

Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



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The Sin of Perfectionism

The desire to be perfect is laudable, but unless it is tempered with an honest admission of our imperfections, it can become a terrible curse on ourselves and those around us.

“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us” (1 Jn. 1:8-10).

One of the cardinal truths of Biblical theology is the fallen condition of the human race. We are not perfect, and it is folly to pretend otherwise (Rom. 3:23; Eccl. 7:20; etc.). In this text, John labels any claims of perfection as sin, a foolish rejection of God and His truth. This fact is so blindingly obvious that I have never heard anyone claim they are perfect.

So why does John warn us—twice in three verses—not to make such a preposterous claim? Surely we all know better.

Or do we? What John is addressing is actually quite common. We may not overtly boast of perfection, but we have other ways of avoiding the reality of sin in our lives. For example, when we do make a mistake, how often do we

instinctively point to someone else as having contributed to the error? This effort to somehow pin blame on others is nothing more than an attempt to keep our own record clean. “I’m not responsible” is just another way of saying, “I have not sinned.”

Some people develop this self-righteous criticism of others into a systematic theology that keeps all the attention focused permanently on the sins of others: the denominations, the liberals, the unchurched, the atheists, etc. There is certainly enough sin “out there” in the world to criticize, so that we can make ourselves look pretty good in comparison. That was the thinking of the older brother of the prodigal son, who saw his own performance as infinitely better than that of his little brother. By fixating on his brother’s failures, he could boast, “I never transgressed your commandment at any time” (Lk. 15:29), and never recognize the preposterousness of what he was saying.

It’s one thing to acknowledge generically, “I’m not perfect.” But unless we are willing to own up to specific failures

in our life, complete with apologies where appropriate, our generic confession means nothing.

One more thought: Ironically, perfectionism can contribute to a psychological disorder that keeps us from making genuine improvements in our own lives. The perfectionist will set such impossibly high goals for himself that when he fails to reach them—which is inevitable—he struggles with a sense of personal worthlessness. And he often hides his despair by bearing down even harder on the sinners around him.

Jesus demanded, “you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). But after setting that lofty goal, He died for an entire race of creatures who would never achieve it. That’s why the only sensible course of action is the honest self-appraisal that John urges upon us: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us . . . and to cleanse us.” Only by reaching out for God’s mercy can we find the strength to make improvements in our own lives, and the compassion to help others do the same.

– David King