

PRACTICALLY PERFECT

The Book of Philippians #21

I love movies. So it was no surprise to me that as I was reading though today's Scripture passage and thinking of a title for my sermon, a line from a movie same into my head – “practically perfect”. The words come from the movie Mary Poppins which I have enjoyed for years. Thou it's hard to believe, that movie is 51 years old this year. When it first came out in 1964 I saw it three times, twice in an indoor theatre and once in a drive-in theatre when I took my 8 year-old sister with me because I wanted her to see it. It's probably the only movie I have seen more than once in a theatre.

Since video cassettes were introduced in 1977 there have been plenty of opportunities to see a movie more than once and in the convenience of your own home. But in those days, if you expected to see a film again you had to go to a movie theatre. Consequently studios would often re-release their most popular movies into theatres and Mary Poppins was no exception. It was re-released into theatres in 1973 and again in 1980. Here is an interesting fact about Mary Poppins. Just as Disneyland in California is known as the house that Mickey built, Walt Disney World in Orlando Florida is known as the house that Mary Poppins built. That's because Mary Poppins was the most profitable film of 1964 and Walt Disney sunk those profits into purchasing land in order to build his east coast theme park.

There are many memorable scenes in Mary Poppins which are directly linked to the music. Songs like “Let's Go Fly A Kite”, “Feed The Birds”, “Chim Chimney”, “Step In Time”, “Supercalifragelistic”, and “I Love To Laugh” all conjure up scenes of high flying kites, pigeons feeding in the square, chimney sweeps dancing on rooftops, Mary and Bert stepping through chalk drawings to ride on animated carousels, and Bert and the kids floating on the ceiling because they are laughing so hard.

But there's one memorable scene when Mary first comes to the house of Jane and Michael Banks. After she enters her room she sets her bottomless carpet bag on a table and begins to search for her measuring tape. When the kids ask her why, she responds that she wants to see how they measure up. Like everything else in the movie Mary Poppins' measuring tape is magical. It does not measure height but rather a person's personality and disposition.

When she measures Michael the tape says, ‘Extremely stubborn and suspicious’, which makes Jane giggle. When she measures Jane the tape reads, “Rather inclined to giggle. Doesn't put things away” which makes Michael smirk. Both kids think the tape is accurate when it comes to measuring the other, but are a little chagrined that it so accurately describes them. The kids then ask their new nanny to measure herself. She agrees. When the tape is read it says, “Mary Poppins. Practically Perfect in every way.”

This movie is of course a fantasy. Though all of us would like to be known as practically perfect in every way, the truth is that none of us are. And at the end, not everyone's life will be wrapped up so neatly in a bow as at the end of Mary Poppins where the family is reunited and all is well with the world. Still, we strive to make our lives practically perfect in every way.

All religions throughout history have had at their core the goal of making their followers perfect, or at least acceptable to a higher power, in order to avoid whatever disastrous consequences may await them at the end of their life. Even Jesus tells us to be perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48).

According to 1 Peter to be perfect is to be holy in all your behavior (1 Peter 1:15-16). This was what devoted Jews strove for – a life wholly devoted and holy lived out in honor of their heavenly Father who Himself was Holy and perfect (Leviticus 19:2).

The religious leaders of Jesus' Day were no exception. And Paul was one of those leaders. According to his own testimony he was a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee who lived according to the strictest sect of the Jewish religion (Acts 23:6; 26:5). Like them he did things to be seen of men and strove to be as practically perfect here on earth as humanly possible. To use his own words, he was a member of the false circumcision.

But all that changed as he traveled a dusty road on his way to Damascus. In a moment of confrontation with the Savior he moved from an understanding of the Law to an understanding of grace, from the world of false circumcision to the true. In Philippians, chapter three verses three to six Paul speaks of both his present condition and his past life.

PHILIPPIANS 3:3-6

“For we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh, although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more; circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.”

Paul is putting forth an argument for those who would doubt his previous dedication to the Law. Though soon to be seen as foolishness, he begins to present his case for why he could put confidence in the flesh. In his list of qualifications Paul starts with four items from his heritage:

PERSONAL HERITAGE

Circumcised on the eighth day
Of the nation of Israel
Of the tribe of Benjamin
Hebrew of Hebrews

Being circumcised on the eighth day is an obvious reference to the fact that he was born into a Jewish family who followed the covenant of Abraham. He is saying his qualifications precede even him.

Being of nation of Israel qualifies him as a recipient of the covenant of God through Abraham. As in the first, he is stating that he comes from a long line of people who were chosen by God to be set apart and holy to Him. He is a legitimate descendant of the people to whom God made a covenant of blessing and a promise of a future hope.

Coming from the tribe of Benjamin may not seem worth mentioning to those of us who know what a terrible price the tribe of Benjamin paid for mistreating the Levite's concubine (Judges 19-21). But there are other aspects of the tribe of Benjamin which merit special honor.

Benjamin was the only son of Jacob to be born in the Promised Land; in Deuteronomy 33:12 he was called the beloved of the Lord; from the tribe of Benjamin came the first King of Israel, King Saul. This tribe is also important because it was the only one to join the tribe of Judah in remaining loyal to the house of David after the kingdom of Israel split in two and became the separate nations of Judah and Israel - Judah being ruled by Rehoboam, the grandson of David, and Israel being ruled by Jeroboam, who

rebelled against the house of David.

Paul also says he is a Hebrew of Hebrews. A Hebrew is someone who is a descendent of Jacob, whom God renamed Israel. The slaves in Egypt were called Hebrew slaves. The phrase “Hebrew among Hebrews” is synonymous with being called an Israelite among Israelites or a Jew among Jews, though someone can be of the Jewish faith and not be a descendant of Jacob. What Paul is saying is that he made it to the top of his class, exceeding all the other descendants of Abraham and of Jacob. We will understand better what he means in a few moments when we look at his zeal for the Law.

After reciting his heritage Paul goes on to list three personal achievements regarding the Law – his adherence to it, his zeal for it, and his fulfillment of it.

PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENTS

He was a Pharisee

His zeal caused him to persecute the church

He was blameless in regards to the Law

First - He was a Pharisee. Of all the differing factions, the Pharisees were the ones most devoted to the Law. They emphasized fastidious tithing, painstaking ritual purity, and strict observance of the Sabbath, feeling that such laws clearly set Israel apart from all other nations as God had originally instructed them to be. In Acts (22:3) Paul says he was educated under Gamaliel. This same Gamaliel instructed the Jewish council to take care in what they did to the apostles who were preaching in the name of Jesus (Acts 5:34-40). To be taught by Gamaliel was a high honor indeed for he who was a teacher of the Law and respected by all the people.

Second – His zeal caused him to persecute the church. In Galatians Paul says that he was advancing in Judaism beyond many of his contemporaries among his countrymen because he was more extremely zealous for his ancestral traditions than others around him (Galatians 1:14). Because of his zeal for the law Paul felt an obligation to eliminate any perversion of the Jewish faith, feeling such perversion would bring further disaster on the land and on the Jewish people, a repeat of past judgments on the people of God for their willful disobedience. As a result he persecuted any and all who suppressed the Law, willingly and violently targeting the church.

Third - He was blameless in regards to the Law and its legalistic requirements. Paul believed righteousness could be achieved through obedience to the code of conduct spelled out in the Law. He considered himself as one who followed this code completely and was therefore faultless in regards to its standard of righteousness. Quite a statement for anyone to make yet Paul did not hesitate to say it. Based on his previous knowledge of righteousness he was convinced that he had attained what few others did – personal purity in the eyes of God.

So Paul is presenting the case that because of his heritage and obedience to the Law he was one of the most qualified people to boast in fleshly accomplishments. If anyone could boast in the flesh he could. Yet, Paul tells the Philippian church he no longer considers these accomplishments as something gained but rather something to be rid of. He now considers them worthless and counts them all as loss for the sake of Christ.

PHILIPPIANS 3:7-9

“But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord,

for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ; and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.”

This was not the first time Paul reevaluated his life in light of new revelation. As I have already mentioned he was forced to confront his ignorance when Jesus spoke to him while on his way to persecute the believers in Damascus (Acts 9:1-6). What a paradigm shift that must have been. Paul spent his whole life dedicated to the Law, believing he could attain righteousness by obedience and adherence to it only to find that the Law had no effect on righteousness. Its only purpose was to expose sin (Romans 7:7-11). And though he believed in the resurrection of the body he did not believe Jesus rose from the dead. Yet suddenly, on his way to kill all who were followers of the Way, Paul finds himself confronted by a resurrected Jesus.

As they used to say, that must have blown his mind. It certainly was a very humbling experience – to go from being self-assured and convinced of the righteousness of your cause, to being thrown off your high horse, physically and symbolically blinded, then restored to sight. Though experience can change someone instantly, it takes a while for the heart and mind to fully understand and accept what has just happened. And I’m sure that was true of Paul as well. Though he spent a few days with the disciples in Damascus and immediately began proclaiming that Jesus was the Son of God, I bet it took him a while longer to shed his dependence on the Law and to understand how fully grace forgives.

Yet here in Philippians he is confessing that all he had accomplished and all that he had inherited no longer had any meaning or purpose for him. Knowledge of the Law no longer held any advantage for him. All that mattered since his encounter was to know Christ Jesus his Lord. He was willing to let all go, everything that he had accomplished, everything that he was and everything he had stood for, in order to more fully gain Christ.

Previously he had worked hard at having a righteousness of his own derived from the Law. Now he is seeking after the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith in Christ. He no longer desires to know every nuance of the Law and the power that adherence to it gave him. He now desires to know Christ Himself and the power of His resurrection. Once committed to causing suffering, he is now committed to participating in the suffering of those who follow Jesus.

Hard to believe someone could change so radically. Ananias and the disciples were leery of him, not believing anyone could change so quickly from being a persecutor to a believer. But God assured Ananias and Barnabas assured the disciples that Saul’s conversion from the Law to faith was genuine (Acts 9:13-16; 26-27).

His journey from being accepted by those who were fully devoted to the Law to being accepted by those fully devoted to grace took a while to completely manifest. After his conversion he did not immediately go to Jerusalem but went away to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. Then three years later he went up to Jerusalem but only met with Peter and not with the other apostles. He then went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, to preach the message Christ had delivered to him. Only after an interval of fourteen years did he go up again to Jerusalem at the urging of Barnabas and because of a revelation he had received. It was during this visit that he was finally introduced to all the apostles and received the blessing of the apostles to go and preach the gospel to the Gentiles (Galatians 1:15-2:10).

Some doubted Paul’s conversion and were afraid of him (Acts 8:13; 9:26). It wasn’t until they saw the change in him and the direction of his life that they became convinced of the genuineness of his

conversion. Every genuine conversion should come with a genuine change of direction. For some this change will be more dramatic than others as in the case of Paul. But a change will occur because when one confesses with their mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believes in their heart that God raised Him from the dead, they are saved (Romans 10:9). And when they are saved the Holy Spirit is given as a seal of the promise of God that they have received eternal life now and in the world to come (Ephesians 1:13-14). And when the Holy Spirit is present He is at work within believers both to will and to work for God's good pleasure (Philippians 2:13).

Because of this nothing remains the same. Our sin nature no longer has complete control over us; our will is being redirected to the will of God and not of the flesh; our position changes from condemnation to acceptance; and our destination changes from darkness to light. Any one of these changes will have its effect on us. When all of them together have their impact, change becomes evident through our actions, our words, and the direction our lives are headed.

We become what Scripture describes as new creatures. The old has passed away and the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). And when the new comes the desire for the old fades away. That is what happened to Paul. His desire for his old way of life no longer held any meaning to him. Not only was he convinced that his efforts to obtain righteousness through the Law were in vain, but he considered that aspect of his life to no longer have any value to him.

He counted all his previous efforts as loss, as if he had invested badly in the stock market. The high value stock in which He placed his eternal retirement suddenly became worthless, unable to sustain him, with no hope of any future return. Every cent he had invested was lost, every effort he had put into it was in vain. So he cast it aside, counted his losses and moved on. Now wiser and more informed, Paul places his riches in something that is eternal, will not fade in value, and has a guaranteed return rate that is fixed for eternity. It's a life insurance policy paid for in full by the blood of Christ, guaranteed to pay out upon death. But it's also a policy that pays dividends after death, because this life insurance policy is not limited to this life. It applies also to the life to come.

Have you ever heard the phrase: "*I don't smoke and I don't chew and I don't go with girls that do*"? This was a popular phrase in Christendom at one time. These types of sayings came out of houses of worship that required its members to conform to their particular sense of purity. These standards varied from location to location and distinguished one assembly of believers from another.

We still have parts of Christianity today that divide the body of Christ into do's and don'ts. Instead of having Christ as the separator (divider) between darkness and light, some churches separate themselves from other believers by imposing different rules on their members. For instance, dancing is forbidden by some as is the playing of card games; a distinguishing factor of another is the strict adherence to dietary guidelines. Requiring one day over another to come together and worship and requiring one type of baptism over another are both signs of strict adherence to a set of rules. Vary or digress from these rules and you are no longer allowed in their fellowship.

Unlike cults which do not acknowledge the divinity of Christ, these are Christ AND churches. Christ is their Savior but more must be done to achieve a state of piety. The righteousness which is derived from Christ is insufficient. Adherence to a firm set of rules is also required. This is not just working out your salvation. This is working out your salvation *their* way.

But here is what Paul, who knew more than any of us about rules and regulations, had to say about these additional conditions for piety.

COLOSSIANS 2:16-17

“Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day – things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.”

COLOSSIANS 2:20-23

“If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, ‘Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!’ (which all refer to things destined to perish with use) – in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.”

Paul reevaluated the personal advantages he had which he believed gave him a better standing before God and came to realize that these were actually disadvantages. What he once considered his trophies he now considered his rubbish – a radical depreciation in value. It is not that his Jewish heritage and the things he accomplished were garbage in themselves. It is simply that when they were compared to knowing Christ, they were put in a different and proper perspective. One pales in comparison to the other. When compared to having a relationship with the Living God through Christ, trusting in one’s lineage and religious achievements seems foolish. So he is willing to forsake them all for the privilege of knowing Christ.

What about you? What about me? What do we still cling to from our old life? What do we still count on to make us righteous? Are we, like Paul, willing to count as loss those things which do not bring us closer to Christ? Or are we still clinging to and trusting in the old ways of earning righteousness which we learned through our traditions and family heritage?

I did not grow up in the church but I did grow up in an occult household with false spirits roaming the halls of our homes. I had to forsake the seeking of false spirits for help in overcoming the trials in life. They led me down false trails which lead only to death. But I did not know that until I met Christ face to face. When His word penetrated my heart and soul as it did Paul on his way to Damascus, I too was changed. And though the journey from what I was to what I am becoming is not over. I know that God has begun a good work in me and will continue to perfect me until either the day He calls me home, or the day that Christ returns, whichever comes first (Philippians 1:6).

Like Paul, some of you were raised in places of worship that believed in following a strict set of rules and personal effort in order to be worthy of salvation. You have left there and come here but have you also left the false for the true? Have you counted the false things you were taught as rubbish and, like Paul, are you seeking to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings?

These are things we must all ask ourselves for all of us have been tainted by the world’s view of righteousness and the various ways of how to attain it. But there is only one way to attain righteousness and it is not from our own efforts or from the Law. It is found only through faith in Christ. If we are willing to forsake all other ways and to seek after Christ alone we will find what we so desperately seek.

So our challenge today is to put our lives in perspective, the same perspective Paul had forced upon him on the road to Damascus. We can be practically perfect by attempting to attain righteousness by our own efforts through earthly rituals and religious exercise. Or we can cease from our labors as Paul did and seek after that which is eternal. We must either trust in the Law or trust in grace. To value one is to devalue the other. We must be careful which one we value more.

MATTHEW 16:24-26a

“Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?’”

Paul gave up everything he had accomplished in his life in order to find the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ. Jesus asks no less of us. Will we be practically perfect through our own efforts or eternally perfect through the efforts of Christ? It is a choice all of us must make. As the Scripture says,

JOSHUA 24:15

“Choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served..., or the gods of the (people) in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”

And once we have chosen, let us keep our eyes set upon Jesus, that He may be our vision for today and for tomorrow, a constant reminder of where we have been and where we are going. Let us lay aside everything that has impeded our progress in the faith and the things that frequently trip us up. Instead of looking down and back let’s look up and look ahead at the path laid out before us by the One who willingly shed His blood for us.

HEBREWS 12:1-2

“Let us lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.”

BE THOU MY VISION

Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art
Thou my best thought, by day or by night
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light

Be Thou my wisdom, Be Thou my true Word
I ever with Thee and Thou with me, Lord
Thou my great Father and I Thy true son
Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one

Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise
Thou mine inheritance, now and always
Thou and Thou only, be first in my heart
High King of heaven, my treasure Thou art

High King of heaven, when vict'ry is won
May I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's Sun
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall
Still be my vision, O Ruler of all

*Words: Ancient Irish Hym, translated by Mary E. Byrne; Music: Irish Folk melody
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