

# Perfect Makes Practice

Matthew 5:38-48; Philippians 3:12-14

## All Saints Sunday

31 October 2010

Here's a brain teaser for you. The perfect man meets the perfect woman and they fall in love. After a perfect courtship, they have a perfect wedding, a perfect honeymoon, then live a perfect life in a perfect house which, of course, is situated on a perfect street in a perfect little village.

One perfect spring day, this perfect couple are driving in their car when, suddenly, they see a beautiful rabbit hopping along the road. It turns out to be the Easter Bunny carrying a load of chocolate eggs. They give him a ride and help him deliver his goodies. Unfortunately, there is a crash and the car ends up in a ditch. Only one of the three occupants survives. Which is it? The perfect man, the perfect woman or the Easter Bunny. Who is the lone survivor?<sup>1</sup>

Give up? Well, it can only be the perfect woman. Why? Because, as every woman knows, the Easter Bunny and the perfect man are fictional. They don't really exist!

Now, that's obviously a sexist joke. But I am not sure which of the sexes it offends most of all. Is it the male sex because it summarily dismisses the possibility that some men might just be perfect after all? Or, is it the female sex that are insulted because the story infers that women commonly think of themselves as being perfect? I am confused. One thing that is perfectly clear about this story is that we do know who must have been driving the car!!

Being the perfect man or woman is, of course, something that is quite beyond us flawed and fallible human beings. We can only joke about the possibility of perfection. But it is no joke that many people today live under the burden of many and varied demands to be perfect. Especially, to act perfectly. To execute their jobs perfectly. Without any room for any mistake.

I was pondering this fact the other day when Evelyn and I were flying back from vacation. I was thinking about the pilots of the plane being responsible for the lives of the 400 people onboard. When it comes to flying these increasingly complex machines, there is very little room for error. Especially when taking off and landing, the pilots have to get it right first time. Even though they are aided by a great deal of modern technology, yet they have to act perfectly or else the consequences are dire.

I wonder how you or I would react under such intense pressure? How would we cope with situations where we knew we had to perform perfectly the first time? In moments when we knew there were no second chances. In jobs, for instance, such as the surgeon in the emergency room, or the police officer faced with the violent criminal, or the operator in the control room of

the nuclear power station, or the umpire in the baseball game, or the political leader involved in delicate peace negotiations. How would we handle these kind of jobs where the constraints of performing perfectly are ever-present? Where we only get one chance to do the right thing?

But such stresses not only affect those in supremely demanding jobs, many ordinary people also have to deal with a great deal of pressure for perfection in their everyday lives. Think, for instance, of the young mother constantly having to show she is a paragon of perfection as a wife, mother and career-woman. Or, the teenager forced to present the perfect macho image to his friends lest they think he's a geek. Or the grandparents constantly having to watch that they do and say the right things in family situations where there is hostility and bad feeling. The stress ordinary people feel to perform flawlessly in their lives can be quite significant.

Then there are a whole host of additional expectations of perfection experienced by those of us who are Christians. Many passages in the Bible seem to portray the only life acceptable to God is that which is absolutely without fault, "Who has the right to go up to the Lord's hill? Who may enter his holy Temple?" asks the Psalmist, "Only those who are pure in act and thought."<sup>2</sup> Anyone else, seemingly, will not be welcome in God's presence.

Also, in the Sermon on the Mount, we are faced with one of the greatest demands of all, the demand of Jesus, who says, "You must be perfect - just as your Father in heaven is perfect."<sup>3</sup> Based on this, much traditional Christian teaching has bred a spiritual and moral perfectionism that repeatedly torments us with such maxims as: Real Christians never gets upset or lose their tempers. Real Christians are always happy and smiling. Real Christians never have any doubts. And, of course, we get so depressed when we cannot achieve these religious expectations. We feel we are simply not making the grade as Christians. We feel failures in God's sight.

As we endeavour to cope with the pressure of perfectionism these days, perhaps the most important thing is, more and more, to accept ourselves with all our faults and failings. Increasingly, to face up to the fact that we are human beings with feet of clay. Even I, your minister, who is well known for doing all things faultlessly, makes a mistake once in every blue moon! You just need to look at today's sermon title for confirmation. "Perfection makes Practice". Yes, all of us, bar none, have to face the fact we are imperfect people living in an imperfect world.

A new film entitled *The King's Speech*,<sup>4</sup> due to be released at the end of November won "The People's Choice Award" at the recent Toronto International Film Festival. It relates the story of the struggle of Prince Albert, the future King George VI, the father of Queen Elizabeth, to overcome a serious speech defect, a chronic stammer, that had afflicted him since childhood and seemingly stemmed from the impatience of his father, George V, when the young boy could not express himself clearly or quickly enough.

In 1925, when Prince Albert, or the Duke of York as he then was, had to address a huge audience at the closing ceremony of the British Empire Exhibition he was embarrassed and humiliated by his faltering and awkward performance. The problem became even worse during the later 1930s when it became evident that, with the abdication of his brother, Edward VIII, he would be called to ascend to the throne and, as George VI, would have to give strong speeches of leadership during the war years.

The film tells how an Australian speech therapist, Lionel Logue, was called upon to help Prince Albert deal with his stammer and overcome his dread of public speaking. The future king proved to be a difficult challenge for Logue because of his stiff, uptight personality and his constant consciousness of royal status. He believed that, because he was who he was, he should be able to speak fluently and articulately without any need for coaching. The idea of a commoner from the colonies having to help him was quite abhorrent.

Logue gave his royal patient breathing and vocal exercises but with limited success. However, the real breakthrough came when Logue managed to get Albert to loosen up, laugh at himself, come to terms with his faults and failings, and realise that he wasn't perfect, nor did he need to be perfect. From that point on Albert made enormous steps in becoming the man who, as King George VI, would be able to give the strong royal leadership that was needed throughout the war years.

A few years ago, Stephen Hayes, former minister of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Cobourg, wrote an excellent little book, entitled, *You Don't Have To Be Perfect*. In it, he talks a lot about self-acceptance; accepting the fact we are who we are; that we don't need to be perfect to be Christians. We are people who get angry, who get discouraged, who worry and are anxious. The important thing, he says, is that we accept such feelings, not trying to deny them but believing them to be compatible with our Christianity. "It does not mean," he says, "that we resign ourselves to our imperfections but it does mean that we can live with our failures even as we work to improve ourselves."<sup>5</sup>

And this is exactly what Jesus intends when he encourages us in Matthew 5:48 to be perfect. The word for "perfect" in Greek is *teleios* and this does not mean perfect in the absolute sense of being completely without

any fault or failing. Rather, it means the movement a person makes towards the goal of personal fulfilment or wholeness or maturity while accepting the imperfection of their present life. It does not denote a state already achieved but rather the journey towards that state which is, of course, the journey of a lifetime. It is the journey of the saints of God. Not saints as we so often think of them as those whose unblemished characters have elevated them into a state of moral and spiritual purity. But saints in the sense of those who, despite their faults and foibles, are in the process of becoming "sainted" or sanctified – those who are on the journey of growth in Christian discipleship.

And it is to the undertaking of this journey that Jesus challenges us today, not to the instant attainment of some ideal state of moral and spiritual perfection. It is to fighting the good fight that he summons us, knowing that we will have our successes and failures; but we will constantly pick ourselves up when we fall short and, as St. Paul says in Philippians, keep pressing on towards the mark of our high calling in Christ Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps, today, you find yourself under the pressure of perfectionism – whether from your own expectations or those around you or from what you feel is expected of you as a Christian. If so, know now, today, that you are, by the grace of God, released to be yourself because God accepts you just as you are with all your faults and failings.

The Good News of the Gospel is that, to be a follower of Jesus Christ, you don't have to be perfect. You just have to keep sincerely journeying on towards that goal.

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St. Paul's Presbyterian Church  
Peterborough, Ontario

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from a story by King Duncan, "The Perfect Man", [www.eSermons.com](http://www.eSermons.com)

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 24:3,4

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:48

<sup>4</sup> *The King's Speech*, starring Colin Firth, Helena Bonham Carter, Geoffrey Rush; Director Tom Hooper; See Saw Films/Bedlam Productions, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Hayes, *You Don't Have To Be Perfect*, Woodlake Books c.1990

<sup>6</sup> Philippians 3:14