

Spiritual Life #90

Christian Perfection

Matthew 5:48

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

One of the things that our brother mentioned would tie up a little with what I would like to share about this evening. And that was the whole issue of living your faith, which is what he was getting at. You probably know that the world's greatest difficulty with those of us who call ourselves Christians is the way our lives, our practical lives contradict our testimonies. Or we do not practice what we preach. That's what puts so much of the world off Jesus. That's why so much of our witnessing is so dry. Because we are not making an impression of Jesus upon others.

What I found in my own life was that a great deal of the reason for that was I was not through and through from my inner heart what Jesus wanted me to be and I was doing what most Christians do. What most Christians do is put up with a lot of dirt in their hearts and in their minds. They put up with a lot of wrong feelings, a lot of wrong thoughts. They just get used to enduring it and holding it down. That's the way my life was until about, I think, about maybe 18 or 19 years ago, when God did a work that changed my heart inside. That's really what I want to share about.

There are many different beliefs about the way that takes place and what I have tried to do over these years, because we are a body that consists of Catholics and Protestants and Presbyterians and Methodists and Lutherans and Baptists, I've tried to share in all kinds of different ways this truth. That it's possible to come into a victorious life. I have often probably shared it the way I have experienced it. I have tried as much as possible to share it the way others experience it, too. Maybe this would highlight the two main attitudes to it. It comes out of one of the old books that I bought in London during the Christmas time and it begins like this.

"At one of our theological institutions, the students asked their tutor in theology to give them a definition of scriptural holiness" -- which is really inner heart cleanness, you see. "The professor replied that the holiness he found in the Bible seemed to him to be not so much a definite experience to be reached immediately as an eternal approximation toward an unrealizable ideal." I think many people honestly take that view, "an eternal approximation toward an unrealizable ideal".

"I think we should love and respect loved ones who have that attitude," he continued. "But there is beyond doubt an experience attainable by faith which some describe as holiness and which has brought to many Christians a great spiritual uplifting so as to mark an epic in their spiritual life." Then he says, "In my last circuit, an evangelist conducted a series of mission services in the church over which I had pastoral charge and emphasized the definite view of holiness or victory and urged the people to believe and enter in. Several of the most thoughtful members of my congregation were so greatly blessed that from that time their Christian life seemed to be on a higher plain." (That's what happened to me, you see.) "Because of this, I have never spoken other than respectfully of that form of teaching, though I have never been able to teach this way myself."

So, it is important for you to know that not everybody thinks this way and there are many loved ones

who believe you ought to just grow continually in grace and come gradually into more and more victory. I just have to testify that after years of such trying to grow I seemed to be in a worse state than I was at the beginning and that it was my great delight to find that God was able to do a deeper work in me through faith. It delivered me from the works of law that I was trying to produce by my own will power.

That's really what we're talking about this evening, loved ones. Because, one of the titles given to this way of life is not only a "Victorious Life", not only a "Clean Heart", not only "Sanctification", not only the "Fullness of the Spirit", but also "Christian Perfection". I think Satan has used that term to discourage and deceive many of us. So that's why I'd like to spend just a little time this evening talking about it.

First of all, loved ones, it's good to see that it's in the scripture. So, maybe you would turn to Matthew 5:48. Let's cast out of our minds all the shakiness. "I hope he doesn't want me to be perfect." Let's cast out of our minds all that kind of silliness that Satan puts in there and let's look at just Jesus' words. Matthew 5:48, "You, therefore, (and this is our Savior talking) you, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Now, don't let's get all under bondage to it. Let's just stand back and see, this is our Savior who died for us and who loves us. This is something he is saying to us. This is a command he's giving us.

He is not the Savior that we have learned to trust if he is giving us a command that we cannot obey. I think you'd agree with that. If he's standing here and he's saying "be perfect", and he knows fine well those idiots can't be perfect, then he is not the loving Savior that we have learned him to be. So, Jesus is saying, "be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect." We should see, all right, now, the Savior is saying, boy, we've to be pretty good. That's what he's saying. He's certainly saying that much. We're going to be pretty good and so he says, "Be perfect."

Now, it's good to look and see that the language that we have, the English language, is not the greatest. Philippians 3:12. Paul shows us that the language we have does not really have enough words in it to express the infinite truth of God and that's reasonable. It's a finite language and God is an infinite God. So, this is Philippians 3:12, "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect..." So, you see that Paul is saying, now, there's a sense in which I'm not already perfect. Now, this is Paul who loved Jesus. So, Jesus said, "be perfect" and here's Paul saying, well, I'm not yet perfect. It is more or less the same word "teleios". It's just he uses the passive of the verb "teleiomi" there. It's the same Greek word. Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me His own.

Now, in case you say, ah, now, that's Pauline theology, you see. He doesn't fall for this perfect stuff that Jesus was trying to put over on us. No, but he does, because verse 15, "Let those of us who are mature", well, it's not mature. The adjective is the same word "teleios". The King James is really the fairer translation because Paul says, "let those of us who are perfect be thus minded." Do you see in verse 12 he says, I'm not already perfect, and yet he says in verse 15, "but let as many of us as are perfect". Now, obviously, there is some sense in which we can be perfect and there's some sense in which we can't be perfect. That's what I'd like us to look at, loved ones.

There is a sense in which we can be perfect and there's a sense in which we can't be perfect. Now, I think you get the clue to it in Jude 24. If you look at Jude verse 24, and those of you who have the same trouble as me will locate it before the book of Revelation. And, why it's verse 24 is Jude only wrote one chapter and so there's only one verse 24 there. Jude 24, "Now to him who is able to keep

you from falling and to present you without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing.” “To present you without blemish.” That’s the Greek word “amomous” and it means “faultless”.

Now, you and I can only be presented faultless when God raises us again from the dead in the final resurrection. We can’t be faultless in this life because all of us have inherited from our fallen forefathers all kinds of faults. I haven’t a straight nose. Now, I didn’t help it much with a hockey stick one time but my nose isn’t straight. Some of you have not the greatest eyesight in the world. Most of us here have inherited some faults from the long line of forefathers that have suffered from living without the fullness of the Holy Spirit. So, there are many of us here who have minds that are a little slow. They are. They are just a little slow.

Many of us have backgrounds that have further brought those minds into a state of weakness so that we are not perfect in our judgments. We aren’t. We want to say the right thing but we often make mistakes in what we say. Many of us have inherited emotions that are unbalanced. Many of us came from mothers who were just overwhelming in their emotional affection. Many of us were born of fathers who were kind of dry and cold and not very expressive. We have inherited a lot of that so some of us overreact in emotional situations. Some of us underreact. Some of us want to show another person love but we just are not capable of it with the personality that we’ve inherited. It doesn’t mean that those personalities cannot be improved and worked on by Jesus but it does mean that all of us here have many, many different faults that prevent us being faultless in this life.

Loved ones, God doesn’t ask us to be faultless. He doesn’t require us to be faultless. What does he require? Well, the verse is I Thessalonians 5:23, “May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Actually the Greek means “until”, may you be kept blamelessly until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. God does ask us to be blameless. He asks us to walk in such a way that he cannot blame us, that he will not have to regard us as culpable or blameable for what we’ve done.

Now, it’s important to see that it’s before him that he requires that. You can see it if you look, I think it’s in Genesis 17:1, “When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, ‘I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless.’” Now, it’s blameless before God. I don’t think you’ll ever walk blameless before the rest of us Pharisees. I don’t think you will. I think there will always be somebody who wants to blame you but God doesn’t ask you to walk in such a way that no man or woman can blame you. He asks you to walk before him and be blameless. Loved ones, that’s why, you remember, that that verse in I Corinthians 2:14 says, “The spiritual man judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one.”

Finally, the spiritual person is responsible to God and to God only really for what he does. God asks each one of us to walk before him and be blameless. The world is often harder on God’s children than God himself is. And it’s necessary for us to see God doesn’t require us to be faultless or blameless before men but he does require us to be blameless before him.

Now, what does that mean? Well, loved ones, Adam lived in absolute innocence at the beginning. He didn’t have a memory like ours that has all kinds of shadows hidden in it from the past. He didn’t have a personality that had been warped as ours has by all kinds of wrong actions before we became aware of the way God wanted us to live. So, Adam was a very different person from you and I. He was a man who had not fallen out of God’s fellowship. He was a man that didn’t have a memory filled with not only nightmares but all kinds of memories of hurt feelings and of offended mind. He had a

personality that was perfect.

So, it was fitted to actually obey what is known as the paradisiacal law or the law of innocence. That law requires that a man walk absolutely free from error. Any mistake or error or infirmity is actually an offense against that perfect law. God required that because Adam was a perfect being. Now, once Adam fell from God's fellowship and he began to live without the Holy Spirit, then his children began to live without the Holy Spirit and then your forefathers, my forefathers and our great-great-grandparents lived without the Holy Spirit. It was like a body being without sufficient oxygen for years and years.

And the personality began to deteriorate and so we developed memories that are faulty. We began to develop minds that were impaired and hadn't true judgment. We began to develop emotions that were unbalanced and didn't react the way they were meant to. We developed bodies that were open to disease and the diseased bodies in turn affected our emotions and affected the way we reacted. Because of that situation, God graciously required us not to live by that perfect law of absolute obedience and absolute perfection, that paradisiacal law, but he gave us the law of our Lord Jesus Christ. He gave us the law of perfect liberty. He requires us to obey that law.

Now, what is that law? Well, you can look at it if you glance at Romans 13:10, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." That's the law that we're to obey -- the law of perfect love. The law that is perfect in its intentions and its motives. That's what God requires of us. He requires hearts that are clean. As far as your outward life is concerned all kinds of people will make their comments upon that. You'll make your own comments upon it. But, God requires us fallen human beings to obey the perfect law of love and that's the law of the Lord Jesus Christ from Heaven.

Perfect love is the fulfilling of that law. What is perfect love? It's perfect intention, perfect motive, a clean and a pure attitude. That's what God is asking of us. That's what he through the Holy Spirit is able to bring us. Loved ones, you may argue back and forth about outward actions. You may argue back and forth about people who profess to be filled with the Holy Spirit and what their life is like, but finally, you have to leave everybody to God, and you and I have to be responsible before him for a perfect attitude of purity in our hearts.

You remember I told you before about the little blind girl who was determined to write a good letter to her dad, but, of course, she had no way of writing in straight lines. So she laboriously got the page on the table and then pinned little strings across the paper and then took the pen and started to write. Every time she hit the string, she went up again and she did her very best to write a perfect letter. At the end, of course, it was terrible. She put it in the letter box and her dad got it. He did not judge it according to the actual performance on the paper. He judged it according to the love, that he could tell from the little pin marks on the paper, the love with which his daughter had done it.

That's the way our God deals with us. He deals with you and me according to the attitude and the desires of our hearts. A little girl decides, well, I'll warm my mom's boots so I'll put them in the oven. Well, there's nothing left of them afterwards but her mom really doesn't take it out on the little girl because she feels she did it for the best. That's the way our God treats our actions. The world is much harder on God's children than God himself is because God requires a perfection of love, a perfection of heart attitude.

Now, in order to be able to walk freely in this law of perfect love, I think we need to decide, too, that temptation is not sin. Temptation is not sin. I think many of us have real difficulties with that. We say, "Oh, well, listen, if my heart is really clean and cleansed by the Holy Spirit -- if I am freed from this terrible strife that goes on between pride and envy and jealousy and love of Jesus -- if I am freed and cleansed from that, then how could I be tempted?"

Well, loved ones, all you can say is that Jesus was in that position. He had a pure and a clean heart and yet he was tempted. Undoubtedly, Adam and Eve were in that position originally and they could be tempted. It just is a fact that even if you have a clean heart, you are still subject to temptation. As long as you and I have five senses that are in close contact with this fallen world that is so infested with evil, Satan is going to use those five senses in different ways to tempt us.

You just have to look at Hebrews 4:15 to see that, no, it's wrong to say that temptation itself is sin. Hebrews 4:15, "For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." Even though he was perfect, "yet without sin." So, temptation does not imply sin.

In fact, the opposite can be true. If you aren't experiencing temptation, maybe you should be concerned. Because temptation is one of the marks that a person is growing in grace and progressing in Jesus. Satan is not interested in dead Christians or in inconsistent Christians. He is interested only in Christians who are beginning to move on with Jesus.

So, in a real sense, it is an indication of your own spiritual health if you are experiencing temptation of some kind. Temptation, you remember, cannot come to you unless it is permitted by God. So, it is just good to remember that temptation is not a wildcat event that nobody is in control of. When temptation comes to you, it is your dear Father allowing the enemy of your soul to approach a little closer for a real purpose.

You remember you find that in Job 1:9, "Then Satan answered the Lord, 'Does Job fear God for naught? Hast thou not put a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth thy hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse thee to thy face.' And the Lord said to Satan, 'Behold, all that he has is in your power; only upon himself do not put forth your hand.' So Satan went forth from the presence of the Lord."

So, do you see, God alone could give permission to Satan to approach but he could also restrain. So, he said only upon himself do not put forth your hand. So, Satan can only tempt you insofar as God allows him to tempt you.

Somebody asked, "Did Jesus know that Judas was a thief?" Did Jesus know that Judas was a thief? Obviously, Jesus did know that Judas was a thief. So, then, the same questioner said, "Well, why then did Jesus give him the bag of money to take care of?" The answer is that Jesus gives all of us a bag of money. So, there isn't one of us here that is not given a bag of some kind to constantly test our loyalty and our obedience and our love for our Father. That's what temptation does. Temptation is the only way by which God can strengthen all our weak points. I don't know about you but I know often I felt, just strengthen my strong points, Lord, and let my weak points be. You can't get into Heaven like that.

God is determined to make us like his Son to conform us to his image. Loved ones, one of the chief ways he does it is by temptation, by always putting a certain bag in our lives that will test the very weaknesses that we have. So it is with everybody here. All of us here in this room are tempted along different lines. God allows that to take place to strengthen the weaknesses inside us. An old preacher called Samuel Rutherford [1600-1661] said this, "The Devil is but a whetstone to sharpen the faith and patience of the saints. I know that he but heweth and polisheth stones all the time for the new Jerusalem." That's just good. "I know that he but heweth and polisheth stones all the time for the new Jerusalem."

So, in a deep way, Satan is even made to serve our dear Father's purposes and we need to see temptation in that way -- not as something that we delight in, but certainly something that we can see purpose for. It is something that drives us closer to Jesus' own heart.

Now, I think where many of us get into difficulty is we have problems seeing the difference between evil thoughts and thoughts of evil. Now, do you see that the only way Satan can possibly tempt you or me is by getting the insertion of a thought in some way into our minds? Many of us say, "Oh, now, listen, if my heart was clean then I wouldn't feel anything rising from inside." Well, that's right.

There should not be a rising of evil inside us but I think some of us have problems realizing that nevertheless Satan can fire fiery darts into our minds. You see, I think some of you think, oh, well, listen, if the thought is in my mind at all, it must have come from inside. No, no. If it's a thought that you do not normally want, if it's a thought that contradicts the normal pattern of your own inclinations and your own desires, you can be sure that it's certainly not coming from within your own heart.

I think why we have problems is we kind of think of Jesus' temptations as being one human being meeting another human being. Did you see that it wasn't that way? It wasn't Satan with horns and a fork saying, "Will you make these stones bread?" It wasn't that. Do you see the thought -- and you may gasp -- the thought occurred in Jesus' mind? Do you see that? It didn't come from him himself. It was inserted into his mind.

In other words, our Savior, who is without sin and who is perfect, had a thought, could I draw people by turning stones into bread? Satan has to get the thought into your mind. Loved ones, Satan first presents the thought to your intellect. That's the first step in temptation.

Now, there is no blame attached if you reject that thought. Indeed, often the second step that Satan takes is to bring it in some way to your feelings or your emotions. Now, some of us think, oh, no, no, it would never get that far, then it's sin. Loved ones, really, look at that verse in James and I think you probably have come across it before. It's James 1:14, "but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire." All it says is, not each person sins but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.

In other words, the second step in temptation is that Satan tries to get the feeling into your emotions, all the passion into your appetites. Even though that is a very dangerous step and a critical step in your response, yet, even then, as long as your will has not embraced that, there is no sin. In other words, loved ones, temptation comes through a thought that Satan inserts in your mind, even at times a feeling that he inserts into your emotions. But if you then reject it and refuse to embrace it with your will, there is no spot or blemish and there is no blame attached to

you by our Father in Heaven.

So, there is a real difference between temptation and sin. Some of you may say, well, is it easier if your heart is clean? Well, yeah, that illustration again, before your heart is clean, it's like a can of gasoline being inside and a fiery dart comes in and "Poof!" It just alights. There's a great rising of sympathy from within your own heart. It's almost as if I just wanted the excuse to do this. It's as if there's a spy of Satan inside you, opening the door.

Whereas, when the heart is clean, the fiery dart comes in and there's like a can of water. "Pfff". It just goes out. Yet, you can sin if you choose. There is a great freedom and there is a great ability to reject the temptation. But, loved ones, let's not play around with it. Even a person who is not filled with the Spirit, a person who has not got a clean heart, they have enough of the power of the Holy Spirit still to reject the tempting thought and the tempting feeling.

Loved ones, this is just maybe a first step in talking about this life of perfect love and, in the following Sundays, I would like to deal with some of the other issues in connection with it because I think many of us maybe are around that stage and so I'd like to spend maybe a couple of months, at least, talking about the possibility of this kind of deliverance.

Now, sometimes it's good to ask questions, sometimes it's not. Any questions? Or maybe anything could be clarified?

Question 1: (inaudible)

Response from Rev. O'Neill:

That's right. If you lust after a woman in your heart, you've already committed adultery. In that sense, it would be, it would fit in with this because I think many of us may be walking down a road and we see a nice girl or many of the girls walk down the road and they see a guy who is handsome and it seems to me Satan is able to, first of all, make you aware of that person and really the natural response in God should be, boy, Lord, thank you for that dear person, thank you for the beauty of that person.

But so often Satan moves us on to what we are brainwashed to do -- to have a thought. Now, what would that person be like in bed or what would that... It seems to me that that's the moment of temptation. If you, in fact, give yourself to that and accept that idea and begin to dwell upon it, then you're lusting in your heart. So, it seems to me it's a good illustration. I think what many of you loved ones do as you hunger after the fullness of God, you have a tendency to allow Satan to condemn you for temptation which is thoughts or feelings that insert into your mind or your emotions. I think maybe it's because many of us think that, oh, well, Jesus didn't even have the thought.

You see, that's what the record of the temptations seems. It's terrible to think it, but Satan actually managed to get that thought into Jesus' mind, you see. So, Satan is able to get a feeling even into your heart. At times, I don't know about you but I think at times you can, you can recoil. You are almost amazed. Where did that come from? I wasn't thinking that. You recoil from it and that's almost part of the proof. That it's not from you because you recoiled from it and you shudder at the thought of it.

Yet, it's very easy to think, now, listen, that feeling was in me. Loved ones, the moment, it's the moment you become conscious of it. That's when God asks you to reject it. It seems to me it's important at that moment to do it. Maybe the most important thing in this whole thing is God judges us by the perfect law of love. I think some of you loved ones are expert at taking condemnation.

Some of us are so wretchedly hard-hearted that we need a bit of good conviction of sin. Some of you have such sensitive dear hearts that you will take condemnation to yourself and it is important to remember that one about the little blind girl -- where the dad is thinking of the love that she put into trying to write the letter right and straight. That's how our dear Father looks at us.

He wants hearts that love him and that want to do what he wants them to do. That's what he's looking for. If you're like me, I find within myself that there was a desire for something other than that and that's where this whole message of the fullness of the Holy Spirit was such deliverance to me. I would encourage you, if you find within you another law in your members that kind of fights against Jesus' Spirit, oh, there is victory, loved ones. The beginning is to see that there is victory and to begin to hunger and thirst after it. God has promised, he will fill you if you hunger and thirst.

Let us pray.

Dear Father, we do thank you for your good Word that saves us from claiming too much and saves us from claiming too little. Your Word saves us from trying to live in kind of a paradisiacal perfection and yet saves us from living too low and expecting too little. Lord, we thank you that you have given us the basic principle of your dealings with us. "Be it unto you according to your faith." Lord, we want to know what we can believe you for. Father, we would ask you to teach each one of us that. Teach us how much we can believe you for. Teach us how much we can have faith for, how much, Lord Jesus, you have done for us on the Cross.

We thank you most of all, that your dear Father, after all is said and done, does not deal with us according to our sins or reward us according to our iniquities. You have put us all into Jesus, your Son. As far as you are concerned, all our sins have been done away with and destroyed and you have only love for each one of us this evening. We are not required to die again for a sin that has already been died for by Jesus. Lord, thank you for that. Thank you that though our sins are as scarlet, they are at this moment as white as snow in your eyes. Though they be like crimson, they are as wool because you have already destroyed them in our Savior and you think of us as your dear children. Lord, we thank you for that. As your dear children, we want to be a delight to you and a pleasure to you so we ask you to show us how to be that for your glory.

Now, the grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us now and throughout this coming week and forever more. Amen.