

How Perfect Are We Becoming?

Romans 8:24

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

All of us have things in our lives that we've really been trying to overcome for a long time. I think many of us fail to overcome them because we don't really want to. I think many of us fail to overcome self pity because we don't really want to get rid of self pity because we quite enjoy it. I think many of us really don't want to overcome our bad temper because it is a useful weapon for getting our own way. But I do believe that many of us here this morning fail to overcome some of these things because we don't really believe it's possible. We don't really believe it's possible to overcome them.

I think this is reinforced day after day in the generalization, some of the clichés that are used in ordinary conversation. So we keep on hearing people saying, "Yeah, yeah, I'm working on it. I'm working on it. I know I'm still bad tempered but I'm working on it." Or somebody says, "Well, you know we're only human. I mean, you can't expect us to be perfect. We're only human." And maybe that is the most used comment, and the most untrue. That one, "Nobody can be perfect." And you know the way we just shrug the old shoulders like the French taxi driver, and we just say, "Ah, nobody can be perfect. I mean, everybody knows that. That is the most self-evident fact in the whole of the universe; nobody can be perfect." And we just expect all the other little lemmings to run right up to us and say, "Yeah, yeah, you're right. You're right. We all agree with that. We'll back that."

And so, loved ones really, we are tremendously brainwashed to believe that it is impossible to overcome certain things in our lives and that really it's just foolish to try. And perhaps the most basic principle that reinforces that belief is this so-called principle that nobody can be perfect. Maybe that's the first lie that we should lay to rest this morning. So let's just lay it to rest. Matthew 5:48. Because I wouldn't dream of contradicting all of you, at all myself and I wouldn't dream of asking you to change your mind unless somebody pretty important disagreed with you. So Matthew 5:48. "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." And you know, however much you scour the footnotes of the Revised Standard Version, you cannot find that Sinaiticus or Vaticanus omit that verse, or that's it's a reduction from some other book. There's just no way to get rid of that miserable verse.

So loved ones, the first thing you have to face squarely is that Jesus said, "You must be perfect even as your father in heaven is perfect." And we do owe it to our Savoir to interpret that. We can't just ignore it and pretend it isn't there. Now I agree with you that there also is evidence in the Bible that in some sense we can't be perfect, or in some sense Paul was not yet perfect -- and maybe we should look at that just to restore our battered egos. Philippians 3:12. "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own." Now you can't even interpret too much from that because all it is is Paul saying that he is not already perfect. You can't even say that it's him saying nobody is perfect. He's simply saying that he is not already perfect at this time.

So that's what I'd love us to think about this morning for a while. How perfect can you be? In what sense can you be perfect on this earth and in what sense can you not be perfect? How much can we expect the Holy Spirit to do for us? It's really important to have a clear idea of that, isn't

it, to keep us from that terrible frustration of the overachiever who is always trying to achieve more than is actually possible. It's very important for us to know what can be achieved by the power of the Holy Spirit in this present life. But wouldn't you agree it's equally important for us to know this in order to keep us from all the hopeless complacency of the underachiever who really is filled with complacency and filled with defeat because he thinks it isn't possible.

Let me just nudge you a little this morning and remind you that the world thinks of us Christians primarily as underachievers, not overachievers. You don't hear too many people saying, "Those church people, they live too perfectly." Usually you hear them saying, "Those Christians, why don't they live the way they talk and let's see what they're made of." Oh, I saw a bumper sticker and maybe it's one of yours so don't take it wrong. Well, I saw a bumper sticker which said, "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven." Well, okay, okay, just forgiven. Well it's a good theological point. But the world is pretty tired of Christians who are keeping on saying, "Well we're not perfect you know. We can't be perfect," as they bicker and tear each other apart.

So, loved ones I just remind you that the study this morning ought to be tackled from the viewpoint that the world has on Christians and their viewpoint is definitely that we're not perfect enough. So in what sense can we be perfect? Well, maybe it would be good to look back to Jesus' words and look at the context. So would you look back at Matthew Chapter 5, where Jesus gives us this plain directive, "You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect." Now it might be good to look at the previous sentences in that paragraph in order to find out what the context of that directive is. Matthew 5:48. "You therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Now will you look back at verse 43 which is the beginning of that paragraph? "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 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 the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Perfect in love the way your heavenly Father is perfect. That seems to be the context of the directive. You must be perfect in love in the same way that your Father in heaven is perfect in love.

That kind of ties up a little with the verse that we're studying today that states this whole truth that in some sense we're perfect and in some senses we're not yet perfect. If you look at Romans 8:23, "And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who are the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." So we have the first fruits of the Spirit but we're groaning inwardly for some greater perfection that is coming to us. Now even the first fruits of the Spirit include love, you know. Galatians Chapter 5 says the fruits of the spirit are love, joy, peace, long suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance. So even if we have just the first fruits of the Spirit, in a sense we're meant to have love.

It also ties up, you know with Deuteronomy 6:5, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and all thy soul, and all thy strength, and all thy might." Ties up, you remember with Jesus' answer to the person who said, "What is the great commandment?" And he said, "This is the great commandment; that you love God with all your heart, and soul, and strength, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself." So loved ones, it is reasonable to believe that God expects us to be at

least perfect in love.

Now how does love show itself? And how would perfect love show itself in a way to other people? Well even for babies in Christ, that is even for those of us here this morning who have just seen that we ought to be wiped out for the self centeredness that governs our lives and we see that God has wiped us out in Jesus. And as a result of that, we confess our sins and we repent of them and we give our life to Jesus completely and he sends the Spirit into us. Even those of us who are just born of God this moment even, or born of God yesterday, or were just converted two weeks ago, even those of us who are just babies in Christ. Loved ones, even for those of us, perfect love shows itself in one very minimal way and I'll point you to the verse. It's I John 2:5-6.

I John 2:5-6: "But whoever keeps his word, in him truly love for God is perfected. By this we may be sure that we are in him: he who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked." So someone who is perfect in love, keeps God's word. That means obeys his word. You see, that's what it means. Obeys, obeys his commandments. Now loved ones, that's the basic minimum for even one of you who was born yesterday of the Spirit. I'm not talking about those that were baptized with the spirit and those that have manifested the gifts of the Spirit or those that have been crucified with Christ. Not any of that, just those of us who have been born of God. That's a basic minimum for our expression of perfect love: that we obey God's words.

You know it ties up with our experience in ordinary life. How many mums and dads, how many husbands and wives here, how many roommates, how many brothers and sisters have said to each other, "If you really loved me you wouldn't say that?" Isn't that right? I mean, it doesn't matter what the other person says, "Oh, I love you, I love you brother, I love you." We say, "No. If you really loved me you wouldn't say that." Or, "If you really loved me you wouldn't do that." Now do you see it's the same with our perfect love for God and for each other?

The Father says, "Your love is perfect if you keep my words. That is if you obey my commandments. If you do the things that you know you should do, that expresses your love to me." That's a basic minimum for perfect love. Now loved ones, you can't go any lower in your definition of love than that. Really, you can't. If you do something that you know hurts your dad or your mother and you say you love them, you know you don't love them. You can say, "Oh I have felt love for you a while ago." But obviously you don't love them at that moment. So a basic expression of perfect love for God is obeying the things that you know you should obey him in.

In other words, perfect love is not consistent with known disobedience to his laws. It is not consistent with any act or word or thought that you know opposes the law of God. Now that is of course what I John 3:9 says about one who is born of God. It runs, "No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God." So loved ones, perfect love for God is what the Father expects us to have and perfect love for each other he expects us to have, and that is not consistent with any sin of omission or commission in act, thought, or word.

Now that seems to be the teaching of scripture. And it's, you remember, the same thing you get reinforced in James 4:17, "Whoever knows what is right to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin."

And you know you're having trouble with this at this moment, but loved ones just check it over into relationships with your dad, or your mum, or with your brothers or sisters. And you know how often you mums and dads have heard a child say, "Oh I love you dad, but I'm going to stay out after midnight." And you say to them, "Well I know they think they love me but if they loved me, they

would respect my word." But dear ones, we all deal with each other that way. We all say, "Look, the proof of the pudding is in the eating." The proof of the love is in the acts, thoughts, and words that are consistent with that love. And so it is with the Father. And indeed, that's the only basis, isn't it, for Jesus' blood being able to cleanse us from the things that we don't know are offensive to God.

Isn't that right? I mean, didn't God say, "Look if you walk in the light that I have given you, if you avoid the acts and thoughts and words that I have told you offend me and hurt me, then the blood of my son will cleanse you from all the other sins that you don't know about; all the unconscious sins that fill your lives." So all of us have had experience of a son, or daughter, or brother, or sister, or a friend, or a roommate doing something that they knew hurt us and of course, that expressed to us their lack of love for us. But if they did something that hurt us but they didn't know about it, we didn't treat it in the same light. So you remember conscious obedience to what you know God wants you to do is the basic condition for the blood of Jesus cleansing you from all the other things that you don't know about.

You remember if you just turn one page back and you'll see it. I John 1:7, "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." So you see, God gives you light about a certain act that he wants you to do, or a certain word that he doesn't want you to speak. And if you walk in that light, in other words, if you walk in conscious obedience to God, then the blood of Jesus cleanses you from all sin; from the other things that you don't know about. So just take a couple of instances. Somebody criticizes you, just bores right into you, tears you apart. And you feel maybe, that you want to bite right back at them, but you know the verses of scripture that talk about a soft word turning away wrath and you know that you're expected to be kind to those who treat you as an enemy and so you keep your mouth closed.

That's the basic minimum of victory that God expects us to experience as children of God. And loved ones, could I press you on that again? Because I think we've got so easy going and so relative in our ideas of God's standards that we kind of balk at that. But do you see the picture? Somebody criticizes you, just tears right into you, and you may feel inside you a strong desire to bite right back to them but immediately you know that's there, you know it's wrong, and you keep your mouth shut. That is the minimal, the minimal victory that God expects us to experience in this life.

You see a new person. You don't immediately feel a great love for them. In fact, actually you don't like the look of them too well at all. And so the first instinct is we'll avoid them. But you know the scripture that tells you to be kind and express hospitality to the stranger that is within your gates and so immediately you reject that thought and you go over to them and you introduce yourself to them and you try to make them feel at home. That is the minimal degree of victory that perfect love is meant to express in this life; just that. The same loved ones, brothers, it's the same with the Playboy stuff. It's the same with that whole deal. The whole thing may be rising inside you but the moment it's there, that moment the word comes right across, "Whoever lusts in his heart against a woman has already committed adultery," and the basic minimal victory, that perfect love expressed is in this life, whether you're baptized with the spirit or not, whether you're just born of God yesterday, the basic minimal victory is that you reject that thought and you walk in purity. In other words perfect love requires outward avoidance of sin in act, word, or thought. That's the basic.

Now, even heathen philosophers like Socrates walked in that victory. There are many heathen

philosophers who walked in as much victory as that. You read their lives, read Socrates' life and you'll find that those old boys managed to walk avoiding the things that they knew to be wrong in act, word, or thought. They managed to walk and avoid those things. In other words, the perfect love expression that Jesus calls us to is deeper than that. It is not simply a matter of trying to make your heart follow what your words are saying. It is not simply a matter of trying to do deeds of love in order to make your heart love. That is a ploy of behavior psychology. It's a trick of the power of positive thinking. You don't feel love? Okay. Do deeds of love and you'll soon feel love. No, Jesus condemned that when he said, "It's not what comes into a man's mouth that makes him evil. It's what comes out of his heart that makes him evil." It's the heart that has to be changed.

Loved ones, it might be good to look at it, because a lot of us I think are playing that power of positive thinking game. Matthew 15:19-20. You remember it's this deal that, "Oh, if I keep on being kind I'll get a kind heart." No, you won't. You'll just get more subtle in your hypocrisy really. Matthew 15:19, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man." In other words, Jesus says what makes a man perfect is not simply what he does on the outside but it's his inside that counts. And loved ones, that's the perfect love that God calls us to. Not only a perfect outward expression, but a perfect interior experience of love.

If you just look at I Timothy 1:5 I'll try to share it for a little while. Because I know I can wear you out just looking up different verses. "Whereas the aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith." In other words, it's perfect love coming from a pure heart. I think all of us have experienced, that as we try to love other people and we try to be kind to other people we would find inside us a heart of darkness. We would find inside us an inbred sin that was all the time bending over towards the wrong book. That was always bending over towards the wrong picture. That always wanted to say the wrong thing. We would find inside us a streak of irrationality, a perverted nature that we could not control.

Now loved ones, I point out to you that even while you're walking in that, God expects you by the power of the Holy Spirit that you've already received in conversion, never to express that outwardly. But the truth is that many of us have found we can walk in some degree of victory outwardly like the heathen philosophers, but it's when we come to the inside of our hearts, we find impure hearts. Hearts that are always bending over to thinking the wrong thing about a person. Hearts that are always wanting to criticize a person. Hearts that are always wanting to lose their temper. And many of us have found that it's due to a tremendous conflict within that we have managed at all to walk in outward victory. Now loved ones, God expects us to experience better than that.

He expects us to have perfect love from inside our hearts. He expects us to come to the place where a new person comes into the room and we feel nothing but an immediate love towards them and a desire to make them feel at home. He expects us, when a person criticizes us, to have an immediate heart of love that goes out towards them and loves them and absorbs all the pain and lets it go to the cross. He expects us to have hearts that find it more natural to be pure than to be impure. He expects us to have hearts that find it more natural to obey and rejoice to obey, than to do evil. Now, most of us have found that that was the great deliverance that we entered into after conversion.

Then we found that all this came from the old self inside and we found that old self had been

crucified with Christ. And that if we were willing to let Jesus take our lives over completely and die to all the rights that we felt we had and regard ourselves as crucified with him 1900 years ago and this life is no longer belonging to ourselves or being our own to do what we want with. We found that he actualized this death of the old self in us through the power of the Holy Spirit and filled us from toe, to head, to top, to bottom with the love that he had in his own heart. And loved ones, that is the kind of victory that God expects us to walk in.

He expects us to come to the place where our hearts are pure, where they're clean, where they have nothing but Jesus' reactions and responses in them. He expects us to come to a place where the attitudes, and reactions, the motives, and the desires are clean and pure. Where loved ones, your heart could be put on that screen and we all could look at it and say, "What a picture of Jesus' heart." That's what the Holy Spirit can do in us through the baptism of the Holy Spirit, through dying with Christ to self. Now, loved ones, that at least God expects us to experience as perfection.

He expects us to experience perfect love expressing itself inwardly in perfect attitudes and outwardly in perfect acts, and thoughts, and words that are consistent with his commands and laws. Now you may say, "Brother, in what sense then are we not perfect?" And loved ones, in every sense in which the body, unredeemed affects the expression of that love. Everything, to be perfect has to go through death. So the old self, to be perfect has to come through death. So with our bodies. Our bodies, to be made perfect, have to go through death eventually. Until they go through death they are not perfect. And yet it's our bodies that we use to express this perfect love to other people. So obviously the imperfections of the body can express the perfect love that we sense inside.

For instance, when the body was bereft of the power of the Holy Spirit, it behaved much as our brains would if they lacked oxygen. The minds became impaired and deteriorated. So we have impaired minds. That means that our judgment is not always perfect. That means that we meet a person and we judge that this is the kind of person they are and this is the kind of thing that would help them and maybe it isn't at all. We say the wrong thing to the wrong person. And the gift of the Holy Spirit can help us tremendously in discernment there but still, we will make mistakes because of wrong judgments in our minds. And so all of us, until we meet Jesus face-to-face, even though our judgment will continually be improved as the powers of the soul come under the Spirit, yet we'll still make mistakes in judgment. So some brother will come in here and I'll make some comment about Scotland, just a joke and he's very, very touchy about Scotland because he comes from Scotland. Okay, well the Father understands that and I understand that I better be a little more careful next time. But there will be mistakes that you make because of impaired minds. There'll be mistakes in judgment that we make.

The impaired minds lack complete knowledge. You don't know everything that is offensive to our Father in heaven, just as you don't know everything that would hurt me. So because of that, we walk in limited knowledge. So loved ones, I'm sure, until the end of this life, I'm sure your life will be filled with all kinds of unconscious sins. Things that you do that are not the perfect thing that God wants you to do but you don't know that yet and you have not been able to receive that light yet. So I'm sure that many of us will walk in unconscious sin.

I think that one of the things we have because our body is imperfect is openness to sickness and openness to infirmities of different kinds. And I think when you're under sickness and you're under infirmities of different kinds, there is some imbalance that occurs in the emotions and occurs in

the mind. At the same time, brothers, we are the big babies when we have a cold you know. Let's not take advantage of it and say, "Oh, I'm only being impatient because I have a cold." No. I think if you know you're being impatient, you're walking against light. But it is true that our bodies endure sickness and are hampered by various infirmities so that we're limited in the praising that we do of God. We cannot praise God and pray to him as limitless, as Jesus can. We cannot love God as limitlessly as Jesus can. So there are certain limits brought by that.

We live in this present world. A world on the whole bereft of the Holy Spirit and infested with evil spirits. So you can hardly walk out into that street without all kinds of thoughts flying about in the psychic world. You know there is a psychic world. There is a world of mind and emotions that is all around us. It's intensified in your office isn't it? Especially when the boss has got something against one of the secretaries, then you're very conscious of that psychic world with all the hatred and dislike in it. But nevertheless, even in ordinary situations, we're walking in a psychic climate. And so loved ones, your mind is open to being bombarded by all kinds of thoughts and your emotions will be bombarded by all kinds of feelings. So when the nation itself is feeling distraught and irritated and annoyed by Nixon's whole performance, then there'll be a tremendous pressure in your minds to feel the same way. "We're justified in feeling it. It's our president. We should feel this way. We should feel indignant."

So again and again, because we live in this world, there'll be thoughts and feelings that will flash into our minds and emotions from Satan himself. Now, we are obligated and we have the power to reject them once they come in. But it is important to see that you are never free there from temptations in that sense. We will always be open to those. But loved ones, God does call us to perfect love. And he does make it plain if you follow scripture right through and all the references, he does make it plain that perfect love means inward and outward conformity to the laws of God that you know. And God says that he can give you power to live that kind of life. So will you think about it and pray about it?

Two minutes of questions. You could attack me if you like. Would anybody like to ask a question? And just hold it to two minutes because I think we're all fighting the humidity. Sis?

Participant: Is all anger always wrong?

Rev. Ernest O'Neill: Is all anger always wrong? And obviously it isn't. Sure. It isn't.

Participant: What about when Jesus was angry and threw the money lenders out of the temple?

Rev. Ernest O'Neill: Sure. Is all anger wrong? And then sis quoted the example of Jesus driving the money lenders out of the temple and then she adds, and to be honest you add your own comment that he was angry. I don't think God's word backs you but okay, let's go on. Obviously there is an anger that is not sin, isn't that right? Because there's a verse that says, "Be angry and sin not." Don't you think there is a natural difference between the reaction of Jesus, a controlled reaction against those who are opposing his Father's will on behalf of his Father, and the kind of reaction that we express when somebody's getting the upper hand of us and we're just annoyed and we're angry that they're doing this to us?

In other words, sis I would say that's the distinction. There is a wrath; I think wrath is a better word for it. There is a wrath that is a controlled reaction against anything that offends God or destroys his glory. But anger that is selfish and uncontrolled is sinful. Yeah. So I would say

wrath is controlled and is for God and is therefore unselfish. Anger that is sinful is uncontrolled and selfish.

Participant:[Inaudible 35:08]

Rev. Ernest O'Neill:Sure. Good. Charlie is bringing up the point that I really couldn't get into because of time that we are spirit, soul, and body. I was trying to imply it Charlie, when I shared that the body is the means by which we express this perfect love outwardly and I was trying to include in the body the soul; that is the mind and emotions. And that's why I was trying to say that the imperfections of the soul are still there and they affect the perfect expression of that love to others. But the soul is something that should experience the daily cross and we should gradually come into a place where our souls are utterly possessed by us.

You remember it says, "Possess your soul in patience." We should come to a place where we have complete control of our mind and emotions. You see what I'm trying to do, not frighten you but get you to look up, look up. If God is saying, "This is the kind of life I want you to live." Then does he not provide the power to live that life? Loved ones, that's what I want you to see. Don't look over and say, "Boy he laid such a burden on me. Oh, I just have to go out and buy Carnegie's "How to Stop Worrying and Start Living" and try to do this on my own." No, loved ones, I'm pleading with you. Don't settle for a low human standard that you can attempt to fulfill yourself.

Look at God's high standard. See that the only way to live this way is to accept that dear death with Jesus. Stop living so selfishly. Stop living for that great ego. Stop that! Start accepting that you've been crucified with Jesus. Start saying, "Lord Jesus, my life ended when yours ended 1900 years ago. Here is my life. Live that beautiful life of yours through me." Loved ones, I'm saying that for the sake of that dear wife that you have, for the sake of that dear roommate that you have, for the sake of that dear family that you have, look up and see the life that God can enable you to live. Oh, you remember that phrase, "Expect Great Things from God, Attempt Great Things for God." I'm asking you to stop being underachievers really.

Let us pray. Dear Father, thank you for the death of Jesus on the Cross. Thank you, Father that only if we are willing to do such violence to ourselves through the power of the Holy Spirit are we able to live that beautiful resurrection life. So Father, I would pray for guidance of your Holy Spirit for every brother and sister here this morning, especially for those who are just determined to go out and do this on their own and will fall flat on their faces. Father, I pray that you would make real to us that unless we get out of our own lives and let Jesus take them over completely, the rest of our historical record will be one of defeats and frustrations. Oh, Lord Jesus, thank you that we can accept that we have been crucified with you and we can let you live inside as your perfect love life in act, and thought, and word for your glory. Amen.