

# Holy Imperfection!

~ An excerpt from the book Spiritual Warfare by Thomas J. Tybeck ~

There is an unhealthy controversy growing in our brotherhood centered upon the teachings of Jay Wilson, evangelist of Christ's Church in Bozeman, Montana. The doctrine that he and others are promoting can best be described as Perfectionism. They believe that people have the potential to be sinless in thought, word and deed. Since he has publicly identified me as a sympathizer, I am compelled to respond.

The cornerstone of his theology is Matthew 5:48, *Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect*. He writes, "We submit to the candid reader that the centerpiece of the Sermon on the Mount was that the disciples of Christ are to be perfect as their heavenly Father is perfect. We submit that everything else in the Sermon and everything else in both the Old and New Testament writings are but brilliant facets on this whole jewel of revelation." How is perfection achieved? Since Imputed Righteousness is discounted, we are responsible to realize it.

2 Peter 1:3-4 is just as foundational, *...as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be **partakers** of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust*. Wilson teaches that the phrase *you may be partakers of the divine nature* really means that Christians are "capable of taking on the complete nature of God." The word translated as "partakers" here is *koinwn* [coy-known]. We begin to get off course here.

Many imperfections are present in this philosophy. These are Imperfect Definitions; Imperfect Reasoning; Imperfect Anthropology; Imperfect Sincerity; Imperfect Attitudes; Imperfect Results and Additional Imperfections.

## **Imperfect Definitions**

Someone has said that, "words mean things". How true this is. Our nation was embarrassed as our last President tried to mislead us by arguing about what the word "is," meant. In the same way our Perfectionist friends begin to advance their theory by reinterpreting word meanings.

- Perfectionists would have us understand this means "becoming exactly like God in His complete nature". Actually the New Testament translates *koinwn* using several English words: 1 Corinthians 10:20, renders it as *fellowship* and 2 Corinthians 8:23, renders it as *partner*. *Koinwn* is NEVER rendered as "capable of taking on the complete nature of" anyone else. To say that it does misses the mark.

is τε<leioj [**tea**-lee-ahs]. With it the Greeks expressed the idea of "totality". It means, "having attained the end or purpose, to be complete or perfect. It also means full-grown, mature and adult. It was applied to people who were fully up to a standard and were in that respect perfect, complete, or expert. It also was used of those fully developed in a moral sense. When applied to humanity it never meant Sinlessly Perfect. Nor did it imply taking on all of the positive characteristics of the divine nature as Wilson has stated.

In English, "perfect" is often used in an ideal, absolute sense (i.e. total sinlessness) that is usually not present in Hebrew or Greek. Since these terms were applied to sinners it is understood that they do not denote absolute perfection.

This information is critical in understanding what the Bible says. On the one hand we have the weight of every respected Greek scholar and their lexicons stating that τε<leioj does not mean Sinless Perfection. On the other hand, we have brother Wilson and friends' insisting it does. If the original meanings of Scriptural words are abandoned then the Bible can be made to say anything.

### **Imperfect Reasoning**

One of the errors that may be employed in a discussion is the use of False Dilemmas. This error is committed when one insists that there are only two possible positions to an issue when in fact there are more. The proponents of Perfectionism have characterized those who disagree with them as people who make excuses for sin. They are maligned as Neo-Calvinists who intend to continue to live in sin.

Up to now, Perfectionists affirm an overly simplistic "either-or" understanding of salvation. They say that a person is either committed to sinlessness or that they prove by their behavior that they are not serious about Christianity.

In one sense it is true that from God's perspective everyone is regarded as either saved or lost. Salvation in that sense is "either-or". Yet John writes, *"If I say I have no sin I deceive myself."* Salvation's picture is more complicated than Totally Sinless verses Totally Depraved. There is a range from Immature to Mature on the "Saved" side with many steps along the way. In reality all Christians are somewhere on a continuum, with the perfect example of Jesus at the upper end.

Maturity should be our goal here and now. Absolute perfection belongs to the day of Christ, when we shall be fully transformed into His likeness. Meanwhile, only One has been able to ask with confidence, "Which of you convicts Me of sin?"

Proponents explain Perfectionism thusly: "What sin do you have to commit today? None? That's right! Okay, can you go for a second without sinning? You can? Good! Now, since you can go one second without sinning, can you make it for five seconds? You can? Great! How about 30 seconds or a minute? Yes? Wonderful! How about for 5 minutes or more?" They thereby "prove" that Christians do not need to sin and can therefore never sin again.

Although compelling, there are three errors here. First, this argument is founded upon the Fallacy of Perpetual Accomplishment. It takes a limited set of evidence operating over a limited time period and makes universal conclusions. It contains the hidden premise that if I can do "X" for a limited time then I can do it forever. Look what this logic "proves": If Bobby can bench-press 200 pounds once, then he can do it all day long! If Susie can see well for the first 20 years of her life, then she will never need glasses. The reason no one accepts these statements is that the original accomplishment is unrelated to the claim of the conclusion.

The second problem is this: A person outside of Christ might answer the first question by saying, "No, I do not have to sin today." After all, brother Wilson has rightly rejected the Calvinistic view of humanity as totally depraved. Since a non-Christian does not have to sin by compulsion they would certainly be able not to sin for a second. Using the logic already established it is "provable" that people outside of Christ are capable of not sinning, may choose to be perfect and are therefore in no need of a Savior.

The final problem with Wilson's reasoning is this: Can we be absolutely certain that we are not sinning? This must be asked in the light of human pride and the limitations of our mind and awareness. Let me explain. When I was newly converted I believed that I could worship the Lord anywhere. If I felt like going to the beach on Sunday and missing church that was fine. If you asked me were I sinning by doing so I would have said, "no". But I would have been wrong.

My point is this: Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13:12, "*For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part...*" Humans do not see things clearly. We do not see as God sees. We know only in part. Right now I may be doing things that are outside of the Lord's will - "sins of commission". Or there might be other things that I am not doing that He desires for me to do and I am therefore sinning by not doing them - "sins of omission". If I am doing either right now I am unaware of it. As I grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ I will change my behavior. However, in the meantime, it is the height of hypocrisy to proclaim, "now I've taken every thought captive, now I have arrived and now I am perfect". Yet that is precisely what Sinless Perfectionism requires.

One final thought on being perfect like the Father. God's perfection is beyond our comprehension. Yet we understand that it would include Perfect Health - God is not subject to disease. Our Perfectionist friends have isolated Christ's statement in Matthew 5:48 from its context of loving relationships. Therefore they need to beware lest they enable someone else to build upon their understanding and proclaim that human sickness is a sign of sin. This is an error that many of our Charismatic friends already teach.

### **Imperfect Anthropology**

Wilson also seems to have an imperfect understanding of the nature of mankind. According to him the "words of Jesus in Matthew 5:48 laid the onus on the individual; perfect was something he was to be, not that perfection was to be applied to him". Moreover, he writes, "Perfection of character is... more than mere overcoming of sin; it

is taking on all the positive characteristics of the divine nature." Think of the repercussions of this statement. People have within themselves the innate ability to live a life free of sin without being "in Christ". After all, this admonition was given by Christ years before His vicarious death and the indwelling Holy Spirit. If it was possible for Christ's hearers to obey Him then they were in no need of a Savior. We can be perfect on our own - the responsibility is ours.

If te<leioj is to be understood only as Sinless Perfection then we have a clear cut example of someone (the Rich Young Ruler in Matthew 19-20-21) who will attain it by doing only one more act of human righteousness. And he is without the need of the atoning death of Christ to achieve it. Is this really how our Perfectionist friends see mankind?

### **Imperfect Sincerity**

George Faull wrote an article entitled, " A Question About Perfection", in response to local church problems in Indiana. His article had nothing to do with brother Wilson, who nonetheless reprinted and respond to it.

Wilson began by restating the three premises, which Dr. Faull argued against. His readers were assured, "we do not know of anyone who agrees with these three premises." He then went on to defend the first two premises.

**Premise #1:** *"We have the potential to be perfect, i.e. have sinless perfection because Jesus said to 'be perfect as the Father is perfect'."* Does Jay Wilson agree with this premise? He writes, "God has always required perfection from man... Our point: Man can live a perfect life before God; he can choose not to do so, and God is just in condemning him." By saying this, he affirms what he says he denies.

**Premise #2:** *"God does not command what cannot be done, and he commands us to be perfect and holy as God, therefore sinless perfection is possible."* Does Wilson agree with this premise? He writes, "'Does a person have to sin?' And we answer: 'The scripture indicates that man has the capacity to meet the requirements of the law'." While not a verbatim restatement, Mr. Wilson admits that he agrees with this premise.

Mr. Wilson sincerely believes that the "human must be discarded to make way for the putting on of the divine." But 2 Corinthians 4:7 says, *But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.* How "discarded" is human nature? He writes that the "Children of God are no longer *mere men*; the new creature is as different from human creatures as human creatures are different from dog creatures." Yet this new nature must be slowly manifested in a step-by-step process. But does a dog need to be taught how to behave as a dog? No, it licks, scratches and growls because that is its nature.

### **Imperfect Attitudes**

One of the biggest obstacles to the resolution of Sinless Perfectionism is the seeming disrespect with which those who disagree with its tenets are treated. Those who preach perfection need to take extra care in their rhetoric for "*For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man...* (James 3:2a).

One example of this disrespect should suffice. The September / October 2000 issue of *The 11th Hour Times* contained an article by Dr. Sherwood Smith critiquing Mr. Wilson's booklet *The New Creation*. Dr. Smith's article was well written. He dealt with the tenets of Perfectionism in a logical manner. When he disagreed with *The New Creation*, he did so on the basis of merit. He was careful to deal substantively, not personally. Smith's strongest comments were about "hop-scotch exegesis and round-robin logic", which again dealt with the reasoning behind Wilson's thesis.

Mr. Wilson's responded in a different tone. He wrote that Dr. Smith trashed "the scriptural means by which a Christian may be like Jesus." Not so. Dr. Smith merely asserted another means for the attainment of that goal, namely by the grace of God, by Christ's imputed righteousness and our efforts to please Him.

Wilson complained that Smith's use of his own words was prejudicial and began his personal attacks. "After Smith wantonly states that *The New Creation* begins with a false premise, he charges off into a bunch of verbiage. It is sometimes hard to tell whether he is critiquing his own thoughts or reviewing *The New Creation*." He portrayed "Mr. Smith" as an incompetent who "somehow... gets to [his] next statement" concluding that "he is hard to follow; either this paper was hurriedly written, or the qualifications for his doctorate were not very stringent." Perhaps these discourteous words were meant to inspire his readers, but I found them wholly regrettable.

## **Imperfect Results**

Where can Perfectionism lead?

**Spiritual Discouragement.** Many honest and sincere Christians who attempt to live in Sinless Perfection will become discouraged and fall away from the faith. They realize that this is an impossible goal to reach on their own.

**Spiritual Pride.** Those who claim to be living sinless lives by their own willpower need to heed Paul's admonition "not to be deceived". Several years ago I knew someone who told me that he did not sin anymore. He was very proud of his accomplishment. The fact that his marriage was a failure did not matter, for that was his wife's fault. The fact that the courts were restricting his access to his young child because he kept saying "Mommy is going to burn in hell" did not matter. After all, he was just being persecuted for his faith. And the fact that he has caused many problems in every church he had attended did not matter, for they all had itching ears and would not endure his sound doctrine. I asked him how he knew that there was no sin in his life. He said, "If there were any kind of sin in my life at all, the Holy Spirit would tell me. Since He has not told me, I know I am sinless."

**Spiritual Blasphemy.** The logical destination for those who embrace Sinless Perfectionism, estranged from the imputed righteousness of Christ, is deification. This is the belief that they actually become "gods". This position has already been proclaimed. According to one writer, everyone who follows Jesus is a god and the purpose of the church is to lead people to desire to become gods. It is instructive that when Paul was deified in Lystra (Acts 14:11-18) his reaction was to be appalled and correct this error. So must we.

### **Additional Imperfections**

*The Nature of the Atoning Sacrifice of Jesus Christ.* Mr. Wilson stated that Christ is still offering Himself up as a continual sacrifice for sin. He said, "When you participate in the Lord's Supper, you actually are participating in the sacrifice. It is a continuing sacrifice. Continually carried out by the High Priest in heaven itself."

Yet the Bible teaches otherwise. Read Hebrews 10:10-14 and you will see that the means of Christian perfection was the offering of Christ on the cross. It already is an accomplished fact. He has perfected us!

*The Timely Necessity for Elders.* After working in Montana for 25 years, brother Wilson's churches have no elders. He says that no men are ready yet, but some men "might be ready in the next ten years or so". He has also stated that he is not going to "run too fast" to have elders. I would not characterize 25 to 35 years to develop elders as running "too fast".

Jay Wilson teaches that Jesus Christ was the Holy Spirit incarnate. This would take another article to answer.

### **Perfect in Christ**

#### **How are Christians to be Perfect?**

Romans 4:23-24 clearly teaches us about Christ's imputed righteousness.

Romans 12:1 says that our bodies are to be holy sacrifices to God by His mercies, not by our own onus.

1 Corinthians 3:17 says, *If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.* Paul proclaims that the Corinthian Christians are holy. Yet we know from his epistle that they were people struggling with many sins.

Galatians 3:3 says, *Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?* The answer Paul is looking for is "no".

Ephesians 5:25-27 tells us that the Christians' standing comes from the work of Christ appropriated in immersion.

Philippians 1:6 says, *For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.*

**It is God who will perfect us!**