

New Year New Start, Part 2

1 Peter 2:9; Matthew 5:43-48

1. Perfection is Possible.

- 1 Peter 1:15; Leviticus 11:44-45; Hebrews 5:12-14

2. Perfection is Passionate.

- Matthew 5:43-48; John 13:34-35; 1 John 2:5; Matthew 19:26;
1 John 4:19; 2 Timothy 1:7

3. Perfection is Plural.

- 1 John 4:12, 1 John 4:15- 21; John 19:29-30

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West Valley Church
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New Year, New Start 2021

Part Two

Years ago, the world's most complicated clock was displayed for the first time in the town hall in Copenhagen, Denmark. It took over 10 years and a million dollars to build.¹

The clock, designed by Jens Olsen, is accurate to two-fifths of a second every 300 years. The ten faces of that clock tell the time of the day, the day of the week, week of the month, the month of the year, the year of the century, and it tracks the movements of planets and suns for 2,500 years.

The clock consists of 12 movements which together have 15,448 parts. The clock is mechanical and must be wound once a week. Displays include lunar and solar eclipses, positions of the stellar bodies, and a perpetual calendar, in addition to the time. The fastest gear completes a revolution every ten seconds and the slowest gear is the slowest in the world, turning once every 25,753 years. In order to ensure that all the parts continue to work correctly, it has been gilded with four kilos of gold, and has rhodium coating on all metal faces in the clock. Rhodium is one of the rarest and most valuable precious metals in the world. It is resistant to corrosion – even acid.

But despite the decades of calculations and all the money spent, there was something wrong with the clock: it is not accurate. It loses two-fifths of a second every 300 years. How do they know that? Well, despite being the most accurate clock in the world, it isn't as accurate as atomic clocks. Atomic clocks are measured against the clock of the universe, with all of its myriad parts, from atoms to suns to planets to stars. This clock, all built by hand, despite all that time and money, is not perfect.

Perfection is a hard thing to come by, whether in machines or mankind. But I want to talk to you today about how to have a perfect year – yep, I said “perfect.” We are in the second part of our series called, “New Year, New Start.” Last week we discovered that God has new and great things in mind for us in this new year, and to achieve them we need to be committed completely to Christ. I want to continue on that theme, because God intends for this new year to be perfect for your life and for our church. I am confident that God will achieve it through us together as God's community.

The Bible says this about us as his community:

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God's own possession. You have become this people so that you may speak of the wonderful acts of the one who called you out of darkness into his amazing light.”
(1 Peter 2:9, ceb)

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jens_Olsen%27s_World_Clock (and footnoted resources)

That is what God has in mind for us in this year, but I want you to see that phrase in the fourth line: “a holy nation.” We are to be a holy people. Holy. Righteous. Without blemish. *Perfect*; we are to be a *perfect people*. What does that mean? How is that possible? That’s what we are going to understand before we leave today.

All throughout the Bible—both the Old and New Testaments—you can see God’s burning desire for his people to be holy, blameless, and perfect. I would encourage you to do a study of the word “holy” in the Bible and see how the word is not only used of God, but how often it is attributed to God’s people. Even Jesus, in His famous “Sermon on the Mount,” tells us this. It’s in a passage that we are going to use as the central text of our time together, so I want you to see it clearly for yourself. Since this is our primary passage, would you help me honor God’s Word by standing with me as I read it:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."
Matthew 5:43-48 (niv)

Do you see that last phrase? Get a good look at it. Both that comment, and the context that it’s in, tells us everything we need to know about being perfect in this year, no matter what may come.

So, first, I want you to see that...

1. Perfection is Possible.

Perfection really is possible—it MUST be, or Jesus would not have made the comment that he did. Jesus would not have said to his disciples, and to us: “Be perfect” if it wasn’t possible. We can trust him and we can trust his character, and he wouldn’t tell us to do something if it wasn’t possible. Do you follow that reasoning? Just to make sure that there’s no confusion about this, here are a couple of other places in the Bible that talk about this:

In the New Testament, God says:

“But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written, ‘Be holy, Because I (God) am holy’.” (1 Peter 1:15, niv)

In the Old Testament, God says:

“I am the LORD your God, and you must dedicate yourselves to me and be holy, just as I am holy. . . I brought you out of Egypt so that I could be your God. Now you must become holy, because I am holy!” (Leviticus 11:44-45, cev)

So there is no doubt that being holy, or perfect isn’t a suggestion—it’s an expectation. It isn’t a consideration—it’s a command.

God would not command it if it wasn't possible. So if perfection is possible, then what does it mean? The clue can be found if we look at the original word. Now, let me stop here and say that we're not interested in finding some hidden meaning in a foreign language. Let me remind you why this is important: what we are talking about today is integral to your life if you are a Christian (that means you've accepted Christ's death on the cross for you and now you are living for him). It is integral to your ability to have the abundant life God has promised you. It is integral to your ability to experience this new thing God has for you in this new year. It is integral to our ability to have a healthy, functional community as God desires. It is integral to your ability to make a difference in the lives of others for Christ, which is what God expects of us in this new year. So please—pay close attention to this today, so we can live out our faith Monday through Saturday.

The original language of the Greek is very revealing in helping us figure out what Jesus means for us to be perfect. The word that Jesus used when he told us to be perfect is “teleios” and it means “complete, of full age, fulfilled, mature.” It does not mean “perfect” in some kind of performance scale, or getting a perfect score of 100 on every behavioral test that God has. The word *teleios* is more about *maturity*; like a person who is a full grown adult person instead of half-grown or young. *It is more about function than form.* “Form” says you have to measure up and have a perfect record of religious behaviors. “Function” says you are living to your full potential right now, living to the level of knowledge that you have; living to the full level of the relationship you currently have in Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. *Form* type of perfection is about achieving the level of perfect behavior, never making mistakes again. *Function* type of perfection is about living at the level that you currently know, but also growing into more maturity. That's because every day with Christ is a day to learn new things about him and the way he thinks; a day to become more like him; a new day to introduce someone else to Jesus; a new day to serve someone else. That is why we have small groups and classes on Sunday mornings and Wednesdays evenings – to provide you with the most opportunities to learn and grow more – so you can be more and more “perfect” all throughout the week.

The word “*teleios*” is used in another passage that will shed some light on this for us: [?](#)
Hebrews 5:12-14—

"By now you should have been teachers, but once again you need to be taught the simplest things about what God has said. You need milk instead of solid food. People who live on milk are like babies who don't really know what is right. Solid food is for mature people who have been trained to know right from wrong."
(Hebrews 5:12-14, cev)

That word “mature” is our word “*teleios*” again. It's about something reaching the potential that it has. For instance, if you are writing down notes, you are using a pencil or a pen. That pencil or pen was created with a purpose to write. You can use it for other things—you could pry things with it. You can clean your ears with it. But it's not “*teleios*” until you are writing with it. It might be beat up—it might have scratches on it or maybe it's been chewed on. It isn't spotless, but it is “*teleios*” when you are using it; it's perfect when you are writing with it.

So *you* are “teleios” when, in Christ by the power of the Spirit, you are living up to the potential that you were created for. You are complete. You might be beat up; you might have flaws. But if you are living at your current potential in Christ, in submission to the Holy Spirit, you are teleios— perfect.

So what is that teleios for you; what is that purpose? Fortunately, Jesus tells us. See, Jesus said that...

2. Perfection is passionate.

There’s something really important about the context of the statement that Jesus makes when he tells us to be perfect in that passage from the Sermon on the Mount. In those verses, Jesus is telling us to love our enemies. Let’s look at it again:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."
Matthew 5:43-48 (niv)

Verses 43-47 – all the verses leading up to the command for us to be perfect – they are all about loving people that are difficult to love—loving our enemies, loving those who mistreat us and persecute us. We’ll look at what that means in a moment, but look at the link between those verses and verse 48: “therefore.” Whenever you see the word “therefore” in the Bible you should ask yourself “what’s it there for?” In this case, it is there because it links the first five verses with the last verse. Jesus wasn’t a random thinker; he was a methodical, logical thinker. Whatever he said made sense. So in this case, the last verse made sense with the previous verses; it’s in the same train of thought.

Are you following that? So perfection then, has to do with *love*. Now let’s add that to what we learned already. Perfection—holiness—the holy life that we are commanded to live and capable of living in the power of the Holy Spirit, *is about how we fully love*. It’s not about how we live up to some standard.

I have to say that, there was a time in our church’s history that we measured a person’s holiness by their behavior: if they didn’t smoke, drink, dance, wear make-up, play cards, go to movies, and swim in a pool with the opposite sex, and ladies, add to that they didn’t cut their hair and wear pants, then they *might* be sanctified. We had a long list of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, and you were judged to be holy if you would or wouldn’t do certain things. But friends, that’s the *form* of perfection, not the function; Jesus didn’t define perfection that way. He defined it instead by how we love. He said:

"Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other." (John 13:34-35, tmt)

Remember now, we are supposed to be perfect like God is perfect, and that perfection has to do with love. The Bible says, “But if anyone obeys his word, God's love (notice—God's love) is truly made complete (there it is—teleios: mature, complete) in him.” (1 John 2:5, niv) It's about loving like God does.

How does God love? It's love that goes beyond loving those who are easy to love; it's love for everyone – even our worst enemies. We love our spouses, our friends, our children. That isn't hard to do (most of the time!). But Jesus said that anyone can do that. The kind of love that is really like God's love is the kind that loves annoying people, irritating people, hateful and hurtful people. People who persecute you. Now that's completeness. That's maturity. That's perfection. Here's the difference: the first kind of love comes naturally. The second kind of love requires a choice. We have to choose to love our enemies.

“But that's impossible!” you say. And I would say, you are right! It IS impossible for us. But Jesus said, “with man this is impossible, but with God, all things are possible.” (Matthew 19:26, niv) God can give us the power and the ability to choose to love our enemies. How? “We love because He first loved us.” (1 John 4:19, niv) Because He loved us first with that kind of love, we know what it is. We experience it in our own lives, and our lives are transformed because of it, and through the Holy Spirit we have the power to pass it on.

When we allow God's Spirit to fill us and move through us, God's love can then move us to choose to love those we don't feel like loving. We may not even like that person, but we can choose to act in loving ways toward them with the power of God enabling us to do so:

“For the Spirit that God has given us does not make us timid; instead, his Spirit fills us with power, love, and self-control.” (2 Timothy 1:7, gnb)

Let me give you an example from my own life. I'm not telling you this because I'm anything great, but I'm telling you that if God can do it through me, he can do it through anyone!

When I was in college, my brother was in a motorcycle accident and was in a coma for six weeks and was in the hospital for three months. He was racking up thousands of dollars of bills every day. His insurance reached its limits, so there was a good chance that, if he even survived, he would have to file bankruptcy.

Well, back up to about two years earlier when he had a fender bender with a lady that was so minor, she didn't suffer any health issues because it. Mark's insurance covered her all her damages. Then, two years later while he is in the hospital in a coma, a lawyer for that lady comes in and serves him papers. She's suing him for \$250,000 in *emotional* damages from her fender bender. *My brother is in a coma!* He might not even live another day. They have to leave the papers laying on his chest. Now, I didn't know who the lady was— I've never met her to this day. But I was furious with that woman. How dare she do that, when my brother might not even be alive tomorrow? He might not even survive the day. I can tell this story because I don't even know who she is. But I was so angry that I actually wished that she would go to hell. I confess that to you and say that to my shame. Well, she eventually dropped the suit because she couldn't get any money out of him before the statute of limitations expired. But even though her lawsuit was dropped, I still hung on to my hate. Then one day several months later, I was back in college and I was spending some time reading the Bible and praying. And during that time, I sensed that God was reminding me how much he loves me. That felt great! Then he reminded me that he sent his Son to die

on the cross – *for me!* That felt *really* good. Then he asked me if I truly believed he died for everyone. I thought, “Yes – of course! That’s amazing love!” That felt great knowing he loves everyone that much. Then I distinctly heard his Spirit ask me, “Do you think I love and died for that woman who tried to sue your brother?” He was setting me up! I didn’t want to admit it or agree with him. I don’t remember how long I sat there, but it took a while. I finally had to relent and to repent of my sin, and then ask his Spirit to help me. Then, I chose to forgive her. I have never met her, but even if I did, I would wish her the best because God’s Spirit enabled me to do what I couldn’t do—to love someone I didn’t like. I probably wouldn’t hang out with her today, but I don’t wish her any ill will. I feel the same way about the guy who recklessly caused my auto accident six years ago. I know his name – our attorney found all that information. But I forgive him, and I believe I could tell him that to his face. I’ve often had to recheck my feelings and thoughts about that over the six years that I’ve been dealing with the pain and headaches because of it. I double check my attitude just to make sure I’m not in any kind of denial. By God’s Spirit, I can say I forgive him and do not wish him any ill. I would love for him to know Jesus – the One who loves him so much.

So, thanks to God’s love and his Spirit, perfection is possible, it’s passionate because it’s all about love, and finally I want us to see that...

3. Perfection is plural.

If this perfection was about perfectly keeping to the rules, then it would be singular, because it would only be about how righteous *I* am; how impressive *I* am, about how good *I* am. But it’s not about me—our perfection is about love, and therefore, it is about *you*; it is about *others*. And therefore, it’s plural. It involves other people. Love is not love unless it has an object; unless it has someone to share it with. That’s why this perfection, this holiness, is about community. Holiness, perfection, can only be lived out in and with community! The holiness that we are called to have, the perfection that we are commanded to have, can only—ONLY—be carried out in community. That means we are called as a community to be like Jesus, and that means to love others. John Wesley, the great theologian and founder of the Methodist movement, and from whom we derive much of our understanding of holiness, has said: “The gospel of Christ knows no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness.”²

Holiness, or perfection, is only lived out in community. Think about it another way: have you ever wanted to see God? Ever wondered what he looks like? There is a way for you to see him. Listen to what God’s word says:

“No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in union with us, and his love is made perfect in us.” (1 John 4:12, gnb)

If we want to see God—if we want the world to see God—then we should live perfectly. We should love with the love that God gives us. If you want to be holy, then love others. I don’t

² John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* Volume XIV p321 preface to poetical works; Hendrickson Publishers

care how many rules you can obey. I don't care if you can abstain from everything bad; if you don't love people!

"That's how we stay one with God and are sure that God loves us. God is love. If we keep on loving others, we will stay one in our hearts with God, and he will stay one with us. If we truly love others and live as Christ did in this world, we won't be worried about the day of judgment. A real love for others will chase those worries away. The thought of being punished is what makes us afraid. It shows that we have not really learned to love. We love because God loved us first. But if we say we love God and don't love each other, we are liars. We cannot see God. So how can we love God, if we don't love the people we can see? The commandment that God has given us is: "Love God and love each other!" (1 John 4:15- 21, cev)

Perfection is in loving others – not perfectly obeying the rules, but loving the people you like, and choosing to act in loving ways toward the people you don't like.

But that's not easy; that's a difficult choice to make, and an even more difficult choice to act on. To do so means you need to accept God's love, and then ask his Spirit to fill you and empower you to love like He does. Surrender your life, so that the Spirit's life can be lived fully through you. That's perfection – it's possible, it's passionate, and it's plural.

The best example of this that I can think of is Jesus, of course. Of course, generally speaking, his life is always the best example. But there is something more specific. It was when Jesus was hanging on the cross. He'd already been flogged, which would have shredded the flesh of his back and sides, leaving the muscles exposed. He was nailed naked to the cross and had been hanging there in the heat and flies for three hours when, in order to fulfill prophecy, he said that he was thirsty:

"A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit."
(John 19:29-30, niv)

Jesus said, "It. Is. Finished." There's our word again – *teleo*. It is complete. It is perfect.

Theologically, we know the work wasn't completed until Jesus rose from the dead on Easter Sunday. Jesus' death was only a part of the solution, and would have been pointless if he'd never risen from the dead. And yet here is, right before death, saying, "It is perfected." Because up to that moment – it *was* complete. There was more to follow, because three days later it would be even *more* complete.

What Jesus went through on the cross, he did not do for himself. If it was his preference, he would not have gone through the torture and humiliation and death. No, he did it for you and me, and at that time *we were his enemies*. We were sinful. We rejected God and his love for us. But he died for *us*; for every human being.

His perfect love was passionate and plural. And because of that, it is now possible for us. We must obey his command; we must be perfect.

Pray

Now, before you leave, let me say something, just in case you are thinking this. You might think I'm saying that, if you have the function of perfection, then it doesn't matter the form. In other words, if we are loving others, we don't have to obey the behaviors that the Bible talks about. But that is the exact *opposite* of what I'm saying. Jesus said this in his sermon on the mount:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” (Matthew 5:17, niv)

Which makes sense, because Jesus showed us God's love. That's why he also said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment.

And the second is like it:

“Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:37-40, niv)

In other words, when we love like he does, we are obeying all of the Old Testament Law and all that the Prophets said.

The Apostle Paul clarified this further; he said in Romans:

“Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments...are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.” (Romans 13:8-13, niv)

Do you see? Focus on loving God and loving others in all the power of the Spirit, and you don't have to worry about any rules; you'll already be obeying them.

Go perfectly into this new year!