

the doctrine of sanctification, for it only speaks of one half of the part we must play, and, by itself, will lead Christians to become lazy and to neglect the active role that Scripture commands them to play in their own sanctification.” (from Systematic Theology by Wayne Grudem)

Nevertheless we not only yield and submit ourselves to His divine will, but we are called to **exert God-dependent effort to press on** toward Christlikeness, as He molds and fashions us, thus **bearing His image** in greater degree. Below we will talk further about the role of the Gospel and of faith in Sanctification.

Sanctification Continues throughout life

Some have maintained that the idea of attaining **sinless perfection** in the Christian life is a **real possibility**. But the Bible nowhere teaches this, in fact it clearly teaches that sanctification continues throughout life until death and **only at the resurrection will we be finally free** from the constraints of mortality and bodies subject to temptation and sin. This erroneous teaching of **“perfectionism”** is founded on certain scriptures where we are given the goal of sanctification, which is to mortify and vivify (put off-put on) calling us to seek after the perfection of God’s holiness in our lives such as;

Matthew 5:48 - 48 "Therefore **you are to be perfect**, as your heavenly Father is perfect. NASB

2 Corinthians 7:1 - Therefore, having these promises, beloved, **let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness** in the fear of God. NASB

1 John 3:4-6 - 4 **Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness**; and sin is lawlessness. 5 And you know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin. 6 No one who abides in Him sins; **no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him**. NASB

In the case of Matthew 5:48 when Jesus calls us to God’s perfection, we see the clear and obvious goal of all Christian character and conduct, which is the very nature of God Himself. Shall the God who is holy and seeks to conform us to His character call us to less than is own perfection? We are called to strive for perfection, that is clear. But **nowhere** does the Scripture say or **even imply** that **such a goal can be obtained**, but on the contrary it clearly teaches that we are **not capable of attaining** such a goal (Rom 6-7, Gal 5:16-24, Phil 3:10-14), but are in many places **urged to strive** for it (Eph 4-6, Col 3, Rom 12:9-21, 1 Pet 1:13-5:9).

James 3:2 - 2 For **we all stumble in many ways**. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. NASB

1 Peter 2:11 - 11 Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to **abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul**. NASB

Both James and Peter acknowledge (as does John 1 Jon 3:7-10) that we sin in various ways because we are at war with **“lusts”** in our soul and we therefore **“stumble in many ways.”** And Paul gives this warfare an extensive treatment in Romans 7, but elsewhere is continually urging us to strive against sin and press on to the goal of heavenward perfection.

2 Corinthians 7:1 - Therefore, having these promises, beloved, **let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness** in the fear of God. NASB

But the context of 1 John 3 clearly debunks the idea of sinless perfection. For if verses 4-6 were teaching sinless perfection, then verses 7-10 would disqualify every single Christian from salvation because we all continue to sin in the course of daily life.

1 John 3:3-11 - 3 And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. 4 Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness. 5 And you know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin. 6 No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him. 7 Little children, let no one deceive you; **the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; 8 the one who practices sin is of the devil**; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil. 9 **No one who is born of God practices sin**, because His seed abides in him; and **he**

cannot sin, because he is born of God. 10 By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother. NASB

When John discusses the idea of **“practicing sin”** he refers to the idea of ongoing serious unrepentant sin and not the daily struggle against sin that every Christian faces. The present tense of the Greek verbs here speak of **continual** or **habitual activity**. This is seen clearly in the severity of the language of the context. When he says that **“no one who is born of God practices sin”** and **“cannot sin,”** the statement could not possibly be true, since all of us who are born of God do in fact continue to sin throughout life. Consider the idea, do you ever sin? What John refers to is the person who lives in licentiousness wherein they have no will to struggle against sin but continue in the practice of serious sin unabated by a desire to surrender to the law and Spirit of God. The subject of John’s reference is a person ruled and dominated by sin, but Christians have been freed from the ruling or dominating power of sin (Rom 6:5-10, 22). It is the **antinomian** attitude which Paul denounces in Romans 6:1-2, **“shall we continue to sin that grace may abound?.... may it never be”** is his answer.

Romans 6:1-2 – 1 What shall we say then? **Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase? 2 May it never be!** How shall we who died to sin still live in it? 3 NASB

Paul later describes the great **warfare** in the Christian life **against sin** which seeks to dominate us, but inwardly we **“delight in the law of God”** struggling against sin both without (word and deed) and inwardly (thought).

Romans 7:19-25 - 19 For **the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish.** 20 But if I am doing the very thing I do not wish, I am no longer the one doing it, **but sin which dwells in me.** 21 I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wishes to do good. 22 **For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, 23 but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.** 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin. NASB

It is very apparent that Paul generally characterizes the Christian life as having a **struggle between the flesh and Spirit** as a **normative** and **ongoing** reality, to which he gives the directive for Spirit dependent self-denial, **“so that you may not do the things you please.”** These **“things you please”** he describes as **“against the Spirit”** as he describes the ongoing **“desire of the flesh”** or sinful nature.

Galatians 5:16-18 - 16 But I say, **walk by the Spirit**, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. 17 **For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another**, so that you may not do the things that you please. 18 **But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.** NASB

He further describes the **ongoing mortification** of the flesh in Spirit led effort as our **obligation** to God as His sons.

Romans 8:12-14 - 12 So then, brethren, **we are under obligation**, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh — 13 for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; **but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.** 14 **For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.** NASB

Of course the struggle against sin has always been a struggle for the people of God, a fact to which the **Old Testament** is a glaring witness. The righteous man **Noah** was not free from sin as his drunkenness testified (Gen 9:21). **Abraham** the friend of God also did not fully believe God’s promise to give Him offspring through Sarah, and sinfully sought it another way with Sarah’s handmaid Hagar (Gen 16:1-4). **Isaac**, the man of faith (Heb 11:20) lied to Abimelech that Rebekah was his sister (Gen 26:7). **Jacob** deceived his father Isaac (Gen 27:18-29). **Moses** displayed his sinful anger against the people (Num 20:10) and his lack of trust in God’s Word

(Num 20:12) and struck the rock twice rebelling against God (Num 20:24). **Job** was the **“righteous”** man who was **“blameless and upright”** by God’s own testimony who said of him **“there is no one on earth like him... a man who fears God and shuns evil”** (Job 2:3). Yet Job himself acknowledged his own personal sins (Job 9:20, 14:16-17), admitted that he was not innocent but guilty (Job 9:28-29) and that he needed God’s mercy and forgiveness (Job 7:20-21, 9:15). King **David** of whom the Bible says he was **“righteous and upright in heart,”** was man who fell into the serious transgression of adultery, deceit and murder, and in the Psalms regularly admitted to many more trivial sins (Ps 19:12). **Isaiah** the prophet upon the sight of God in His throne room said, **“Woe is me, I am a man of unclean lips”** (Isa 6:5). Even the righteous prophet **Daniel** confessed his sins and wickedness (Dan 9:4-16). There are several statements in the **Old Testament** that flatly **deny** the idea of **perfectionism**.

1 Kings 8:46 - 46 "When they sin against Thee (for there is no man who does not sin) and Thou art angry with them and dost deliver them to an enemy, so that they take them away captive to the land of the enemy, far off or near; NASB

Proverbs 20:9 - 9 Who can say, "I have cleansed my heart, I am pure from my sin"? NASB

Jeremiah 17:9 - 9 "The heart is more deceitful than all else And is desperately sick; Who can understand it? NASB

The **New Testament** also adds clarity to this issue in many places. Jesus urged the disciples to prayer and watchfulness so they wouldn’t yield to temptation and then added, **“the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak”** (Matt 26:41). The Lord’s prayer of Matthew 6:12 declares, **“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us.”** This implies that the **daily life of disciples is characterized by an ongoing need for divine forgiveness**. Paul also speaks of his own ability in the pursuit of perfection as **“not having yet attained”** to it.

Philippians 3:10-14 - 10 that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; 11 in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. 12 **Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect, but I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.** 13 Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and **reaching forward to what lies ahead,** 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. NASB

In fact Paul says, **“I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet”** clearly stating the he presses on to the **“upward call in Christ.”** See in these that we are to **exert God-dependent effort** to press on toward Christlikeness, and this is the aim for which we strive but will never quite attain in this life. In this striving after Christlikeness we glorify God and have a **sure goal** that is always before us calling us heavenward to **progress in bearing His image**.

We have been **set free** from the **reigning power of sin to dominate our lives**, but it has **not been completely eradicated from us yet**.

Romans 6:5-11 - 5 For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection, 6 knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, that our body of sin might be done away with, **that we should no longer be slaves to sin;** 7 **for he who has died is freed from sin.** 8 Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, 9 knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; **death no longer is master over Him.** 10 **For the death that He died, He died to sin, once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God.** 11 **Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.** NASB

Romans 6:17-22 - 17 But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, 18 and **having been freed from sin,** you became slaves of righteousness. 19 I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification. 20 For

when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. 21 Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. 22 **But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification,** and the outcome, eternal life. NASB

Only in the promises of the **resurrection** do we see the ultimate **liberty from this warfare** and struggle **against sin**, when death shall be destroyed and we shall be transformed into immortality by God's power at **Glorification**.

Philippians 3:20-21 - 20 For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; 21 **who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory,** by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself. NASB

1 John 3:2 - 2 Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, **when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is.** NASB

1 Corinthians 15:51-55 - 51 Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but **we shall all be changed,** 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and **we shall be changed.** 53 **For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality.** 54 But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory. 55 "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" NASB
Revelation 22:3 - 3 And **there shall no longer be any curse;** and the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His bond-servants shall serve Him; NASB

See in these proofs from Scripture that **perfectionism** or sinless perfection is a **grave error** indeed. It denies the essence of the Christian struggle against sin during the process of Sanctification. Since this is the nature of our daily struggle to bear the image as Christians, we must avoid this serious error and remain steadfast in our struggle both to identify and mortify sin in our lives. For further study on Sinless perfection or Perfectionism read Grudem pgs 750-753 and Demarest The Cross and Salvation pgs 416-420.

Enjoying Christ and the goal of sanctification

Let us consider that as we **exert God-dependent effort** to press on toward **Christlikeness**, we will in fact by the Spirit's transforming power attain ever increasing degrees of holiness and experience His virtue in our character. In this striving after Christlikeness we glorify God and have a **sure goal** that is always before us calling us heavenward to **progress in bearing His image**. We must actively fix our eyes on Jesus and seek to imitate His likeness.

Ephesians 5:1-2 - Therefore **be imitators of God, as beloved children; 2 and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you,** and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma. NASB

We are called to pursue this character actively in our Christian life, for it is God's purpose to conform into Christ's image. The New Testament puts this forward as an **imperative** again and again. Putting on Christ's virtue is **not optional** but **mandated** by Jesus and the Apostles.

John 15:10-12 - 10 **"If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love;** just as I have kept My Father's commandments, and abide in His love. 11 "These things I have spoken to you, that **My joy may be in you,** and that your joy may be made full. 12 **"This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.** NASB

Colossians 3:12-15 - 12 And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, **put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving each other,** whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. 14 And **beyond all these things put on love,** which is the perfect bond of unity. 15 And **let the peace of Christ rule** in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and **be thankful.** NASB

As we **look to God in faith** in seeking these virtues, and seek the **filling** of the **Holy Spirit**, we receive power from God both to put off the old nature and to put on the new. God's Word calls us to **careful** and **calculated God dependent effort** to accomplish this.

Ephesians 5:15-19 - 15 Therefore **be careful how you walk**, not as unwise men, but as wise, 16 **making the most of your time**, because the days are evil. 17 So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but **be filled with the Spirit**, 19 speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; NASB

As we experience the **daily renewal** of the filling of the Holy Spirit, these virtues increase in our character and we come to enjoy the very **goodness of God** in our own selves and relations, and become nourished by the good fruit of His Spirit in our daily lives. In this transforming process we experience the **beauty** of **Christlikeness** in a rich and powerful way as it seasons our life with the very character of Christ and we fulfill our **chief end** of **glorifying and enjoying God**.

Galatians 5:22-25 - 22 But **the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control**; against such things there is no law. 24 Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 **If we live by the Spirit**, let us also walk by the Spirit. NASB

This **fruit** of the **Holy Spirit** becomes the very experience of our days, filling our life with the beauty of God's nature. Bruce Demarest points out that these 9 rich and powerful virtues (which are the **single** fruit of the Spirit) are given to us in three **triads**, each expressing a different relation to our lives. These are to be actively **cultivated** in us by **God dependent effort**.

- **Love, Joy Peace** – These virtues affect our **basic disposition** or if you will the foundation of our **attitude, demeanor** and **mindset** in daily life. **Love** here is the *agape* love of God which is self-giving, sacrificial and supernatural (**John 15:13, 1 Cor 13:4-8, 1 John 3:16-18, 4:7-11**). **Joy** is that inner delight and felicity in the heart that, being focused in faith on God's goodness to us in Christ, is immovable and constant regardless of negative circumstances (**Psa 31:7, Neh 8:10, Acts 13:52, 1 Pet 1:6-9**). **Peace** is that abiding calmness, serenity and rest in the heart and mind which results from reconciliation with God in Christ, and provides us with freedom from anxiety and distress in daily circumstances (**John 14:27, Rom 5:1, 15:13, Phil 4:7, Col 3:15, 2 Thess 3:16**).
- **Patience, kindness, goodness** – These graces concern our **relationship to others**. **Patience** is that forbearing temperance of attitude that suffers long or endures with difficult circumstances or troublesome people (**Rom 15:1, Eph 4:2, Col 3:13, 1 Thes 5:14**). **Kindness** is a charitable and generous disposition toward others that manifests in gracious acts of free benevolence to others (**Luke 6:35, Eph 4:32, Col 3:12-13**). **Goodness** is not sinlessness but an integrity and uprightness of heart and mind that reflects God's goodness (His righteousness, holiness, justice, kindness, grace, mercy, and love) in our relationships with others (**Luke 6:35, Gal 6:10, 1 Thes 5:15, Heb 13:16, 3 John 11**).
- **Faithfulness, gentleness, self-control** – These qualities regard our **individual selves**. **Faithfulness** is a steadfast and reliable integrity and loyalty to others in our word, priorities and commitments (**Luke 21:16-19, 1 Cor 4:2, 2 Tim 4:7-8**). **Gentleness** is a humble consideration toward others which gives preference in honor (**Rom 12:16, 1 Thes 2:7, Tit 3:2**). **Self-control** is that self-discipline or self-restraint which is temperate under temptation and emotional duress or excitement (**Acts 24:25, 1 Cor 7:5, 9:25-27, 2 Pet 1:6**).

Let us then **actively cultivate** these virtues and to the degree that we do, we will **enjoy Christ!**
2 Corinthians 13:11 - 11 Finally, brethren, **rejoice**, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, **live in peace**; and the **God of love and peace shall be with you**. NASB