

When Methodist founder John Wesley commissioned preachers for the work of spreading the gospel, he asked them, “Are you going on to perfection?” That’s quite a question! We might want to answer, “Well, nobody’s perfect,” but Wesley expected candidates to answer, “I am, by the grace of God.” Wesley then asked, “Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?” The expected answer was, “God willing, I do.”

Don’t be put off by those questions. The phrase about going on to perfection wasn’t Wesley’s invention; it comes right from Scripture. The author of Hebrews wrote, “*Therefore let us go on toward perfection, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ, and not laying again the foundation: repentance from dead works and faith toward God...*” (6:1).

The writer of Hebrews is not suggesting we abandon the basic teachings about Christ or reject them for something different. Rather, he meant that if we’re spending all our time talking about the basics of the faith, then we aren’t moving forward and on toward perfection. When we move beyond these initial things, build on them, and put them into action, then we are going on to perfection. This connects to Jesus’ words where he commands his followers to love their enemies, adding, “*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect*” (Matthew 5:48).

Pastor Scott Hamley explains going on to perfection this way: “When Wesley was talking about Christian perfection, he didn’t mean absolute perfection. He meant more of a practical perfection, being perfected in love. He meant [people] could come to the place where they were so in love with God that they would not sin knowingly. He didn’t mean that a person could ever be without sin in this life, but rather without intentional sin. Sins of ignorance are always going to happen. We’re always going to do the wrong thing from time to time because we don’t know what the right thing is. We don’t have perfect knowledge. But Wesley believed it was possible that, by God’s grace, a believer could mature to the point where they would never sin on purpose.” Hamley adds, “By the way, Wesley was always suspicious of anyone who claimed to have reached Christian perfection. He denied that he himself had reached it. And perhaps that’s part of going on to perfection, to recognize that you aren’t there yet.”

He’s right; we’re not there yet. We’re unfinished. But alongside that, we hear Paul’s assertion: “*I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ*” (v. 6). “The day of Jesus Christ” refers to the second coming of Jesus at the consummation of the age.

Paul’s argument is that the completion point of the spiritual life comes at the end, and even then, it only comes with God’s help. Meanwhile, we should not let the spiritual shortcomings in our lives derail us from going on toward perfection in love, from growing in Christ, and from gaining spiritual maturity. Paul’s prayer for the believers in Philippi is that their “*love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help [them] to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ [they] may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God*” (vv. 9-10). Paul prays that by the end of our Christian journey we will be completed in the fullest sense, with God’s help. Paul’s not perfect either, but he’s on the journey, writing of himself, “*Not that I have already attained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own*” (3:12). First, God claims us; then we may grow in Christ to perfection with the help of God’s Spirit.

C.S. Lewis (*The Chronicles of Narnia*) wrote about God bringing us to perfection. Lewis said that when we seek Christ’s help in being the person God wants us to be, Christ doesn’t settle for giving us just a little. Lewis explained that as a child he often had toothaches. If he told his mother, she would give him an aspirin to deaden the pain for the night, a temporary fix. But Lewis also knew that if said nothing, the pain would get worse and his mother would take him to the dentist, and he didn’t want that. “I wanted immediate relief from pain,” Lewis wrote, “but I could not get it without having my teeth set permanently right. And I knew those dentists; I knew they started fiddling about with all sorts of other teeth which had not yet begun to ache. They would not let sleeping dogs lie; if you gave them an inch they took it all.”

Lewis went on to say that Christ is like the dentist. If we ask for his help to deal with something about which we are ashamed, or which is spoiling our life, he will give it, but Christ will not stop there. Lewis pictures Christ saying, “Make no mistake, if you let me, I will make you perfect...I will never rest, until you are literally perfect — until [God] can say without reservation that [God] is well pleased with you, as [God] is well pleased with me.” If you give Christ an inch, he’ll take it all.

We are not perfect yet. Recognizing the unfinished nature of our practice of faith is a good thing. It helps us to live life with humility, recognizing that we aren’t all that God intends for us to be. Humility should make us gracious, willing to listen in our dealings with others.

Recognizing the unfinished nature of our practice of faith should help us to beware of certainty. The unfinished nature of our knowledge means that our opinions aren't the last word on the topics of life. We should remain open to the teaching of God's Spirit.

Recognizing the unfinished nature of our practice of faith should help us to *work* on being perfect in *love*. We do that by saying "yes" as God reveals things in us that need to change as we progress in our relationship with Christ and with others. Faithfulness in the Christian life is not usually the outcome of our initial commitment to Christ. Rather, it comes slowly and sometimes even painfully through subsequent submissions to God's call.

Recognizing the unfinished nature of our practice of faith should help us to do the work of God *now*. Remember that although the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine is far from finished, good ministry is happening there. Something similar can be true in our lives: We can be God's person in good works, in acts of generosity, and in faithfulness to the will of God as we understand it at this point while we walk this Christian road.

Recognizing the unfinished nature of our practice of faith should help us to expect spiritual progress as we continue to seek God's will. Going on to perfection is not a DIY project. God helps us.

Most of all, we should be hopeful. As each of us remains a faithful disciple committed to following Jesus, "*the one who began a good work among you*" and the one who "*will bring it to completion*." So, to all the unfinished saints out there, to all the Christians under construction, let us go on to perfection, with God's help.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, may I grow day by day to be more like You, full of compassion and kindness. Saturate my heart with Your love so that I may love You more with every passing breath. Thank you, for Your Holy Spirit Who is making me to be more like You, Lord Jesus. I want to reflect Your grace and Your beauty in thought, word and deed. I ask that I may devote my time and heart to reflect on all You are and all You have done for me, so that You are magnified more and more in my life, so that the beauty and grace of God may be seen and reflect in me. Amen.

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The God Who Completes

Sunday, December 9, 2018

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Philippians 1:3-11

Its official name is the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine. Some people call it the "Cathedral of Saint John the Unfinished." Even in its incomplete condition, at 601 feet long and 124 feet high, this Episcopal cathedral is one of the most impressive landmarks in New York City. The Cathedral features a 230-foot Gothic nave which seats 5,000 worshippers. The Cathedral also boasts the largest rose window in the country, constructed out of 10,000 pieces of glass. The building is an architectural masterwork, with so many unique elements we don't have time to describe them all here.

Construction of this colossal building began in 1892. Worship services and other ministries began there in 1899, when only a portion of the edifice was usable. The church officially opened in 1941, but even then, there was much work waiting to be completed. Over the years, financial woes, changes in architectural plans, wartime delays, engineering problems and, a destructive fire (2001) plagued construction. And so, today, 126 years to the month after the cornerstone was laid, this massive church is still sometimes dubbed "Saint John the Unfinished," and there is no proposed end date for construction.

Don't you hate it when the word *unfinished* gets attached to your projects? How about that DIY bathroom remodeling project? It may not date back to 1892, but it might still be called "the john unfinished." A nicer description might be "a work in progress." No matter what label we give them, such unfinished projects seem to stand in judgment of us, reminding us that while we may have plenty of ideas and ambition, we're not so good with follow-through.

Of course, it's one thing to have unfinished jobs around the house; it's quite another thing to realize how unfinished we are as individuals and just how far short we fall of the goal of being the persons God calls us to be. Given that the New Testament uses the word "saints" to refer to living followers of Jesus (Acts 9:32), we could refer to ourselves as "Saint John the Unfinished" or "Saint Jane the Unfinished." We sometimes acknowledge that we are works in progress by saying that we are "Christians under construction," but this expression is usually used to let ourselves off the hook and not do the hard work of reaching our potential. But this phrase does express the idea that the Christian life is a journey, not a destination.