For, Noah and Job were in fact *sinners*. The Scripture says that they were blameless or “perfect” and yet they sinned. This paradox gets to the very heart of the Christian message. If such a thing has never bothered you, then you don’t understand God’s holiness or your own sin very well. There is a

mystery here that has been revealed in these last days through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Remember, this same “blameless” or “perfect” Job once asked, “**How can a man be righteous** (Heb - *tsadhaq*; LXX – *dikaios*) **before God?**” If Job already was perfect, then why would he ask how anyone can be righteous before God? **Righteousness is what allows a person to be perfect.** Can you imagine a blameless person who is unrighteous? Job’s question is as important today as it was back then. **How can a man be righteous before God?**

**Job knew the answer.** He understood that **the righteous live by faith.** Listen to Job’s great declaration of faith in Jesus Christ, “**I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes--I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!**” (**Job 19:25-27**). This is one of the great declarations of faith in Christ in the entire OT.

This is vital to understand. There is **a righteousness that is by the Law, by trying to be a “good” person.** God will grant this righteousness as just compensation for faithfully acting out the terms of **the covenant of works.** “What is that?” you ask? The covenant of works is a mutual bond established by God with all people on earth. It is what

makes all people responsible for their actions. The requirements of this covenant are written on your hearts. This is why even the unbeliever has a conscience that accuses or defends him when he sins (**Rom 2:15**).

This covenant, like all covenants, has **terms**. The terms are that if you perform your part of the covenant, **God will reward you with eternal life**. God is fair. “**He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life**” (**Rom 2:6-7**). This is what the Law itself said. “**The man who does these things will live by them**” (**Lev 18:5; Rom 10:5**). This was not just a misunderstanding of Moses by the Jews. They did not make up the idea of salvation by works. It is right there in the Law.

However, if you do not, **God will curse you** accordingly. The stakes are high here. You will get what you merit. You will get what you have worked for. You will get what you deserve. “**But for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil**” (**Rom 2:8-9**). How much evil? *Any* evil. Those are the terms of the covenant.

These two different judgments are rendered as a matter of **simple justice**, like an employer paying the employee for what he has done. “**To the man who works, his wages are not credited as a gift, but as an obligation**” (**Rom 4:4**). Thus, Scripture is abundantly plain. Under the terms of the covenant of works, “**It is those who *obey the law* who will be declared righteous**” (**Rom 2:13**).

But **the all-important question now** is this. What are the terms of this covenant? In a word: *Perfection*. The point here is not to “try hard,” but to be *exactly* like God. **Christianity today has completely missed the question**. We aren’t even asking it. We tell people that the problem with them is that they are not fulfilled and happy, when the real problem is that they have violated the terms of the covenant of works and are already under God’s wrath for it. The problem is not that we are unsatisfied. The problem is that every one of us has failed and our eternal judgment is looming. Hell is staring us in the face.

Friend, if you wish to inherit eternal life by being righteous according to the law, **you must be perfect** and do all the law. As Moses said in another place, “**If we are careful to obey *all* this law before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, *that will be our righteousness***” (**Deut 6:25**). But, you must not mess up even a single time. How

much of obedience does the law require? *All*<sup>3</sup> obedience. As James said, “Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it” (James 2:10). Spurgeon said, “even if you were absolutely perfect in every sense from this moment on, it wouldn’t do anything to justify *past disobedience*.”

But thanks be to God, this is where Jesus comes in. Jesus being *the only perfect man* is not some kind of throw-away doctrine. It is your very life. The terms of this covenant were met *in him*. He obeyed and did it all. And for it, God rewarded him with eternal resurrected life (Rom 1:4). This Jesus comes and gives a *new covenant*, one that is far better than the covenant of works, because it is not grounded in our obedience, but his. As a better covenant, we can call it the “perfect” covenant.

Since as we have seen, none of us is capable of perfect obedience even though the Law demands it, God condescended *in pure grace to save us another way*. This way comes because Jesus obeys the terms of the covenant of works as a representative for all who trust in him by faith. This is how Job knew that he would live. *He had a redeemer*: The Lord Jesus Christ.

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<sup>3</sup> All = כָּל as in אֶת-כָּל-הַמִּצְוָה (if you do *all* the law).

You can see this even in the Sermon on the Mount by going back to **Matt 5:17**. Jesus said, “I have not come to abolish the law... but to *fulfill* it.” Jesus’ preface shows that whatever the law commands a human to do will be fulfilled and done *by him*. You cannot understand **Matt 5:48** apart from 5:17. It is not that we fulfill the Law as we apply his teachings to ourselves. It is that *he fulfills the very law* that he is commanding *us* to obey. There is a reason why Jesus is called “The Lord *our* Righteousness” by Jeremiah (**Jer 23:6**). It is not merely that he is the Lord of Righteousness, but that he becomes *our* righteousness. There is another way to heaven. It is through the Lord Jesus Christ.

In this verse, *Jesus identifies with his hearers*. He has become one of them. He has come down from heaven. He became a man. He was born under law. He was circumcised and baptized. He was tempted by the devil. He has become True Israel. He obeys as one of them where they fail to obey themselves. In this way he fulfills the law. He is the Better Moses not because he is giving a new Law, but because he is the perfect mediator of the eternal moral law of God. *He obeys where even Moses fell short*. He is the Perfect One. He is the one you are to look upon by faith to remove the curse of your sin.

The idea of the new covenant is that **God credits the righteousness of Jesus to the account** of any who trust in His righteousness rather than their own. What kind of righteousness? *Perfect* righteousness. Not yours, but his. You are viewed as if you are perfect because God sees the righteousness of Christ in those who trust in him by faith.

“**Christ is the end of the law,**” the Bible says, “**so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes**” (**Rom 10:4**). This is the good news of the gospel. The righteousness Job sought was found **by faith and not by works**. The blamelessness of Noah and Job and of all Christians throughout time is found by trusting in the righteousness of God to impute or credit the righteousness of Jesus to their account even though they are not themselves righteous. This is what it means to submit to God’s righteousness rather than establishing your own.

The perfection we gain is first and foremost **a legal status** that God credits as your sins are taken away in Jesus’ death. God considers you as perfect because **by faith** – which is a gift of God – **you are united to Christ**, hidden in him and clothed with his righteousness. The metaphor of clothing is critical to think about.

Job says, “**I put on righteousness as my clothing**” (**Job 29:14**). The Psalm says, “**May your priests be clothed with**

righteousness” (Ps 132:9). And Galatians says, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Gal 3:26-27).

You are born naked. Clothing comes later. Clothing is something you “put on.” In other words, righteousness is a status you have even though underneath you remain sinful in the flesh. This is why Martin Luther used the idea of being a little piece of dung covered with snow to get at the biblical idea that we are simultaneously justified sinners. One day, we will no longer have this sinful flesh and we will no longer be sinful. But that day is not today.

The Scripture calls being declared righteous—*justification*. Your justification rests not upon your righteousness, but upon Christ’s righteousness credited to you by faith. How glorious this is to the person who knows that they continue to sin. David said, “Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will *never* count against him” (Ps 32:2; Rom 4:8). When it says God will not count sin against a man, the meaning is that he will not credit it to his account; not *ever*. The key word is “credit.” It means “imputation.” The idea is that sin will not be used against him in a court of law. God will not impute or attribute or declare guilt *even though he is guilty*.



This is a **revolutionary message** unknown to all the religions of the world. And if it does not thrill you and cause you to gasp, then you do not know what it means to be justified. But this is **nothing new to the NT**. This has always been the way of it. Abraham was not justified by what he did. Abraham did what he did *because he was justified*. Paul tells us that if Abraham was justified by works that he would have had something to boast about in front of God (**Rom 4:2**). He could have said to God, “**Look at what I did for you.**”

Instead, **Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness** (**Gen 15:6**). God gave Abraham a promise which was to give him a Seed. This person would save even Abraham from his sins by becoming the sacrifice to appease the wrath of God. Abraham had this lesson foreshadowed to him by Christ himself, the Angel of the LORD, when he asked him to sacrifice his son Isaac. This story became a **prefigurement of the sacrifice of Jesus**. Abraham believed and trusted in God’s promise and so in spite of his own sinfulness, God credited the righteousness of Jesus to his account. And *in this way* he became a blameless, perfect man.

This righteousness **comes through faith**, and yet **faith is not the one good work you do** that can cause you to boast.

Rather, faith is the gift of God. Scripture says, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph 2:8-10).

Many people stop at verse 9 to demonstrate that faith is the opposite of works, which it is. No one can say to God, “I was smarter than others,” or “I was more righteous than they.” No one may boast by saying, “I trusted you when so and so did not.” For faith is a gift of God’s grace alone.

And yet, faith is not opposed to works. Rather, it established them. He says that salvation by faith alone necessarily results in “good works” which have been prepared from all eternity that we do. We are not saved just to believe, but to act and do good works. We don’t do good works in order to receive grace. We receive grace in order to do good works.

In light of this, let’s consider the paradox side by side. Jesus says, “You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” On one hand, because of the status received by faith, God can rightly call *sinners* perfect. Hence, this command is attainable for every Christian. In fact, every Christian has already attained it, not through self-

righteousness, but through Christ's righteousness. We've been talking about this side of it, but it never goes away, no matter what we say next. Every Christian, no matter how much they will sin in the future or have sinned in the past, is counted as perfect by God through faith in Christ.

Nevertheless, we were created in Christ Jesus *to do good works*. Thus, when Jesus says, “Your righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees,” he is talking about more than the imputation we have already discussed. He is talking about *actual righteousness* that is found in observing the Law of God.

For some reason, many Christians have concluded that obedience to the law is contrary to salvation. Some believe in a once-saved-always-saved that never incorporates obedience, as if walking an aisle makes you a Christian, rather than faith in Christ, as if the law of God is now meaningless in the NT. That is not justification but *self-deception*. In fact, if there is no transformation of life, then this action is nothing more than just another form of self-righteousness. Walking an aisle is the furthest thing imaginable from biblical perfection.

Rome accused our Protestant fathers of teaching that faith alone means a faith that is alone. In other words, they accused Calvin and Luther and others of teaching a faith

that is not accompanied by works. The Reformers were concerned about the *ground of justification*. But justification becomes the ground by which God then *justly* infuses righteousness into the sinner so that they begin living lives of obedience, however imperfectly. Calvin writes, “It is ... faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone: just as it is the heat alone of the sun which warms the earth, and yet in the sun it is not alone, because it is constantly conjoined with light.”<sup>4</sup> So, God considers us legally perfect before we are actually perfect, and this explains *perfectly* our paradox. First we are perfect, legally. Then we become perfect, that is more mature, more blames in our actions based on what we already are legally as viewed by the court of heaven.

With this in mind, all the good commentaries on this verse, including Calvin and Luther, say that the perfection Jesus is talking about here is something we are to *aim at*. In all honestly, Jesus it not concerned so much with the status of perfection, but with *actually obeying God*. It’s not the motives here, but the obedience itself. It’s not making up your own laws like the Pharisees, but knowing and obeying God’s laws.

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<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Acts of the Council of Trent: With the Antidote*, 6<sup>th</sup> Session, Canon XI, in *Calvin’s Tracts* Vol. III, (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1851), 152.

I want to spend a moment thinking about this. Again, Jesus said **your righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees**. This culminates in him saying “be perfect.” What could he have meant by this comment about the Pharisees? The Pharisees were masters of the letter of the law, but they wholly eliminated its intent. They cared about the external forms, **but not the heart of the matter**.

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus constantly says, “**You have heard it said ... but I say to you**” (**Matt 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44**) Many mistakenly think that when Jesus says, “**You have heard that it was said,**” that he is quoting Moses and the OT Law. When he says, “**But I say to you,**” he is therefore *overthrowing* the OT law.

Take for example, the law on oath-swearing in **Matthew 5:33-34**. “**Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn’**” (34). The idea is that Jesus is summarizing Moses here. Then Jesus says, “**But I say to you, ‘Go not take an oath at all...’**” (35). The idea now is that **Jesus is overthrowing Moses**, telling us that we must never take oaths because he is the new Law-Giver and Moses is now obsolete. We have entire

Protestant denominations that believe this and thus will never take an oath under any circumstances (so they think).

But this couldn't read the Sermon on the Mount more badly. When Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not murder,'" and then he adds, "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment," Jesus isn't making up something new or overthrowing the law of murder. Rather, he is giving the true intent, the heart of what that law always meant, but was being subtly changed so that the heart no longer mattered, only the outward act mattered. Again, Lev 19:17, "You shall not hate your brother in your heart." That's the OT, not Jesus making up some new, more intense requirement.

The same is true with oaths. He isn't abrogating oaths. He said at the very beginning of his section on the law, "Do not think I have come to abolish the law, I have not come to abolish the law..." (Matt 5:17). He means what he says. Later, Jesus was placed under oath at his trial before the High Priest (Matt 26:62-64). "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God" (63). Caiaphas said. Jesus did not respond, "I overturned oath taking, so I'm not going to answer you." Rather, he answered, because he was placed under oath. "You have

said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven” (64).

So what is going on with the Pharisees and Jesus’ supposed quotations of Moses? He isn’t quoting Moses, but their interpretation of Moses, their subtle transformation of Moses so that they do not have to obey whatever part they do not want to obey while they still look righteous and holy to others. William Hendriksen puts it like this. Notice the subtle shift in emphasis in the way I read these laws and you may get the point of how a Pharisee read them.

**God’s intent:** *You shall not swear by my name falsely.*

**Pharisaical reading (P.R.):** You shall not swear *by the name* falsely.

**God’s intent:** When a man makes a vow to Jehovah or swears an oath... *he shall not break his word.*

**P.R.:** When a man makes a vow *to Jehovah* or swears an oath ... he shall not break his word.

**God’s intent:** When you shall make a vow to Jehovah your God, *you shall not be slack to pay it.*

**P.R.:** When you shall make *a vow to Jehovah* your God, you shall not be slack to pay it.<sup>5</sup>

For God, the intent is what matters. For the Pharisee, because their hearts were hardened tombs of death, they played word-games. “Well, if you swear on your momma’s grave, you can break your oath, because you aren’t swearing by God’s name.”

Let’s return to our verse, which is a summary of how we are to approach the law and is **the antidote to legalistic righteousness**. Look at every single instance of blamelessness in the OT and you will see that it is always related to what the person does in relation to God’s Law.

The key is we do not obey because somehow God judges upon our sincerity. Nor does not weigh the scales such that if you meet the requirements 51% of the time that is enough. We do it *because* we have the status of perfection already. We do it because we have been given changed hearts. We do it **because we love God** and don’t want to play games with his law. And we love God because we have first been loved by God.

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<sup>5</sup> **William Hendriksen** and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, vol. 9, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 307.



Martin Luther thus writes about our verse, “We cannot be or become perfect in the sense that we do not have any sin, the way they dream about perfection. Here and everywhere in Scripture ‘to be perfect’ means, in the first place, that doctrine be completely correct and perfect, and then, that life move and be regulated according to it. Here, for example, the doctrine is that we should love not only those who do us good, but our enemies, too. Now, whoever teaches this and lives according to this teaching, teaches and lives perfectly.”<sup>6</sup>

The problem, as we have seen, was that the Pharisees self-righteousness was **hypocritical**. It was hypocritical because it was completely made-up obedience. They picked and chose what they wanted while making up things that God never even said. Jesus put it this way, “**You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men**” (**Mark 7:8**).

They **had no real interest in following God’s law**. They used God’s word to invent their *own* laws. It’s the most horrible type of biblical interpretation. They use the Scripture to invent laws that are nowhere to be found in

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<sup>6</sup> Luther, M. 1999, c1956. *Vol. 21: Luther's works, vol. 21 : The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works. Concordia Publishing House: Saint Louis.

the Scripture. They twist and distort its real meaning to justify their hypocrisy.

But Jesus demands that our perfection *not* be like the Pharisee. We are not to go around making up our own laws just because they seem righteous to us. “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death” (Prov 14:12). Or think of it this way. We don’t need to only pick on Jewish scribes. Gentiles do the same thing. You are not to say as the world does, “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!’ These are... based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence” (Col 2:21-23). Legalistic, unbiblical taboos that we impose upon one another are deadly to the freedom that Christ won for us: the freedom to serve God and obey His law rather than our own.

Instead, we are to follow God’s law. This is, contextually speaking, what it means to be perfect. This is how our righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisee. As the Psalmist said, “The law of the LORD is *perfect*, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right,

giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes” (Ps 19:7-8). If you misunderstand justification as imputation with no subsequent working of the Holy Spirit in your life, then you have **no way of explaining half of the OT!** You won’t be able to figure out how a sinner can talk about obeying God and loving his law, because you will see the law as opposed to the promises of God (contra Gal 3:21).

We act like our perfect Father as we follow his perfect Laws rather than our own. We do it because he is our Father, has saved us, forgiven us, and already declared us totally righteous in Christ. This is the main point that Jesus is making throughout this entire section of the Sermon on the Mount. For the believer who has already been transferred into the kingdom of God, is it really such an impossible thing **to desire to obey God’s law?** Don’t you love his law? Is it truly a burden to you to not want to harm your neighbor? Sure, to keep it perfectly is impossible this side of heaven. But Jesus isn’t really talking about that. The desire to keep it is the only rational response to the Law that a true believer can have. Because we are new creations. Yes, we often break it and even desire to do so. That’s the contamination of the flesh in which we still live. Who will rescue me from this body of

death (**Rom 7:24**)? Jesus will (**Rom 8:1ff**)! And death will then be perceived as that glorious transformation that we all long for.

David the *sinner* said, “Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long... I hate double-minded men, but I love your law... I hate and abhor falsehood but I love your law... Great peace have they who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble” (**Ps 119:97, 113; 163, 165**). Is it any wonder then that Paul would write, “Love is the fulfillment of the law” (**Rom 13:10**). It is not just love in general, but love of the Law itself.

Those who hate God’s law do so because it shows them *their unrighteousness*. And this they cannot stand because they are too busy establishing a righteousness of their own to bother with what God says. But the root of the hatred is that they hate God himself. They don’t like his law because they don’t like him. But the believer loves God’s law because he now loves the God who gave it. This is the perfection Jesus is talking about.

And what does this law tell us? Throughout the Sermon on the Mount (and the OT!), it commands us to *love our neighbors as ourselves*. It commands us *not to take personal retribution*, but to leave room for God’s wrath. It commands us to *make good on our oaths* by being people

of integrity. It teaches us to **take seriously our covenantal vows of marriage**. It shows us that the heart is the root of adultery and murder. Therefore, we are not even to hate another person or cause them to lust after another.

*When* followed, **the Law is a lamp unto our feet and light unto our path**. It makes our paths straight. It makes the church lovely. It makes civilization beautiful. Friend, if you wish to enter the kingdom of God, **you must be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect**. You must desire to follow God's law. You must not establish your own laws in its place.

*If and when* it is followed, it is because we trust in a good God and in a perfect Jesus Christ who has shown us what is good and what the Lord requires of us by first becoming one of us and then obeying the law for us. This is the gospel. Have you believed this good news? Look to Jesus and know forgiveness and life in Christ.

Interestingly, the form that Matt 5:48 takes can be read as **either a command or a statement of fact**. It can be translated as, "**You must be perfect**," or as "**You shall be perfect**."<sup>7</sup> The former is the law. The latter is the promise found in the gospel. The verse itself shows you this paradox.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. **Leon Morris**, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 133, n. 171.

Thus, in this verse, the law and the gospel kiss. Obey God. That is the law you are to love and live by faith. And this is the gospel: Christ did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets. He came to fulfill them; so that through his obedience and the subsequent obedience he grants to us by the Holy Spirit, we might have eternal life.

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