

**“Perfectionism”**  
**Hebrews 10:1-18**  
**August 29, 2021**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Today’s passage concludes main doctrinal section of Hebrews, a section that proclaims the good news of Jesus by reference to the Old Testament. All the points made here have been made previously. Why the repetition? We repeat things we consider to be of great importance. The author believed that the gospel is the most important thing of all, and that the hard hearts of his readers needed the repeated hammer blows of gospel truth in order to be broken and then reassured.

Though the material he covers in this passage is not new, he does present it with a new twist, indicated by the repetition of the word “perfect” in verses 1 and 14. In this gospel, Jesus “has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.” The word translated “perfect” in verse 1 is a surprisingly common word in Hebrews, occurring in one form or another twelve times. Notice the tense of the verb in verse 14. Jesus “has perfected” us already. How could the text say such an obvious untruth? There are many areas where Christians disagree with one another, but this is not one of them. We are all quite ready to state that we are far less than perfect. Some help is given to this problem by noting that the Greek word for perfection has a slightly different sense in Greek than in English. The Greek word *teleos* means complete or fulfilled. But still, who of us regards ourselves as completed? We have given a name to the quest for perfection, and it is not a positive name. We refer to it as “perfectionism.”

Perfectionism can be found in the list of psychological dysfunctions. It is not hard to see why. Perfectionists tend to be filled with fears and anxieties for the simple reason that their standards are never realized. But is it possible that the desire itself for perfection, or completion, is a God-given one? And isn’t it closer to the mark to view the dysfunction of perfectionism simply as the attempt to gain this sense of completion apart from Christ? Think of the satisfaction you get with a sense of completion, as well as the challenges of living with a sense of incompleteness. Like many of your jobs, one of the challenges of my job as a pastor is that there is rarely a sense of completion. With every sermon I preach, I am left with a strong sense that I could have done better. I can attempt to shepherd and help people, but my efforts are never perfect, and there will always be others with needs. I think one of the reasons I enjoy bike-riding is the simplicity of its sense of completion. You go from point A to point B and just keep both wheels on the ground. Or if you’re a more creative type, perhaps you feel that sense of completion when the picture on the canvas is finished or the cake is beautifully decorated.

It's not just about completing tasks. More foundational is the sense of relational completeness, the sense that things are okay with the significant people in your life. And no one is more significant than God. The perfection or completeness the book of Hebrews is speaking of is ultimately found in Christ. Today's passage speaks powerfully to this, as well as speaking about where it cannot be found.

## **I. Perfection Frustrated – v. 1-4**

The opening verses of this chapter make a point that we've encountered previously in Hebrews. The animal sacrifices of the Old Testament were unable to bring the sense of completion, of perfection, that we all long for. The text mentions two flaws of the Old Testament sacrifices. First, they were a **“shadow of the good things to come.”** The contrast is between a shadow and **“the true form of these realities.”** In other words, it's the difference between what we would call a silhouette of someone, formed by casting a shadow of that person's head, and a full color picture with all the detail of that person. These Old Testament sacrifices communicated truth, but it was vague and lacking in detail.

The second flaw was found in their repetition. Had they been effective, they would not have required repetition. The fact of their repetition had the opposite effect, reminding the Old Testament people of God of their sins every year. The repetition sent a message saying, “Unless something better can be sacrificed, the death of these sacrifices I am witnessing will come to me.” Verse 4 states the problem clearly. **“For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”**

Verse 5 begins a quote from Psalm 40, which contains a common Old Testament idea. **“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired...in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure.”** Other passages make this same point with even stronger language. For example, Isaiah 66:3 says, **“He who slaughters an ox is like one who kills a man; he who sacrifices a lamb, like one who breaks a dog's neck; he who presents a grain offering, like one who offers pig's blood; he who makes a memorial offering of frankincense, like one who blesses an idol. These have chosen their own ways, and their soul delights in their abominations.”**

How can these verses be reconciled with the fact that it was God who directed that these sacrifices and offerings be made in the first place? The answer to that question is the key to this whole passage. There was nothing wrong with the offering of these sacrifices in the Old Testament period. God intended them to prepare the way for the true sacrifice of Jesus. The wrong was with the people offering the sacrifices and their use of these. The passage from Isaiah points out that those bringing these offerings that God despises had “chosen their own ways.” The offerings God hates are the ones offered in self-trust. God hates self-

righteousness, and sinners have an immense capacity to turn even the best God-given things into an occasion for self-righteousness. That is the case with the offerings God hates.

This truth brings us to the main application for us before we move to our next point. One of the difficulties in applying the teachings of Hebrews to our own lives is the fact that the specific form of self-righteousness present in their day is not an issue for us. In my years of ministry as a pastor, I've not had one single person attempt to make the case that we should reinstitute animal sacrifices. But that doesn't mean that there is no application of this material to our lives. While it is true that Christians today aren't claiming that animal sacrifices can make them perfect or complete, there are other objects of such claims. It's not just animal sacrifices that can't make us perfect or complete; it's any thing other than Jesus. So the application of this section is to ask yourself what you might be looking to for completion or fulfillment apart from Jesus. For most people, it usually boils down to wanting to be right and to look good. This passage is telling us that your desire for completion, fulfillment and perfection is good and God-given. But any pursuit of this desire outside of Christ will fail.

What attempts for completion, fulfillment and perfection outside of Christ are most present in your life? I came across an article this week that listed some of the symptoms of the dysfunction of perfectionism. I think it's accurate to say that these are some of the symptoms of trying to find your perfection outside of Christ. They include being highly critical, being depressed by unmet goals, a fear of failure, procrastination, defensiveness, and low self-esteem. On the other hand, those who come to realize the truth of the second half of this passage, that our completion, fulfillment and perfection are found in Christ, are filled with life, joy and health. Let's look at that now.

## **II. Perfection Realized – v. 5-18**

Perfection could not come through the Old Testament sacrificial rites. Instead, according to the passage quoted from Psalm 40, it comes through a person. The author of Hebrews had a Christ-centered view of the psalms, and views Christ as speaking through this psalm of David. Verse 5 is a statement of the incarnation. **“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me.”** In order for perfection to come to sinners like us, God had to send someone like us, but without sin. No animal could serve as our substitute, and no human other than the God-man could serve as a substitute for the human race.

Not only must the second member of the godhead become man, but he must submit himself fully to the will of God. It was God's will that he should be the sacrifice of atonement to satisfy divine wrath. The psalm attributes to Jesus these words of commitment to do the will of God. **“Behold, I have come to do your**

**will, O God.”** The will of God, as we see in the next verse, is that Jesus should offer his body as a sacrifice for our sanctification.

Our perfection comes through the sacrificial offering of the person sent to us, our Lord Jesus. The author makes the point again contrasting the one-time offering of Jesus with the repeated sacrifices of the Old Testament. The fact that Jesus’ sacrifice didn’t need to be repeated demonstrates its effectiveness in removing sin. The fact that the Old Testament sacrifices were repeated many times demonstrated their inability to take away sins.

The power and effectiveness of Jesus’ sacrifice is also seen in the fact that it begins a process through which all the suffering in the world will be ended. **“When Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sin, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet”** (v. 12-13). The Old Testament priests never sat down in the tabernacle. Jesus sits because his priestly work is done. So powerful is the offering of Jesus as our sacrifice that all he needs to do is to wait for its full effects to be realized. In the death of Jesus, Satan and the kingdom of hell were dealt a death blow from which they will never recover. In time, all Jesus’ enemies will be subdued. Some will be subdued by conversion, in which Jesus’ enemies become his friends. Others are subdued through judgment, and they will be placed under his feet, becoming part of his footstool.

The question naturally arises here, “Why is Jesus waiting? Why doesn’t he subdue his enemies immediately and end the great suffering of our planet?” Such a question is strengthened in times of suffering such as the one we are in currently. Covid infections are increasing rapidly in our state and among our people. Tragedies in Afghanistan and Haiti have dominated the news. As we sit here this morning, a powerful hurricane is barreling toward Louisiana. Personal tragedies have occurred in the lives of many of our church members. Jesus could end it all immediately. Why doesn’t he?

This is the problem of evil, and a couple of points need to be made about this. First, it is important to remember the attitude of Jesus amidst these tragedies. As we read here that Jesus is seated and waiting, it would be easy to conclude that he is indifferent about all this suffering. We might wrongly envision him seated in a rocking chair in heaven oblivious to this world’s sufferings. That could not be further from the truth. Do you remember Jesus’s response to the death of his friend, Lazarus? His emotional response was one of anger (John 11:38) and sympathy, a sympathy leading him to weep. The suffering of this world produces suffering for Jesus as well. He could end both his own suffering and the suffering of his world immediately. Why doesn’t he? The answer is found in 2 Peter 3:9. **“The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”** The Lord’s heart is big with mercy, and his delay is to allow

time for the benefits of his great sacrifice to bring forth the fruit of many conversions.

Not only does this one sacrifice begin the process that will end all suffering, but it is also the force behind our perfection. **“For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified”** (v. 14). Note again the tense of the verbs. He “has perfected” for all time those for whom he died. It’s a perfect tense verb, which means that it speaks of a past event that has continuing effects. There is a sense in which we have already been perfected. We have full forgiveness, the righteousness of Christ as a gift, and adoption as God’s sons and daughters. There is nothing more that God could give us because he’s given us everything already. It’s only a matter of time before all of it will come to us. It’s as if you’ve been named the chief beneficiary of your recently-deceased rich uncle’s estate, and it’s only a matter of time until his assets come to you.

And then the next verb is in the present tense. Who are those who have already been perfected? It is **“those who are being sanctified.”** The present tense in Greek speaks of an ongoing action. We are not yet fully sanctified, but are in the process of being so. This verse also helps us understand something of the process of our sanctification. It happens, at least in part, as we come to receive the perfection we have in Christ. Many in our church have benefitted from a discipleship program called “Sonship.” This verse provides a good biblical basis for that program in its teaching that our sanctification is based on our grasp of our justification, our perfection through the sacrifice of Jesus.

## **CONCLUSION:**

We are made perfect or complete in Jesus. The desire for completion is God-given, and the realization of that completeness is also God-given through the sacrifice of Jesus. Think with me for a minute about what it feels like to complete a satisfying job. It might be something as common as finishing dinner preparations for another meal. Or it might be a lengthy project at which you have worked for months or even years. Completion is deeply satisfying. Our final verses remind us that this completion Jesus brings is defined by the new covenant, when the law of God is written on our hearts and we live in the realization of sins forgiven.

Where do you see the dysfunction of perfectionism at work in your life? God calls us to repent of seeking to find it anywhere outside of Christ. In him and only in him, you are complete. Receive the perfection he died to give you and now graciously offers to you.

**Small Group Discussion Questions**  
**Hebrews 10:1-18**

1. The word translated “perfect” appears 12 times in Hebrews and twice in our passage (v. 1, 14). It is a Greek word that has the idea of completion or fulfillment. When was the last time when you experienced a sense of satisfaction at something that you completed?
2. There is a psychological dysfunction that goes by the name of “perfectionism.” In your experience, what are some of the harmful results of perfectionism?
3. Do you see any perfectionist tendencies in your heart?
4. Interact with the idea that a desire for completion is God-given. Do you agree or disagree with that? If the goal of completion/perfection is appropriate, it is the means of achieving it that becomes problematic. Our passage begins by saying that the sacrifices of the Old Testament were not able to provide it. By extension, we can say that nothing short of Christ’s death can provide such completion. What do you tend to look to for completion/perfection apart from Christ?
5. Verse 13 says that Jesus is now seated and waiting for his enemies to be made his footstool. We may often want Jesus to end all suffering now instead of waiting to do so. What does 2 Peter 3:9 say about why he is waiting? Can you think of any application of that truth?
6. Verse 14 says that you have already been made perfect by the single offering of Jesus? In light of the fact that none of us is without sin, what do you think he means by that?
7. What does this verse teach about how our sanctification is based on our justification? What does that mean practically?