

**Exodus 20:1-17 + Turn to the Lord Who Alone Is Holy + Series: Turn to the Lord
Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY + 3rd Sunday in Lent + 4 March 2018**

What does it take to be perfect? Athletes pursue perfect scores. Teams pursue perfect records against their opponents. Businesses pursue perfect sales records and customer reviews. Parents pursue having perfectly well-behaved children and couples pursue perfect marriages. Even pastors and churches pursue perfection with their ministries and membership.

Yet how realistic are any of those pursuits of perfection? Many Olympic sports have gotten away from “perfect scores” in favor of points to the thousandths place because athletes aren’t perfect. Rare is the team that ever achieves a perfect record. Sales rise and fall, and one bad review ruins business perfection. Children sin, as do their parents. Pastors and the members they serve prove to be what they and every other believer have always been—sinners. Even the dictionary admits that perfection is rarely possible, if ever. The dictionary defines *perfection* as ***the condition, state, or quality of being free or as free as possible from all flaws or defects.***¹ We all fall short of perfection, and yet we all keep pursuing perfection in different aspects of our lives. Why is that?

Well, deep down inside every one of us, there’s a desire for perfection—to be what humanity once was before our first parents Adam and Eve fell into sin, to have again the image of God—holiness that reflects God’s holy will in every thought, every word, and every action. But there’s a problem.

Sin has corrupted us. Sin ruins and rots our best words, our best thoughts, and our best actions. God says, ***“Be holy, because I the LORD your God am holy.”*** (Leviticus 19:2) Yet we fall short time and again. We miss the mark of that holiness again and again. We repeatedly cross the line where God says, “No trespassing.” We follow our will rather than God’s holy will, and we earn God’s holy condemnation, because we are not as holy as he is.

Yet what makes it even more twisted is that our sinful nature keeps making us think perfection is something we can achieve. “If I just try hard enough, maybe I can please God. Maybe I can gain his favor. Maybe I can earn eternity with him. If I just try hard enough or at least try a little harder, if I try to be good to others or at least better than them, then maybe, just maybe, I can get the hellish consequences of sin off of my back.”

Then the harsh words of the Ten Commandments bring us back to reality. God’s holy Law thunders like artillery fire with concise bursts of do’s and don’ts destroying everything around us and within us as they state what our relationships should be with God and others. ***“Do not have other gods besides me.”*** Don’t give anything a higher priority than me. Don’t make anything else or anyone else an idol—whether that’s an idol of wood or stone or a false god of your own making. ***“Do not misuse the name of the LORD your God...”*** Don’t drag my name through the mud or use it for worthless reasons. Use it for prayer and praise and thanksgiving. ***“Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy...”*** Make sure you set aside time to rest for your soul, time spent with me in the Word and worship.

“Honor your father and your mother...” Respect the authorities that I place over you in the home, in society, and in the church. Do not dishonor or disrespect them. ***“Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not give false testimony against your neighbor.”*** Treasure my gifts of life and marriage and sex and possessions and reputation for what they are—and do not abuse or dishonor or make them your gods. ***“Do not covet your neighbor’s house. Do not covet...anything that belongs to your neighbor.”*** Do not look at anything or anyone with a sinful desire to make it your own, for such sinful thoughts lead to sinful actions and death.

...And we can’t bear to look at the bright, glaring mirror of God’s commands any longer. We can’t bear to look at our sins in all their corrupt, decaying ugliness. Instead, we act like the Pharisees of Jesus’ time and make up our own rules. We get hyper-focused on eating right or parenting right or how we treat others or how well we do our work or trying to impress others with how great we are in whatever aspect of life. We try to make society better with more laws or we try to make our families or our churches better by piling on the rules. Then, maybe then, we can ignore the reality that we all keep failing God and others. We keep trying harder and we keep failing.

Or we try to be like Benjamin Franklin when we fail in our relationships with God or others. At the age of twenty, he came up with a plan for ***“arriving at moral perfection”*** by focusing on thirteen virtues—focusing on one virtue a week trying to “perfect” himself. In the end, though, Franklin never achieved ***“moral perfection,”*** far

¹ Definition from *Google Dictionary*.

from it—and neither do we since no effort can overcome the guilt of our sins no matter how hard I try to be more kind, more helpful, more industrious, more mindful, or more healthy in my living.²

Or maybe we take the Olympian approach. Instead of striving for a perfect score, my goal is to outscore my opponents. In life, we're tempted to think that way about others when it comes to success, to family, to sports, to politics, even to religion. All that matters is that I'm better than you, but then God says we should compare ourselves to him. ***"Be holy, because I the LORD your God am Holy,"*** and we fall short. We miss the mark. We fail.

In the end, our pursuits of perfection will always end in failure. So we seek exceptions and loopholes, but there aren't any. ***"Honor your father and mother"*** isn't followed by pages of exceptions. *This rule shall not apply when your parents demonstrate themselves to be incompetent or when your friends' parents let them do what your parents forbid or when you don't agree with the political party in charge.* ***"You shall not commit adultery"*** isn't followed by pages of exceptions. *This rule shall not apply when your marriage is on the rocks or when you know you're going to marry them eventually or as long as you really love them or as long as you don't get caught.* There are no exceptions, no loopholes to God's holy Law—and the consequences are real.

With these commandments, God's holy Law thunders with the threat of eternal punishment for any and every disobedience. What's worse is what James writes, ***"Whoever keeps the whole Law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it."*** (2:10) Friends, every one of us has failed! The Law condemns every one of us because we can never be holy enough. So where can we turn if we cannot turn to laws or rules for help or hope or heaven?

We turn to the Lord who said about himself. ***"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery....I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the fathers' iniquity to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me, but showing faithful love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commands."*** We turn to the Lord who alone is holy.

We turn to Jesus, who alone is holy, because he alone is God. Yet Jesus was also conceived and born a human being like us. Jesus was ***"born of a woman, born under law"*** just as we were. Jesus came not to pursue perfection, but to be God's holiness. (Galatians 4:4) Jesus came not to try to be perfect, but to do the impossible. Jesus came to keep the entire law of God from top to bottom every second of his life from conception to death—a death which he did not deserve because he never sinned! Jesus came to keep God's holy law perfectly in every thought, every word, every action in every moment of his life.

Jesus gave his Father top priority always. He only used God's holy, saving name for prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. He took time for his soul to rest in the Word and worship and prayer. He honored all authorities whom God had placed over him, not just his loving parents, but even the unjust religious leaders and the waffling Roman governor Pilate. He treasured and taught about God's gifts of life and marriage and sex and possessions and reputation. He sought no loopholes or exceptions and never had a covetous thought. Jesus alone was holy. He alone was holy enough to keep these commandments, to cleanse the temple during his ministry (John 2:13-22), and to live the holy life that God demanded for us.

Because of his life lived ***"under the law,"*** Jesus set you free from the slavery of the law with all its guilt and consequences and condemnation. Because he was holy, you are holy in God's sight through faith in Christ. His life was lived for you. His death was the payment for your sins, and now God sees you no longer as slaves, but as his beloved sons and daughters. In Christ, who alone is holy, you have hope and help and heaven assured. And you don't have to do anything to earn that or purchase that. Christ has done it all for you freely!

While that might seem foolish or too easy to our own self-righteousness, that is truly the ***"wisdom of God."*** (1 Corinthians 1:24) So why did God reveal his Law as he did in the Ten Commandments? That Law serves as the mirror showing all of our ugly, sins, showing how desperately we need a Savior. That Law drives us back again and again to the Lord who set us free from slavery with his faithful love in Christ, to find forgiveness for all of our sins, our guilt, our failure in the holy Lord who faithfully loves every one of us.

In light of Christ's perfection for us, that Law now serves as a guide for you and me to obey God's commands day after day out of joyful, thankful love. You and I can't possibly reach perfection this side of heaven, but as beloved children adopted into God's family, forgiven and set free from sin's slavery, we need not pursue

² <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/01/health/13-virtues-wisdom-project/index.html>

perfection. Jesus was perfect for us. Therefore out of love, we give our God and his saving name and his holy Word our highest priority. Out of love, we love others respecting those whom God has placed over us and treasuring God's gifts of life and marriage and sex and possessions and reputation. We turn not to laws or rules for hope or help or heaven, instead we live for Christ because he lived for us.

In the end, when it's time for the Lord to call us home or when the Lord calls a loved one in the Lord home, we don't turn to how "good" we were or how "good" they were. In light of God's holy Law, we can't. Instead we turn to the Lord who alone was holy for us even in death, who alone gave his holy life that we might live, and then who alone took that holy life back up again that we might live with him for all eternity. Jesus is our hope, our help, our holiness, and our clear path to heaven. To him be all glory alone! Amen.