

A biblical scholar reflects

What type of perfection?

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Biblical scholar G rard Ross  offers an overview of the biblical concept of Christian perfection and of holiness. It is a universal calling for every believer that is expressed in different ways.

"What perfection?" At first glance the question seems a bit rhetorical. Can there be different concepts of perfection? Aristotle was clear: "What has nothing outside it is complete." In other words, "that which, in respect of goodness or excellence, cannot be surpassed in its kind."¹ Thomas Aquinas made this concept his own and clarified that "a thing is perfect in proportion to its state of actuality, because we call that perfect which lacks nothing of the mode of its perfection."²

Perfection therefore contains the idea of being complete, self-sufficient, and unsurpassable. Absolute perfection belongs to God, as Thomas writes: "God is subsisting being itself, nothing of the perfection of being can be wanting to Him."³

But questions obviously arise: How can we understand the perfection of a God defined as self-sufficient (*Ipsum Esse per se subsistens*), yet Divine Revelation also reveals His Being as *Agape*? In Matthew's gospel, how can Jesus ask the believer, with their human limitations, to be perfect as God is perfect? These two concepts of perfection – the Greek and the Biblical – do not align.

The First Testament

Perfection is an attribute of the Supreme Being in Greek philosophy. But throughout the Bible, it is significant that God is never said to be perfect, with the exception of *Mt 5:48*. Just as divine works of God are perfect, the human person is called to be perfect, but never God. For example, God said to Abraham: "... walk before me and be blameless (Heb. *t m m*)" (*Gen 17:1*). "You must remain completely loyal (*t m m*) to the Lord" (*Dt 10:12*).

The Hebrew words speak to a sense of integrity, an undivided heart. So, a human being is perfect before God when he or she lives a total choice of God and does not follow other deities. While Greek terminology speaks to the idea of fullness and being without defects, the Hebrew word reflects a concept of completeness, integrality, and reaching fulfillment.

Pauline Writings

This fundamental concept is also found in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul exhorts believers to live their lives as spiritual worship and renewal of the mind "so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Greek: *teleios*)."
(*Rom 12:1-2*)

This exhortation eliminates the separation between the sacred and profane. Yet there are no specific Christian references, such as being 'in Christ', the gift of the Spirit, or *agape*. In discerning "*what . . . is perfect*" lies an implied adherence to what sound reason recognizes as good and pleasing to God, to a life lived in renewed faith. Paul inserts the novelty of Christian living into universal ethics and thus elevates ethics in this way.⁴

Paul used the word, "perfect" as it was commonly used in morality then, as synonymous with mature adulthood, as opposed to childhood. In *1 Cor 2:6*, the apostle calls "perfect" Christians those who are "spiritual" (v. 13) and thus allow themselves to be guided by the Holy Spirit and therefore are adults (*1 Cor 14:20; Phil 3:15*). The one who is "perfect" was seen as one who had moved beyond the stage of childhood characterized by discord and jealousy to become an adult led by the Spirit and *agape*.

In the 'new' way of faith, perfection is not an attainable ideal of sinlessness through one's own strength. Rather it is a life of faith open to the eschatological future which, through the Spirit of the Risen One and the gift of *agape*, already acts in our present existence. Thus, it is not a question of wanting to reach an unattainable ideal using one's own abilities. It is an adhering with one's whole being to God's will.

The Gospel of Matthew

"Be perfect therefore as your Heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48)

In Matthew's Gospel, 'perfection' characterizes the teaching of Jesus. Thus, it had a major influence on Church spirituality and even fostered inequality between ordinary Christians and those who chose a 'state of perfection'.

But was Matthew's concept of perfection fully understood?

Jesus offers a series of contrasts, or *antitheses*, in *Mt 5:48* that allow us to understand what the Lord means by "fulfillment of the Law" (v. 17). He speaks to "a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees" (cf. v. 20), of behavior in conformity with the divine will of a God who is Father.

The 'antitheses' begin with the characteristic structure: "*You have heard that it was said... but I say to you.*" Jesus contrasts his understanding of the Law with that of Judaism in general. In fact, justice superior to that of the scribes as made explicit in *Mt 5:21-48* does not consist in multiple precepts nor in scrupulous submission to them. Rather it is found in those callings that invite us to love as our Heavenly Father loves. It is a forgiving love that comes from the heart. It is one that is radical, demanding, and without discrimination. Yet it is certainly not stressful because it corresponds to an interior call that, if lived, frees and makes the believer grow as a human-divine person, as a child of God. The perfection asked by Jesus does not signify freedom from defects or omissions. Rather it lies in imitating the Father's sincere, faithful and boundless love, but with all the inevitable limitations of our humanity.

Although Thomas Aquinas reasoned according to the Aristotelian concept of perfection, he came to the same conclusion: "The perfection of Christian life consists especially in charity."⁵ Christian perfection is therefore not an ideal to be achieved only by an elite group of consecrated persons nor limited to a simple evangelical counsel. Jesus addresses this calling to everyone in the living of one's daily, everyday life.

The rich young man

But doesn't this conclusion seemingly contradict words used by Jesus in speaking to the rich young man in Matthew's Gospel⁶?

The rich young man tells Jesus that he has lived the Commandments and then asks, "What do I still lack?" (*Mt* 19:18-20). To this Jesus replies: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor.... Then come, follow me!" (*Mt* 19:21).

Jesus calls the rich young man to follow him as a disciple and his question, "what do I lack?", corresponds precisely to the idea of perfection. It corresponds to the idea that "The one who lacks nothing is perfect." In fact, Jesus answers: "If you want to be perfect...."

But Jesus asks the young man for total detachment from (material) goods to become his disciple in a narrow sense. This invitation is not addressed to all believers, but only to this rich man as a necessary condition for him to follow Jesus literally. Even if the definition of "perfection" here is identical to *Mt* 5: 48 – adhering to the Father's will and striving to love as God loves – its application in the context of the rich young man is different. It speaks to a particular vocation to be implemented as a renunciation of goods, not as a higher ideal to be pursued. It is a concrete requirement of discipleship in a narrow sense. For that rich man, Jesus' call is not optional advice, but a vocation linked to "if you want to enter into life". It is his, it is this young man's specific way of being a Christian. But Jesus also leaves the rich man free to decide.

Two distinct situations

The circumstances in which Matthew uses the concept of perfection are important. In *Mt* 5:48, perfection as adherence to the will of the Father revealed by Christ is the vocation of all believers. But in *Mt* 19:20, this call is made personal through a specific way of life. The rich young man is called to live this universal call to perfection by responding in a specific way. For him, discipleship means following Jesus materially as well. It is 'his' way of being a Christian. Thus, Matthew's text does not want to distinguish between two categories of believers: those called to a state of perfection, and those for whom it is enough to live the Ten Commandments. Rather, everyone is called to perfection in different ways.⁷

In a commentary on *Mt* 5:48, R. Schnackenburg writes: "[P]erfection is not an ideal which we are to approach step by step, without ever reaching it; rather, it is a total surrender to God [...] by which we are to structure our life in the world, each according to his vocation. It is the love of God with all our heart and all our strength, the love from which also grows our love of neighbor and of our most distant brothers, of friend and enemy, in the image of God's love. Nor is this perfection inspired by a humanism which is striving for a fully rounded humanity, with all its powers developed to perfection. It is a life in the sight and in the company of God, so that we may pass muster before him, however miserable our humanity may still remain. Finally, that perfection is not an ethical blueprint but a religious demand: the demand to submit and surrender to the eternally superior God in obedience to his call, in the resolve to be pure in heart and radical in deed, and also in reliance on his mercy, help, and salvation."⁸

1 In III Phys. VI, 8. See <http://1goslibrary.org/aristotle/physics/36.html>.

2 *Metaphys.* IV, 16.

See <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0052%3Abook%3D5%3Asection%3D1021b>.

3 *S.Th. And, q. 4, a. 2.* See <https://logoslibrary.org/aquinas/summa/1004.html>.

4 Cf. R. Penna, *Lettera ai Romani III, Rm 12-16*, EDB, Bologna 2008, *on site*.

5 *S.Th. IIa IIae, q. 184, a. 1.*

6 Only Matthew calls him "young" perhaps because in his source (Mark) replies: "I have observed these things since I was young" (Mk 10:20). Mark himself speaks of him as "such" (Mk 10:17) and Luke presents him as a "head" (Lk 18:18).

7 Cf. S. Légasse, *L'appel du riche*, Beauchesne, Paris 1966; with fine-tuning in V. Fusco, *Poverty and sequela*, Paideia, Brescia 1991.

8 *Christian Existence in the New Testament, vol. I.* Translation of *Christliche Existenz nach dem Neuen Testament* by Rudolf Schackenburg. University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1968), pp. 177-178.