

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
February 20, 2022

## **Made Perfect**

Hebrews 7:26-8:6

A strange thing happened last week at the Winter Olympics in Beijing. Chinese ski jumper Song Qiwu barely cleared 70 meters in the mixed team event, even with the wind behind him. This was a full 30 meters shorter than the leading competitors. It was an unremarkable jump that left the commentators and the crowd underwhelmed. Even Qiwu himself was less than pleased. But when his score was initially shown on the television screens, it appeared that all five judges had given him a perfect score, which would have put the Chinese team in first place. It turns out, though, that the score was the result of a technical error. Qiwu's score was revised down and his team finished last, thus failing to qualify for the second round.

It's hard when you go from perfection to far from perfect, especially on a world stage. But even in the arena of our daily experience, we know what it's like to live with a strong sense of being assessed and evaluated, rated and ranked. Sometimes the assessment comes from others around us. Your boss, your teacher, your parents, your peers, your social media followers. Sometimes the assessment comes from yourself. How am I measuring up to what I think I should be or to what I should be achieving? Am I living the way I believe I should be living? What kind of rating would I give myself? And then of course there's God's opinion, the ultimate assessment. Is the Lord pleased with me? Does my life meet divine approval? In the eyes of heaven, what kind of score do I deserve?

Right now, I don't see anyone in the congregation holding up a card that says "A Perfect 10." Paul's declaration, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23) has formed us enough to know that we can't show up at church with a sense of spiritual spotlessness. On the contrary, we come into God's presence again today not on the basis of what we've done but on the foundation of what he has done for us through Jesus Christ.

In today's text from Hebrews, God's action on our behalf is described using the language and imagery of priesthood. The writer of the letter, sometimes referred to as the Preacher, has introduced the congregation to the great priest Melchizadek. According to the Preacher, Melchizadek was a foreshadowing of Jesus. His qualities of righteousness, peace, and timelessness point forward to a new and greater high priest. That's when the preacher transitions to spotlighting the greatness of Jesus, a priest who can save completely and for all time. He's the one through whom we come to God. He "always lives to make intercession" for us (7:25).

"Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens" (7:26). That sounds like perfection to me. A priestly perfect 10. But we need to be careful to understand the nature of Jesus' perfection. Jesus participated in both the life of God and the life of humanity, which means that he knows this life we experience, life in this present world, from the inside and not just from the outside. Earlier in his letter, the Preacher stresses that it was through suffering that Jesus was made "perfect" (2:10). Now this doesn't mean perfected morally. After all, the Preacher has already pointed out that Jesus was "without sin" (4:15). Rather, in this case, "perfect" has

to do with being made “fit” for a vocation or job. It was through his suffering, in other words, through his trials, tests, and temptations, that Jesus was “made perfect” (7:28) for his task in God’s plan to reconcile us to himself and rescue us from death.

Thomas Long tells about a former student who described a summer he spent as a laborer on a construction crew. He said that his foreman was a kind and gracious person. So if a worker got sick on the job, he understood and made arrangements. If a worker had problems at home and was late or absent from work, the foreman would cover for him. But the one thing this foreman would not tolerate was if a worker would sit down on the job before the work was done. To sit down was a sign that the job was done, and to do so beforehand was a violation of a sacred trust.<sup>1</sup>

The Preacher says, “We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven...” (8:1). Jesus completed what he was sent to accomplish. He remained faithful to his task. He was steadfast in his obedience to God’s will and purpose. He accomplished, once and for all, what was necessary to bring about peace between defiant humanity and God.

And yet, so much imperfection remains, in the world and in our lives. So much about life on this planet that doesn’t align with God’s righteousness. So much about our lives that doesn’t conform to the priorities of God’s kingdom. The enormous gap between what God expects of us and what we actually do, or don’t do, can weigh down on our discipleship and discourage us from persevering in faithfulness and obedience. We may even begin to lose sight of God’s grace, and start to strive in our own power to attain what we believe holiness requires of us. Rather than living out what Christ has already accomplished for us, we start to focus more on what we can accomplish. Our life for Christ gets turned into a kind of spiritual perfectionism.

One person has written:

The chief characteristic of perfectionism is a constant, overall feeling of never doing well enough or being good enough. Karen Horney’s classic phrase describes it perfectly: “Perfectionism is the tyranny of the oughts.” “I ought to do better.” “I ought to have done better.” “I ought to be able to do better.” That goes from preparing a meal to praying to witnessing. The three favorite phrases of the perfectionist are: *could have*, *should have*, and *would have*. Always standing on tiptoe, always reaching, stretching, trying, but never quite making it.<sup>2</sup>

We want to live lives that are pleasing to God. And the only way to do so is in and through the grace of God. Often, this sense of God’s grace, God’s loving acceptance, is strong when you first come to faith in Christ. But with time, you may be tempted to think that it’s up to you to finish what God has started. Maybe you slide into a different mode of spirituality, striving in your own power, by your own effort, to progress toward spiritual wholeness, to advance toward perfection. But the reality is that every day, at each step along the way, your transformation into the likeness of Christ has to come from the one who is the source and sustainer of your new life, the Lord himself.

And remember that the Lord isn’t a God who is remote from us, a God who keeps his distance as he goes about evaluating our lives. Yes, God is holy, and calls us to holiness. Our lives are subject to his judgment. But that doesn’t mean that God is a distant detached divinity administering a standardized test of righteousness, to see how you score and whether you make it into his kingdom or not. Instead, note what the Preacher has already pointed out: “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in

every way, just as we are" (4:15). This is a high priest who didn't just bring an offering but actually became the offering. Jesus offered himself for our sins (v. 27). He gathered our sinfulness, weakness, and failure into himself and placed himself on the altar. As one commentator has put it, "he brought as an offering to God nothing less than the fullness of the human condition perfected by his own obedience."<sup>3</sup>

This is good news that we need to hear and believe. It's not an admonition to strive for perfection. It's an announcement about the perfection we already have in Christ. I'm not saying we should aim low and settle for less when it comes to living as God expects us to. We're always accountable to God for how we're progressing in holiness and righteousness. But if our lives are driven solely by the pursuit of perfection, we'll find ourselves overwhelmed by impossible standards.

A few years ago, *USA Today* reported on some research exploring the rise of perfectionism in young people, particularly college students. Compared to previous generations, they're harder on themselves and more demanding of others. They also experience higher levels of social pressure to be perfect. One of the researchers concluded, "Today's young people are competing with each other in order to meet societal pressures to succeed and they feel that perfectionism is necessary in order to feel safe, socially connected and of worth."<sup>4</sup>

Safe, socially connected, and of worth. Add to these the need to feel accepted and the hunger for approval. The need to feel valued. The need to feel loved and forgiven. These, and many other things, are needs that transcend generations and reach across humankind. As Thomas Long says:

We want our lives to count for something, to make, in other words, an acceptable offering. But we are plagued by the fear that our offering is finally unacceptable. Not only do we frequently make a mess of our lives, but even when we are at our best, even when we press ourselves to the limit to give and serve and do the right thing, it still seems insufficient. We can never do enough, achieve enough, love enough, give enough, have enough, be noticed enough. Someone is always standing in judgment over us—parents, teachers, employers, strangers, our inner selves—putting us on trial, deeming our efforts to be unacceptable. So day after day we are condemned to trudge to life's altar with a new offering, but it is never satisfactory.<sup>5</sup>

In the midst of our struggles with the pursuit of perfection, we need to return, day after day after day, to the cross, where Jesus already made the offering that makes us perfect. His offering is enough. Our wholeness isn't in what we do but in what he has done for us. When you trust in what Jesus has done for you, and commit your life to following him, you set out on a path that involves being made like him. You aim your life toward holiness. You grow in faithfulness, steadfastness, and obedience. Jesus' suffering and sacrifice start to take shape in the way that you take your life and make it an offering to God, each day, as a testimony to redemption, reconciliation, and restoration, with God and with others.

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Long, "Imagine There's No Heaven: The Loss of Eschatology in American Preaching," *Journal for Preachers* (Advent 2006) 27.

<sup>2</sup> "Perfectionism: Fraught with Fruits of Self-Destruction." Christianity Today. April 10, 1981. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1981/april-10/perfectionism-fraught-with-fruits-of-self-destruction.html> (February 16, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1997) n.p.

<sup>4</sup> Sean Rossman, "Millennials strive for perfectionism more than past generations, study says." *USA Today* (January 4, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews*, n.p.