



Devotional Thoughts :: The Peril of Perfectionism

The Peril of Perfectionism - posted by savannah, on: 2012/7/9 21:25

The peril of perfectionism is that it seriously distorts the human mind. Imagine the contortions through which we must put ourselves to delude us into thinking that we have in fact achieved a state of sinlessness.

Inevitably the error of perfectionism breeds one, or usually two, deadly delusions. To convince ourselves that we have achieved sinlessness, we must either suffer from a radical overestimation of our moral performance or we must seriously underestimate the requirements of God's law. The irony of perfectionism is this: Though it seeks to distance itself from antinomianism, it relentlessly and inevitably comes full circle to the same error.

To believe that we are sinless we must annul the standards of God's Law. We must reduce the level of divine righteousness to the level of our own performance. We must lie to ourselves both about the Law of God and about our own obedience. To do that requires that we quench the Spirit when He seeks to convict us of sin. Persons who do that are not so much Spirit-filled as they are Spirit-quenchers.

One of the true marks of our ongoing sanctification is the growing awareness of how far short we fall of reaching perfection. Perfectionism is really antiperfectionism in disguise. If we think we are becoming perfect, then we are far from becoming perfect.

If we think we are becoming perfect, then we are far from becoming perfect. I once encountered a young man who had been a Christian for about a year. He boldly declared to me that he had received the "second blessing" and was now enjoying a life of victory, a life of sinless perfection. I immediately turned his attention to Paul's teaching on Romans 7. Romans 7 is the biblical death blow to every doctrine of perfectionism. My young friend quickly replied with the classic agreement of the perfectionist heresy, namely, that in Romans 7 Paul is describing his former unconverted state.

I explained to the young man that it is exegetically impossible to dismiss Romans 7 as the expression of Paul's former life. We examined the passage closely and the man finally agreed that indeed Paul was writing in the present tense. His next response was, "Well, maybe Paul was speaking of his present experience, but he just hadn't received the second blessing yet."

I had a difficult time concealing my astonishment at this spiritual arrogance. I asked him pointedly, "You mean that you, at age nineteen, after one year of Christian faith, have achieved a higher level of obedience to God than the apostle Paul enjoyed when he was writing the Epistle to the Romans?"

To my everlasting shock the young man replied without flinching, "Yes!" Such is the extent to which persons will delude themselves into thinking that they have achieved sinlessness.

I spoke once with a woman who claimed the same "second blessing" of perfectionism who qualified her claim a bit. She said that she was fully sanctified into holiness so that she never committed any willful sins. But she acknowledged that occasionally she still committed sins, though never willfully. Her present sins were unwillful.

What in the world is an unwillful sin? All sin involves the exercise of the will. If an action happens apart from the will it is not a moral action. The involuntary beating of my heart is not a moral action. All sin is willful. Indeed, the corrupt inclination of the will is of the very essence of sin. There is no sin without the willing of sin. The woman was excusing her own sin by denying that she had willed to commit the sin. The sin just sort of "happened." It was the oldest self-justification known to man: "I didn't mean to do it!"

In one strand of the Wesleyan tradition there is another type of qualified perfectionism. Here the achievement of perfection is limited to a perfected love. We may continue to struggle with certain moral weaknesses, but at least we can receive the blessing of a perfected love. But think on this a moment. If we received the blessing of a love that was absolutely perfect, how then would we ever commit any kind of sin? If I ever loved God perfectly, I would will only obedience to Him. How could a creature who loved God perfectly ever sin against Him at all?

Someone might answer: "We could still sin against Him in ignorance." But the perfect love with which we are called to love God is a perfect love of our minds as well as our hearts. If we perfectly loved God with all of our minds, from whence could this ignorance flow? One who loves God perfectly with the mind is perfectly diligent in studying and mastering the Word of God. The perfectly loving mind perceives correctly the light into our paths. A perfectly loving mind doesn't make errors in understanding Scripture.

But could we not still make mistakes because our minds are less than perfect? I ask why our minds are less than perfect. It is not because we lack brains or the faculty of thinking. Our thinking is clouded because our hearts are clouded. Take away the cloud from our hearts and our minds are illumined by the clear light of God.

A perfect love would yield perfect obedience. The only perfected love this world has ever seen was the love of Christ, who exhibited perfect obedience. Jesus loved the Father perfectly. He sinned not at all, either willfully or in ignorance. - R.C. Sproul

Re: The Peril of Perfectionism - posted by pilgrim777, on: 2012/7/9 22:11

You were doing fine until you got to the 5th paragraph and then you mutilate Romans 7, trying to convince everyone that this is the normal Christian walk. Basically, you are denying that Paul was crucified with Christ and set free from the power of sin. That he died and hence the law or sin had no longer any hold on him. He was free to stop sinning and that is why he could preach this now.

Romans 6:6 Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.

This does not sound like a wretched man to me. A wretched man is one who is a slave/servant to sin but Paul wrote this:

Rom 6:17 But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you.

Rom 6:18 Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness.

You are talking like a man who has not been crucified with Christ or else a man who has been but is trying to perfect himself in the flesh and put yourself back under the law. (having started in the spirit).

That is what Paul is talking about in Romans 7. Either an unsaved man under the law (knowing what is right but has no power to do it) or a saved man, who has put himself back under the law (thus falling from grace). But you write as if this is the Christian walk.

Does this sound like a wretched man?

Galatians 5:16 I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.

How do you know that or how can say that Paul? Really? Do you really mean that?

Or this?

Galatians 5:24 And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts.

And what does Paul glory in? The Cross, because he knows it is only by the power of God that he is overcoming and able to have victory over sin.

Galatians 6:14 But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.

Does this sound like a wretched man? "But now, being made free from sin..." WHAT!?!?

Rom 6:22 But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life.

Seriously, what do you think about this statement by Paul?

BUT NOW BEING MADE FREE FROM SIN and BECOME SERVANTS TO GOD, YE HAVE YOUR FRUIT UNTO HOLINESS...

That sounds like a pretty anti-wretched statement to me.

I know a lot of people that wish they could say those words from their heart.

Pilgrim

P.S. I have never met anyone that thinks they are sinless except of course in cults. But, neither should we tell people that they will be wretched sinners their whole life without any hope of ever increasing victory.

Re: "Be ye therefore perfect..." Matt. 5:44-48, on: 2012/7/9 22:44

Dear brothers,

I would suggest that here again is a situation where we must dissect and categorize (if you will) exactly what we are saying.

1. There are those believers who have been taught wrongly that a "second blessing" or some other measure of God's union will (alone) grant perfection (absolute complete agreement with God) in one's life and walk automatically.
2. There are those believers who have learned rightly that through the new-birth, slavery to sin has been defeated entirely in one's life and bondage to righteousness has been clearly granted. (righteousness is imputed - Rom. 4; and righteous living is made available - Rom. 6)

Let us encourage each other to live the righteous life that we have been enabled to do through the new-birth; and that is especially strengthened through the experience of the baptism of the Spirit of our living God - whose desire and plan it is that we all become just like Jesus "in holy conduct" and character. Let us rejoice as we realize the walk of righteousness, but with a spirit of humility. Let us be quick to accept the conviction of the Spirit when we do sin, and even quicker to repent in earnest. Finally, let us not assume that by the righteousness that was imputed to us positionally is what we walk in conditionally (automatically). To WALK in righteousness requires absolute surrender to His will by yielding to His Spirit within us.

In Romans 7, the apostle Paul was speaking present tense of course. He was simply showing that any attempt to live righteous through obedience to a written commandment would be futile. That is because it would be by his own strength. But that to live by the Spirit within him, there would be victory. That is because the Spirit of God cannot sin. It is all a matter of absolute surrender to the Spirit of God.

Remember: Romans 6, spells out our freedom from slavery to sin and that we are righteous bound; Romans 7, shows how we cannot walk in that righteousness by seeking to obey written commandments by our own strength and will; and Romans 8, shows that as we live by the Spirit within us we will not have any condemnation due to the fact that the Spirit does not sin against the law of God since He IS God, and thereby we "mortify the deeds of the flesh." Hallelujah!

Re: The Pilgrim's Progress - posted by savannah, on: 2012/7/9 22:46

Christian. Well, neighbour Faithful, said Christian. . . Tell me now, what you have met with in the way as you came; for I know you have met with some things, or else it may be writ for a wonder.

Faithful. I escaped the Slough that I perceived you fell into, and got up to the gate without that danger.

Christian. Did you meet with no assault as you came?

Faithful. When I came to the foot of the hill called Difficulty, I met with a very aged man, who asked me what I was, and whither bound. I told him that I am a pilgrim, going to the Celestial City. Then said the old man, Thou lookest like an hon

est fellow; wilt thou be content to dwell with me for the wages that I shall give thee? Then I asked him his name, and where he dwelt. He said his name was Adam the First, and that he dwelt in the town of Deceit. I asked him then, what was his work, and what the wages that he would give. He told me, that his work was many delights; and his wages, that I should be his heir at last. I further asked him, what house he kept, and what other servants he had. So he told me, that his house was maintained with all the dainties in the world; and that his servants were those of his own begetting. Then I asked how many children he had. He said that he had but three daughters; the Lust of Flesh, the Lust of the Eyes, and the Pride of Life, and that I should marry them all if I would. Then I asked how long time he would have me live with him? And he told me, As long as he lived himself.

Christian. Well, and what conclusion came the old man and you to, at last?

Faithful. Why, at first, I found myself somewhat inclinable to go with the man, for I thought he spake very fair; but looking in his forehead, as I talked with him, I saw there written, "Put off the old man with his deeds."

Christian. And how then?

Faithful. Then it came burning hot in my mind, whatever he said, and however he flattered, when he got me home to his house, he would sell me for a slave. So I bid him forbear to talk, for I would not come near the door of the house. Then he reviled me, and told me, that he would send such a one after me, that should make my way bitter to my soul. So I turned to go away from him; but just as I turned myself to go thence, I felt him take hold of my flesh and give me such a deadly twitch back that I thought he had pulled part of me after himself. This made me cry, "O wretched man!" So I went on my way up the hill.

Now when I had got about half way up, I looked behind, and saw one coming after me, swift as the wind; so he overtook me just about the place where the settle stands.

Christian. Just there, said Christian, did I sit down to rest me; but being overcome with sleep, I there lost this roll out of my bosom.

Faithful. But, good brother, hear me out. So soon as the man overtook me, he was but a word and a blow, for down he knocked me, and laid me for dead. But when I was a little come to myself again, I asked him wherefore he served me so. He said, because of my secret inclining to Adam the First: and with that he struck me another deadly blow on the breast, and beat me down backward; so I lay at his foot as dead as before. So, when I came to myself again, I cried him mercy; but he said, I know not how to show mercy; and with that knocked me down again. He had doubtless made an end of me, but that one came by, and bid him forbear.

Christian. Who was that that bid him forbear?

Faithful. I did not know him at first, but as he went by, I perceived the holes in his hands, and in his side then I concluded that he was our Lord. So I went up the hill.

Christian. That man that overtook you was Moses. He spareth none, neither knoweth he how to show mercy to those that transgress his law. - by John Bunyan

Noah Webster says of the word Wretched used in Romans 7:24 that it means,

"deeply afflicted, dejected, or distressed in body or mind; extremely or deplorably bad or distressing; being or appearing mean, miserable, or contemptible; very poor in quality or ability". The Greek word translated into English as wretched indicates a person who is exhausted after a battle. The unbeliever doesn't battle sin nor grieve over sinning against that One he loves.

"The writer genuinely deplores the fact that due to the law of sin still operating in him, he is unable to serve God as completely and whole-heartedly as he desires. The poignant grief here expressed is definitely that of a believer. No unbeliever would ever be able to be so filled with sorrow because of his sins! The author of the outcry is Paul, speaking for every child of God. The cry he utters is one of distress, but not of despair, as verse 25 proves. Paul suffers agony, to be sure, the wretchedness brought about by strenuous exertion; that is, by trying hard, but never satisfactorily succeeding, to live in c

omplete harmony with God's will but failing again and again. He is looking forward eagerly to the time when this struggle will have ended." - Hendriksen

"Paul is expressing in forceful terms his dismay at what sin does to him. It is, moreover, important that we understand this as applying to the regenerate. It is all too easy to take our Christian status for granted. We so readily remember our victories and gloss over our defeats. We slip into a routine and refuse to allow ourselves to be disturbed by what we see as occasional and minor slips. But a sensitive conscience and a genuine sorrow for every sin are the prerequisites of spiritual depth." - Leon Morris

And Henry Morris makes this observation,

"It is worth bearing in mind that the great saints through the ages do not commonly say, 'How good I am!' Rather, they are apt to bewail their sinfulness."

Read the Prophets and hear Job, Jeremiah, Isaiah, etc., etc.

Re: - posted by pilgrim777, on: 2012/7/10 0:11

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Re: sinless perfection advocates - posted by savannah, on: 2012/7/10 1:17

Robert Murray McCheyne, who, in the opinion of many, led a holier life than any other mortal, said,

"I find in my heart the seeds of every known sin."

Samuel Rutherford, whose devotion to Christ, purity of life and passion for holiness, said,

"If I were well-known, there would none in this kingdom ask how I do, for upon my part, despair might be almost excused, if everyone in this land saw my innerside."

Henry Beveridge, who was said to be saintly and sharp-sighted as to the high demands of God's holiness, confessed regarding his own heart,

"I cannot pray, but I sin; I cannot hear or preach a sermon, but I sin; I cannot give an alms, or receive the sacrament, but I sin: nay, I cannot so much as confess my sins, but my confessions are still aggravations of them. My repentance needs to be repented of, my tears want washing, and the very washing of my tears needs still to be washed over again with the blood of my Redeemer."

William Law said,

"I'd rather be hanged and my body thrown into a swamp than that other men should be allowed to look into my heart."

Samuel Davies laments his own experience as he says,

"Formerly, I have wished to live longer, that I might be better prepared for heaven; but this consideration had very very little weight with me, and that for a very unusual reason, which was this: - after long trial I found this world a place so unfriendly to the growth of every thing divine and heavenly, that I was afraid if I should live any longer, I should be no better fitted for heaven than I am. Indeed I have hardly any hopes of ever making any great attainment in holiness while in this world, though I should be doomed to stay in it as long as Methuselah. I see other Christians indeed around me make some progress, though they go on with but a snail-like motion. But when I consider that I set out about twelve years ago, and what sanguine hopes I then had of my future progress, and yet that I have been almost at a stand ever since, I am quite discouraged.... The thought that I will not serve the Lord better in this world grieves me; it breaks my heart, but I can hardly hope better."

And John Owen confessed,

"My own heart is a standing sink of abominations."

But some on this forum would argue otherwise.

Somewhat like this,

'O God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people--I am not a thief nor a cheat nor an adulterer, nor do I even resemble this tax-gatherer.' Luke 18:11

These are those of whom Jesus spoke this parable,

And to those who relied on themselves as being righteous men, and looked down upon all others, He addressed this parable. Luke 18:9

So, this is addressed to the sinless perfection advocates.

Re: - posted by EverestoSama, on: 2012/7/10 5:51

Savannah, there are many points we do not agree on, but on this topic we do. Thank you for taking the time to start this thread.