

The Example of Paul



Progress to Perfection (Part 2)
by Derek Prince

It's good to be with you again. The title I've chosen for my talks this week is "Progress to Perfection." I'll begin by reviewing briefly the material that I covered yesterday. First of all, the title indicates there is a goal to attain in the Christian life. And furthermore, that there are definite steps to attain that goal. It's not something vague or indefinite or imprecise. It's clear, precise and practical.

Secondly, I emphasized the importance of having an aim in life. Not merely drifting like a ship, without an anchor, or a rudder, carried about by every wind and current. I pointed out that people whose lives are like that usually end in shipwreck. And the I drew a distinction between external accomplishment and internal development. In the Christian life external accomplishment is what we do for God. But internal development is what we become in God. And, it's important that there be harmony between these two. We know many people, I'm sure, who are very busy for God, very active, very zealous, but they've neglected the development of their own character. And consequently, there's a continuing tension between what they are and what they are trying to do. And often there's an inconsistency so that people look, first of all, at what they do and then look at what they are, and conclude that what they're doing isn't genuine because it doesn't work in them.

Now Jesus stated very simply and exactly a practical goal. THE goal for the Christian life. "Be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect." So, that's the goal. We can't choose. The decision has been made for us. We can only decide whether we will obey or whether we will ignore the requirement of Jesus.

I pointed out that many people are afraid of that word "perfect" but really it's a simple, practical word. It includes the meanings of mature and complete but it goes beyond that. I illustrated it from the example of the word "round." A thing is either round or it's not round. But, on the other hand, there are circles of many different sizes. God the Father is the great perfect circle that encompasses the whole universe. You and I are not circles of anything like that magnitude. But, in our own small and humble way, each of us, wherever God has placed us, can be just a completely round circle. In other words, perfect.

I also pointed out that perfection, as Jesus describes it, relates primarily to attitudes and relationships. It means that we don't let other people's attitudes change us from what God wants us to be.

Today we're going to look at an example of a man in the New Testament who took this command very seriously. That man is the apostle Paul. His example will provide us with both encouragement and a challenge. I'm going to read to you Paul's own statement of his life purpose and aim as it's found in Philippians 3:10–15. I want you to notice how very definitely Paul has an aim. There's nothing haphazard or accidental in his life. This is what he says concerning his relationship to Jesus.

> "That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect, but I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you..."

First of all, I want to point out which you may already have noticed, that in that passage Paul uses the word "perfect" in two slightly different meanings. First of all, he says, "Not that I am already perfect," and then at the end he says, "Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude." Well, that is a thing that can be easily explained.

Let's take the example of an apple as it grows on the tree. At a certain stage in its growth it's just a small, hard, round, green ball. It's not perfect in the sense that it hasn't reached maturity, it isn't complete. But at that time it can be perfect in the sense that there are no flaws, nothing unhealthy in it. Well, that's how it is with you and me. We haven't arrived. We're not there. There's much more ahead of us. We're not mature. But, on the other hand, as far as we've come in the particular stage of our growth that we find ourselves in at any given moment, we can be perfect. Like that little round, green ball of the apple on the branch, in the sense that there's nothing in us that's unpleasing to God, nothing that's contrary to the purposes of God, nothing that we've withheld from God. We're open before God, he's free to do whatever he wills in any area of our lives. We're perfect like the little green apple but we're not perfect like the mature, full grown apple.

So, Paul says, "I'm perfect in the sense that my life is totally open and yielded to God, I'm not resisting God or disobeying God." But, he says, "In the other sense, I haven't arrived at God's final plan for me." So we see the two uses of the word "perfect."

Now, looking at Paul's whole statement of his motive and purpose in life we see that he was a man with real purpose, with a real objective. He said, "I forget the things that are behind." That's important. If you want to advance, you have to forget some things. You have to forget some of your successes and some of your failures. Because, turning around and thinking about them all the time will hinder you from moving on. And God gives us the grace to forget. I've met many people who were hindered in their Christian life by the memory of some failure in the past. Learn to forget. Not just your failures but your successes. Remember, there's more ahead.

The essence of Paul's whole attitude and relationship to God, I think, could be summed up in this phrase, "whole hearted commitment to God." So, in that sense, he was perfect like the little green, small, undeveloped apple. He was perfect in the sense that every part of his life was open to God, yielded to God. He was willing to obey God, he had no reservations, he was holding nothing back. But, he hadn't arrived. So, there's an example for us in the life of some of the great men of the New Testament, the apostle Paul—a challenge to us.

Now I want to look at the example of another great servant of God from the Old Testament, Abraham. I want to read to you the words that God spoke to Abraham at a certain point in his spiritual development. They're found in Genesis 17:1.

> "When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless.'"

The word "blameless" is also translated perfect. It's just like the little, round green apple we've been talking about. There's nothing in it that isn't sound. You see, as a matter of fact, if there's anything in that little green apple that is unsound, in it's final growth it will never achieve perfection in its fullest sense.

And so, this is our response to God's Almightiness. God said to Abraham, "I'm Almighty God. I can do anything. What about your attitude to me? If you'll be perfect, if you'll be totally open and yielded and surrendered and obedient, then I'll take you where I want you to be. I'll get you to your destination."

And that's not only true of Abraham, it's true of you and me as well.

I'd like to turn back to Philippians again and read some words that Paul wrote in the 2nd chapter, verses 12–15.

> "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed, not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe."

I want you to notice two main points there. First of all, Paul says, "Work out your salvation, for it is God who works in you." That's important. God works in us only in the proportion that we work out. It's like pouring water through a funnel. Only if the water goes out the bottom can you continue to pour more water in at the top. But if there's a stoppage in the funnel then you have to stop pouring water in. Well, that's like God with us. God works in us insofar as we work out. But, if we cease to work out, God has to cease to work in.

And then notice the objective or the goal which Paul sets before these believers. "So that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault." Again, that's perfection, isn't it? Blameless, pure, without fault. You see, it's a practical, attainable objective which God sets before us. And I think the key to it is found in what Paul says in verse 12, "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed…" As long as we always obey God and the messengers of God that he sends to us, we can be sure that God will work out perfection in us.

Well, our time is up for today but I'll be back with you again tomorrow at this time. Tomorrow I'll be sharing further with you on this week's challenging theme, "Progress to Perfection."

Radio Program

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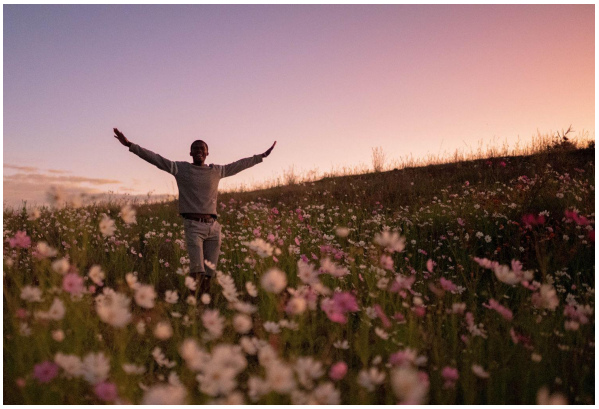

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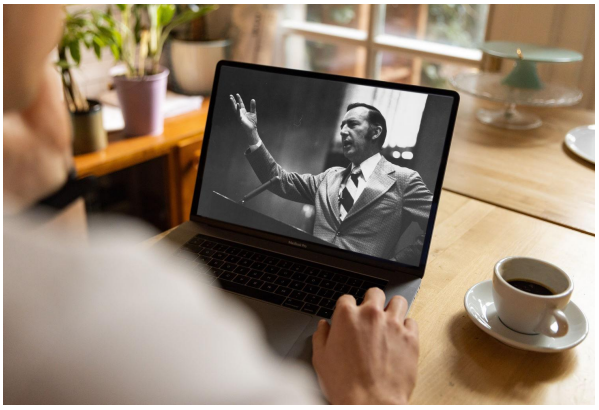

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