

himself from the dead. Imagine the hubris, thinking that one earns Baptism, earns Communion. It is the height of oversight, and yet people overlook the most obvious aspect of their experience. No one lowers themselves into the water; no one baptizes themselves. A baby doesn't birth itself, rather their mother *gives* birth. And Christians are reborn of water and the Spirit, birthed by their Mother, the Church, not by self and a little elbow grease.

It is difficult to conceive of the utter helplessness caused by sin. Sin is living death, drowned in the passions. This is the condition the Lord finds us in, and yet, *"When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions"* (Colossians 2:13). He took something dead and breathed new life into it from heaven, *"for neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation"* (Galatians 6:15). Ability is not the criterion, for adding many works together doesn't amount to a new creation.

"Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live. I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live" (Ezekiel 37:3-6). See, God is not asking for any help! He makes you to live. He puts the breath of new life into you. He knows our weakness, and yet so many strive to measure up. Secretly we fear to entrust the last ounce of our life to God, and so we reserve a little of the salvation for our efforts to accomplish. Then we fear God is ever disapproving of us when we fall short. God calls us to works of faith and love, yes, but He doesn't save us *by* them, or by how perfect we are at them. God's not angry at you, not waiting for you to measure up, not losing His patience, *"for we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works"* (Ephesians 2:10). For. Not by. *"It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery"* (Gal 5:1).

"God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ... For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph 2:4-5, 8-9). Salvation is a gift, received in humility, and He gives it to the undeserving, the ungodly, the helpless, the dead. He *gives* it to you!

All Saints Orthodox Church

www.allsaintsolyphant.org | 211 Willow Ave, Olyphant, PA 18447
frjoshuaschooping@gmail.com | 570-489-0942

Essentials Series

How Good is Good Enough?



Speaking Grace to Perfectionism

by

Fr. Joshua Schooping

Is God angry at you, dear Christian? Do you feel that He is sitting on His throne growing tired of waiting for you to pull it all together? Is He growing impatient with your many imperfections? Is He on the verge of abandoning you because you just can't seem to measure up? No matter how much you try, does it seem like God is never really pleased with you?

Alas, too many Christians are weighted down with these thoughts and feelings. God appears to be unpleasable, an impossible Task Master demanding too much from too imperfect a person. So many Christians see God as stern and unyielding, and as startling as it may sound, even unforgiving. His standards are unbelievably high, too high, and so despair arises at one's persistent and seemingly intractable shortcomings, as does resentment at a God who demands the impossible.

These perfectionistic views are the total reversal of the Gospel, and turn the life in Christ from one of eucharistic joy to one of fearful drudgery. Where does this view of God come from? And where does the belief in moral perfectionism come from? In short, they come from natural man's fallen prejudices. Natural man believes in meritocracy and aristocracy, no pain no gain, honor and shame, get ahead, just do it, the hero's reward, aim high, you get what you deserve, where there's a will there's a way. But God works differently. God seeks the lost, the sinner, the poor in spirit. As such, the present discussion is addressed to the persistent problem of perfectionism.

When we read Scripture, especially the Gospels and the Epistles, we find a vastly different picture of God than the stern, micromanaging Taskmaster. For example, we find that *"while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us"* (Romans 5:6-8). In short, we were not saved while being strong, godly, righteous, or good, or because we were any of those things. Rather, Christ died for sinners, for evil, unrighteous, ungodly, and helpless people.

One common misconception comes from the revealed truth that God does not save good people, only supernaturally good people. When the natural man hears this, though, he immediately thinks of putting forth supernatural effort. But supernatural effort is precisely what the natural man cannot accomplish. Therefore he exhausts himself trying to be supernaturally good enough. This is the foundation of perfectionism: fallen man's logic.

The world reasons that we receive our wage after our work, dessert after dinner, award after victory, reward after a job well done, honor after triumph, rest after a long day's work, spoils after war. God's Gospel, however, turns that logic on its head: *"In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and trust shall be your strength"* (Isaiah 30:15). Paul says, *"consider your calling... that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God"* (1Co 1:26-29).

God did not come to call "a few good men," for as Jesus states, *"It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance"* (Luke 5:31-32). When God looked down from heaven at the state of man, He found that *"all under sin. As it is written: 'There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one'"* (Rom 3:9-12). Does that sound like good news to your ears? It should, because it means that all the pressure is off. You don't have to perform your way to heaven. The boxes have all been checked, the work has already been done. Death has already been defeated. Sin has already been atoned for. Righteousness has been fulfilled. Christ did it, out of love, for you, when you couldn't do it, or even hope to. He washes you clean.

Again hear: *"For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life"* (Titus 3:3-7). Notice that your job is not to save yourself, measure up, amount to something, earn your way, your keep, your share, or prove your worth. Your job is to receive.

One odd thing about fallen, natural man is that he will reject the free gift of salvation. He will *insist* that he contribute. Just show him how, give him the strength, give him the grace, and he will make himself righteous, even raise