

How Perfect Can We Be?

Romans 8:23

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Open your Bibles, dear ones, to Romans 8:23. This was the verse we studied last day, you remember. "And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." And then verse 24 is today's study, "For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?" So the first sentence reads, "For in this hope we were saved." In what hope? Well just the end of the next verse, "The redemption of our bodies." It's that hope. And why is that important? Because that's the completion of our adoption as sons of our creator, the redemption of our bodies -- so we wait for that and look forward to it.

But are we not adopted sons and daughters of God now, in this present life, just because God has sent the spirit of the Son into our hearts? And the truth is, I think, we are, you can see it there in verse 24, "For in this hope we were saved." We were saved. We're already saved, even in this present life. And the beginning of verse 23, "Not only the creation, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the spirit." We have the first fruits of the spirit. So we are adopted children of God even in this present life, but the completion of that adoption, the entering into all our inheritance and the whole universe comes when our bodies are changed and these bodies are redeemed. And until that happens we groan inwardly and that's what verse 23 says, you remember. But in a sense we are children of God today and yet we receive the completion of our adoption and all the things that we're heir to after this life is over and until that happens we groan inwardly. And that thing is a sure thing.

It might be good for you to notice that "hope" in that verse is the Greek word "elpis" and it isn't human hope. Human hope is, well the economy looks as if it is improving and we hope that it will get better and it's kind of a vague, wishful thinking on the basis of the unreliable circumstances around us. But hope in that verse is a sure and certain confidence that our bodies are going to be redeemed because God has promised it. And he has promised in the past, and always kept his promises. And he has always done work on us in the past and so we know he will complete this work and so it's a sure thing, loved ones. And that completion will come about at physical death.

Yet you remember last Sunday, we saw that it is possible to be perfect in some sense in this present life. Because, I think a lot of us get into a real underachieving kind of Christian life because we say, "Oh, well I am not perfect yet but I will be perfect when I'm changed in a moment, in the of a twinkling eye, then I will be perfect." And so we fail to see that in this present life we are meant to be perfect in some sense. Remember that's in Philippians 3:15, I'd just like to whip you with that verse again. We need to, loved ones, we really need to just allow that to come right across us and get us out of all this, oh hopeless human depression and defeat that we get about our own lives.

Philippians 3:15, "Let those of us who are mature," but it's the old RSV going astray on the Greek because the word is "teleios", the very same word that is used in verse 12, "Not that I have already attained this or am already perfect." Just they couldn't face writing in a contradiction and God's word is obviously, is often more comfortable with contradictions than the translators. Verse 12, "Not that I have already attained this or I'm already perfect;" teleios. And in verse 15 says, "Let

those of us who are teleios, be thus minded," let those of us who are perfect be thus minded. And so there is a kind of perfection that is possible in this present life and that's what Jesus was referring to. And that is possible even before the redemption of our bodies. There will be a new perfection that will come then but there is a perfection in this present life that is possible to us and that perfection you remember was the perfection that Jesus referred to in Matthew 5:48.

"You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." And the perfection is mentioned in verse 43. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" It's a perfection in love and obviously Jesus is talking about it as something that we will experience here in this life. The rest of those verses you know: "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Well you don't say, "Lord, you mean when I die?" Jesus is obviously saying, "No, no, right now." "So that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?"

Now there may be tax collectors in heaven, but they won't be known as tax collectors there. That won't be the most important thing about them. And so it is important to see that Jesus is talking about this present life. He's saying, "Be perfect in love. I expect you to be perfect in love." And loved ones, that's the kind of perfect that we have available to us in this present life. There's a perfection that we just hope for and that will come when we die, but there is a perfection in love that God expects us to have now. And in this sense we are already perfect, in this sense that we are able to love. Nothing that happens to our bodies after this life is over will affect that.

And really we don't need anything to be done to our bodies to have love in our hearts, because love is an attitude. It's not primarily something that you do, though it expresses itself in doing things, but love is an attitude. It's not something that requires redemption of our bodies. It's something that is in there. Love is patient and kind. Love is not arrogant or rude. It is not irritable or resentful. Love does not insist on its own way. Love is a dear attitude inside our hearts. And Jesus says, "It's possible for you to have that attitude now in this present life and I expect you to have it."

In fact, I think you remember one of the verses that describes conversion is Romans 5:5 and it talks about love which is shed abroad in your heart through the Holy Spirit which is given to us. And the truth is, once you receive the Spirit of Jesus inside you, he begins to want to love through you. And he begins to want to produce a perfect love for you, a desire for the other people to be happy, and to be joyful, and to find God whatever pain it might cause you. He puts that kind of desire in your heart and he expects us to be perfect in that kind of love. And once Jesus' Spirit fills us that's the kind of love we have.

You remember we talked about in I Timothy 1:5, "It's love out of a pure heart." Jesus comes in and purifies your heart and makes you able to love. That's something that even the old Gentiles were able to discover, even the Gentiles who had hardly heard the gospel, they experienced a purification in their hearts. Now you get that in Acts 15:9, loved ones, and it's maybe good to look at it, to see that even you might say the most primitive converts that the apostles had, experienced this kind of purifying. Acts 15:9, maybe verse 8 would give you the continuity, "And God who knows the heart bore witness to them," this is Cornelius and the other Gentiles, "Giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us; and he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by

faith."

Now I just remind you who those Gentiles were. Do you remember they hadn't heard much about the gospel and Peter was preaching the gospel to them and while he was preaching the Holy Spirit came upon them and Peter looking back says, "The Holy Spirit cleansed their hearts by faith so that they had a pure love for each other. So that only what came out of their heart was pure love, and a desire for the other person's welfare." Now dear ones, that was just kind of ordinary, primitive converts. In other words it depends not on the perfection of our bodies in any sense --not so, loved ones. It depends, loved ones, not on any perfection of the body but it depends just on the Holy Spirit coming into our spirits. Really once that happens, the Holy Spirit is shed abroad in our hearts.

So the Holy Spirit comes in like that. And once he dwells there in the center of our beings, he sheds abroad in our hearts a love of God. A love that is patient and kind, a love that is not jealous or boastful, that is not arrogant or rude, a love that is not irritable or resentful, a love that does not insist on its own way. A love that bears the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance. A love that wants to cover other people's sins rather than expose them, a love that wants to encourage others even when they discourage you, a love that rises up inside you and wants to be a blessing to others who are trying to take you down, a love that does not have any other gods before God the Father. A love that does not commit adultery, a love that does not steal, a love that does not covet. Now loved ones, that is the basic gift that God gives those of us who are born of the Spirit.

And it is really important to see that a person who has dealt with Jesus at the cross finds that kind of life rising up from within them. Now to that extent we are meant to be perfect. We are meant to be perfect in that we're meant to experience a life that is filled with the love of Jesus trying to get out from the inner most parts of our beings. Why it is important to see that is, I think of us excuse ourselves and say, "Ah no, I don't always feel that coming up. Sometimes I feel all the good that I would I cannot do. And the evil I want to avoid, that's the very thing I do. Sometimes I find that's not the kind of thing that comes out of my heart at all."

And loved ones it is important to see that the cleansing of the heart in there comes by faith. That is not one of the things we hope for after we die. That is not one of the things we wait for. That is not one of the things we grown inwardly for and hope, "Ah, it will come when we die." Loved ones, that's the gift that God gives to those who have planted their lives before Jesus and surrendered themselves completely to him. That inner cleansing comes by faith. You remember that verse? "And God made no distinction between them and us, but cleansed their hearts by faith." Now I'm afraid some of us think, "Ah no, that's the kind of thing you work on with discipline." No, loved ones that is a gift of God. A clean heart is a gift that God gives to those who are willing to take their full place in his Son. Now you may say, "Well why have I not, why have I not experienced that?"

I think many of us don't experience it because we have a purely intellectual and emotional relationship to Jesus' death. That's it, we really do. Many of us don't experience this cleansing of our hearts and this love and life of love that comes up within, because we have a purely intellectual and emotional relationship to Jesus' death. That is because too many of us here this morning say, "Oh, I believe that Jesus died for me." And we somehow believe that all God requires is our intellectual acceptance of that concept. I push you on it again. Some of us believe that all God wants from us is the intellectual acceptance of the concept that Jesus has died for us.

Now loved ones do you see, those are games? That's a mathematical game that we are playing; it's a thought game. It's an auto-suggestion game. God requires more from us than simply an intellectual acceptance of the concept that Jesus died for us. He requires a volitional taking part in that death with Jesus. He requires us to see that we were crucified with Christ and the moment we are willing to regard ourselves as destroyed with him and having no more rights to our own way in this present life, the Holy Spirit cleanses our hearts in an instant.

Now truly loved ones, in an instant. It doesn't matter: Moody -- it doesn't matter who it is. It doesn't matter who you talk to, it doesn't matter who you read, they all say a holy heart comes by faith, not by trying hard, not by discipline, not by the power of positive thinking, but by the power of the Holy Spirit cleansing your heart by faith. Loved ones that's true. There is a moment when your heart is not clean and there is a moment when it is clean, because it comes by faith. I push you on it again. "He made no distinction between them and us, but he cleansed their hearts by faith." Then anything that is done by faith is done by God so it can be done in a moment. Now loved ones, oh how I wish you'd receive, I wish you'd see that it is your privilege as children of God, to have a life coming up from within that is pure and loving, and that is patient and gentle and kind, and that whenever there is some other kind of a life coming up, then you know that you have only an intellectual acceptance of Jesus' death. That comes by faith and it comes in an instant.

Now it doesn't matter who of us you talk to, who has any kind of a victorious life, we'll say, "There was a moment when I had envy and jealousy and anger coming up from within and I could not control it, and there was a moment when my heart seemed flooded with the love of God." Now loved ones it comes by faith, and in that sense we are meant to be perfect. In that sense we are meant to be perfect. We're meant to have no trouble with that stuff that comes up from inside. And of course why I share this with you is, if you have trouble, see that the answer is, being cleansed by faith through your crucifixion with Christ. Not endless praying, not endless trying to renew your thoughts, but it is being cleansed by faith through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now loved ones, in that sense we are perfect and in that sense we're already perfect. In what sense are we not already perfect? In what sense do we hope for this perfection to come to us? In what sense do we look forward to the redemption of our bodies fulfilling and completing this perfection? In this sense. That love tries to get out and it hits this old soul, this psychological apparatus that God has given us: mind, emotions, and will. Maybe it gets through that and it hits this old physical apparatus that God has given us. And the love of Jesus is trying to get out but it hits these things and until this body is redeemed completely at the end of this life, there will not be an absolutely perfectly free way. Nevertheless, it can be improved. But in that sense we are not yet already perfect. In the sense that once the life of God's Holy Spirit, the perfect love, tries to get out to other people, it hits psychological and physical apparatus that God has given us to transmit this to others -- apparatus that for years have been preprogrammed on the basis of self.

That is what Paul says. Maybe you would like to look at it. It's in Ephesians 2:3, "Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind." So we have mind and emotions, and a body that for years has been preprogrammed by self and that whole personality has to be rerouted by the Holy Spirit. Now that, loved ones, is the gradual work of the Holy Spirit. A lot of us talk about growing in grace and we think that you grow out of poison. You don't grow out of poison. Poison is cleansed from within you by your being filled with the Holy Spirit. But the percolation of that Holy Spirit through your whole personality is a gradual experience of process. So the cleansing

work is a crisis experience, but the expressing of that perfection through the whole personality is a process experience. You cannot be baptized into maturity, you can only grow in grace into maturity. But you cannot grow in grace into purity, you can only be baptized into purity.

So loved ones, that's it. The perfection that we have today is the perfection of purity. A rosebud is perfect even though it hasn't developed into a full rose, it's still perfect at the stage that it's at. In that sense we are able to be perfect in purity in this present life. In the sense of maturity and a personality that perfectly expresses the pure love that we feel within, we are imperfect and that is something that God is working on through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Just a couple of instances so that we might understand a little more clearly, what we ought to expect by the power of the Holy Spirit in a crisis experience and what we ought to expect through the gradual working of the Holy Spirit over the years as we live. Just so that we may know what measure of victory we can expect in this present life. Now it's important for us to see that we're not finding excuses for ourselves. If you want to try to find, "Well, what measure of victory are possible so that I can know how little I can get away with?" Then obviously, there's such a desire to defend self there and self's lawlessness that you can be sure you're not in the right position, right attitude to God. But let's look at it just so we may know how much we can expect.

You had parents who were very cold, very uncommunicative, showed very little affection to you. And to your wife or your friend or your roommate, you feel a tremendous love bubbling up inside and you want to express that to them. But the old emotions that you inherited from your parents are cold and hard. They're not very expressive and you cannot get them to operate. And you so want to show the other person what you feel for them in your heart, you'd love to put your arms around them but you are not that kind of a person. That's what God means in this verse. There is a redemption of our bodies that we wait for and hope for, because we know it will release us fully and completely to be able to express the love that we feel inside. I just push you on it. There ought not to be a lack of love. The problem is the expressing of that love.

So I don't know how many husbands and wives are in that situation. I don't know how many men here are, dear love them, they were brought up with dads that were just pretty hard and didn't show them much affection, and so they often feel like taking their dear one in their arms and just saying lots of beautiful things to them but the old emotional life that they have and the old mental life, and the physical life, it just won't respond. And so it feels as if the spirit wants to get up and it hits it's head right there on that old soul or that old body. Now loved ones, that's part of the process work of the Holy Spirit, to discipline those mind, emotions, and body to the point where they are free and able to express that love that is inside and in a real sense that will never be completed until our bodies are redeemed. Because you see our mind, emotions, and body are really, fairly much of a unit. You can see that in your emotions you know, you're embarrassed, so you blush. You're nervous, so you can't secrete any fluid at all in your body. Obviously there is a tight connection between the emotions and the body and the mind and the body. And so those will have to be continuously disciplined until we meet Jesus face-to-face.

You're brought up in a family which was very conscious of what everybody else thought. Who were all preoccupied with what the neighbors thought. And your mother tended to encourage you to be the same way. Make sure your teachers think well of you, make sure your bosses think well of you. But, this has become such an enslavement in your being that your mind and emotions and body are utterly preprogrammed like old Peter's was, to say the thing that the person wants you to say whom you are talking to at that moment. And he looked at Jesus and he knew he should say, "Lord, even though

they depart, I'll never depart." But it was all in the strength of his own weak mind, emotions, and body. And maybe you're like that and you know what to say, and you know what to say in the office and you know the right moment to say it, and you know God wants you to say it but the old mind and emotions and body have been preprogrammed to be preoccupied with what other people think. Now, loved ones, that is part of the process work of the Holy Spirit.

You have to be very careful that it is not just a desire to protect self, because some of us of course, are afraid to say anything in the office because we don't want other people to think badly of us. That's a different thing entirely from just a mind and emotions and body that has been used for years and years to doing this and they are just in a habit. And, loved ones, that is part of the process work of the Holy Spirit. I think some of us in prayer really feel a great love for Jesus and we just want to express that with all our hearts and we have minds that had a kind of holiday camp experience in high school and never caught up with self-discipline in college. And our minds have never become disciplined and we kneel down to pray and we want to express that love but our minds can't pick the right words and they can't discipline even the right thoughts. And we begin to have trouble in prayer. Now loved ones, those are some of the ways in which the Holy Spirit wants to do a process work in us. And that's part of what it means to wait in hope for the redemption of our bodies.

But loved ones, I'd push you on it. Do you see that it's all connected with the expression of that love? It is not connected with the absence of that love in our hearts. And you know if you are sitting here this morning and you're thinking, "Oh well, I'm not at that stage, I can't do a lot of those things, but the killer is I have a lot of envy just popping right up in my heart. A lot of times I come into situations and there's a life that rises up within me that's more like a sewer pipe than it is that kind of thing he talked about." Well loved ones, then I push you. That is overcome not by endless trying to batter it to death through the power of positive thinking. That is solved by having that cleansed by faith through your readiness to die to self with Christ. And that's for each one of us.

I don't know how each one of you are, but if that's the kind of heart that you still have, do you see God can give you a new heart? And he promised it back in Ezekiel, "I'll take away that stony heart and I'll give you a new heart." And God can give you a new heart. I don't know... If you are a candidate for a new heart, then I'd say, "Go to the death of Jesus. That's where you find a new heart." Go and say, "Lord Jesus is there some way in which I need to accept my death with you that I haven't? Lord, whatever it is, will you show me? And then, will you cleanse me by your Holy Spirit so that I have a new heart?" And then loved ones, you can begin to grow in grace. You can begin to grow in grace when you get rid of the cancer. Try to grow out of cancer and cancer grows with you. Try to grow out of poison, the poison grows with you. But get rid of the poison, get rid of the cancer, get rid of the disease and then growth in grace can begin. And most of us have found that that's true. We've just been pretending to grow in grace until we had our hearts cleansed by faith.

What I'd like to talk about next day is a little bit of how we allow the Holy Spirit to discipline the human personalities that we have. So would you get into the right position this week, so that you can use next week? Okay? Let us pray.

Father we sense that we've been expecting too little from this salvation that you have brought to us. And Lord often we've been encouraging Satan's spies within us, by putting up with them and by thinking that envy, and jealousy, and irritability, and impatience are consistent with the fruit of

the spirit. Lord, we see that you do a complete and clean work with your children and, we see our Father that it is possible to enter into a life that is pure and is filled with perfect love. Father as we look around at the world in which we live, we see the whole place breaking apart because of hatred and prejudice. And so often our Father, we've said to one another, "What the world needs is love." But, we, in our own hearts have not been prepared to pay the price of having the perfect love shared of God in our hearts. So Lord we apologize to you this morning, if we have said, "Give me some love but not too much." Lord we want to say to you this morning, "Give us perfect love. Fill our hearts Lord Jesus with your Spirit, the spirit that is patient and kind, that is gentle, that is not irritable or resentful, that is not jealous or boastful. Fill our hearts, Lord Jesus, with your life so that the loved ones in our homes and in our apartments can begin to see something better than what we have given them." So, Lord Jesus, we trust you to bring us completely into your dear death so that we might rise into your perfect resurrection for your glory. Amen