

## PERFECT

Matthew 5:43-48

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### **Nadia's Perfect 10**

*The world met Nadia Comaneci in 1976 when she was just 14 years old. She took center stage at the esteemed Montreal Olympics. For her it was just another gymnastics routine. She had practiced and perfected that sequence thousands of times. So although she was now performing in front of millions of viewers, there was no doubt in her mind. The thought of not nailing the routine was not even an option.*

*Hands by her side, she jumped to grab the uneven bars. Swinging, spinning, floating in the air between them. As expected, she performed her routine with flawless perfection. She moved with elegance and grace, twisted and contorted her entire body with style and hit every goal with precision. To the world, her gravity-defying performance was groundbreaking. Still, after finishing her show-stopping sequence, all that was left to do was wait. She wouldn't have known she was about to make Olympic history.*

*Before this, no one thought perfection was possible, and until she presented her flawless routine, no one had ever received a perfect 10. She got one from all 7 judges. She would do it 6 more times that Olympics.*

*In the world of gymnastics, a perfect score is extremely uncommon, and it's almost impossible to achieve a perfect 10. Daniel Baumat, the director of Swiss Timing – responsible for the designing and programming of the scoreboard - later said in an interview, "I was told 'a 10.00 is not possible.'" With no expectation of a perfect 10, he did not program to Olympic scoreboard to reach 10. So the score simply read "1.00." It was the performance of a lifetime. <sup>i</sup> In a word: **perfect.***

We come to the words of Jesus today in Matthew 5:48, and I hope they are as startling to you as they are to me. Perfect? You are to be perfect? Put me on the side of the scoreboard maker! Is that even possible?

There are a number of things that Jesus says that will leave you scratching your head. It's easier, sometimes, to just keep on moving. Nothing will make people want to move on to the passage about how to give to the poor and how to pray like this "be perfect" verse.

And yet, nearing the end of the sermon on the mount and at the conclusion of what are called Jesus' "Five Antitheses," we have this little summary verse: You are to be perfect.

What a challenging standard to give to your disciples who are already struggling to keep up. Can you imagine coaching using that standard while coaching a team? Everyone be perfect today. What kind of standard is perfection? I thought we were just doing our honest best.

We've been told in Romans 3:10, "There is no one righteous, not even one." And again, in Romans 3:23, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." These verses seem to let us off the hook! Admitting that all have fallen is tough, but it's easier than being perfect.

### ***The end of the Perfect 10***

*Nadia isn't the whole story for the perfect 10, by the way. By the mid 80's, there were suddenly too many perfect performances. Judges, who were searching for ways to reward innovation gave high marks, but all the scores were capped at 10.*

*Sometimes, as in the men's finals at the 1981 Gymnastics World Championships in Moscow, the judges backed themselves into a corner awarding 10's. A Hungarian gymnast ended up with a routine that everyone knew could be beaten and received a 10. He was the first guy up on the pommel horse. And then almost everyone who went after him in the finals was better, so it was 10, 10, 10, 10. In '88 we had a three-way tie on pommel horse, again with 10's.<sup>ii</sup>*

*It was a collapse of the whole scoring system. It's why no one today can get a perfect score. Instead, you get one score for execution and another based on the difficulty.*

If too many are perfect, we'll just change what perfect is! Perfection is illusive like that. You go chasing for it in the wrong places, and it can be the death of you. You can kill yourself trying to be somebody else's version of perfect. And some of you are killing yourselves trying to get everyone *else* to be some version of perfect. Maybe that's why Jesus words strike us strangely here. We've lost sight of what kind of perfection we're even aiming for.

Notice, what Jesus did not say:<sup>iii</sup> Therefore, seek to make every situation around you perfect. Seek to make every relationship in which you find yourself perfect. Therefore, be the perfecter of your spouse. Seek to demand that everyone around you live up to perfection. Therefore, present yourself to others however they understand perfection.

Brennan Manning has aptly said that "the temptation of the age is to look good without being good." We want to give the perception of perfect, but nobody wants to do the hard work of *being* perfect. We are a people seeking perfection in all the wrong places, and Jesus comes today to remind us that there is nowhere else to find it than in God Himself. That's why He gives this command.

It was Tolstoy who wrote: "*If you look for perfection, you'll never be content.*"

No, says Jesus. You just have to know where to look. And the place you'll find the perfect image, the one in which you also were created, is in "your Father in heaven."

This whole command hinges on one word: *perfect*. What is perfect? What is exactly that He is telling us we must be. I want to suggest today three words that help us to understand this word.

### **Perfect – *telois***

Perfect, here, is the Greek word *telois*. The root word *telos* means “goal.” To be *telois* is to be at the goal, the point for which you were intended. Whole, Mature, Complete.

#### **1. Whole**

Jesus probably didn’t speak Greek on this occasion, if he ever did. Most assume when he said this, he used the Hebrew word *tamim*, which would mean “whole.” Jesus is saying that you are to be finished, brought to the end you were made for. From the incompleteness that you live in now, you are to come to live in the kind of wholeness that God exists in. To be perfect is to become whole.<sup>iv</sup>

*We were on vacation not long ago, in a cabin in New Mexico. The family went to work on a puzzle. 1000 pieces that made a dinosaur. I stopped by the table every now and then and put a few pieces in so I could be part of the team, but I’m not a puzzle guy.*

*They worked all weekend on the puzzle, moving from corners to edges and in to the center. They came to the end only to find that 3 holes remained. The search began for the missing pieces. One was under the table. Another was carried off by a toddler to the next room over. It was recovered. But one remained missing. All that work only to never finish. Should we warn the next person not to start?*

*Three months later we were shuffling through the bottom of the diaper bag. There was that elusive last piece. We were kind enough to mail it back to the puzzle owner. I’d hate for someone else to be stuck with the incomplete picture.*

You see, apart from the life that Jesus offers we are incomplete. In our sin and misunderstanding, we are fumbling around trying to make a picture without all the pieces. Listen closely. Jesus wants to put every piece together for you, that the whole image of God would be reflected in the wholeness of your life. Jesus tells you that you can be whole.

#### **2. Mature**

Some argue that the word mature weakens the definition too much for how it is used here. But we translate this same word as mature in other places. In Ephesians 4:13, Paul speaks of the time when “we all come to *mature* adulthood,” while in Colossians 1:28, Paul states that his goal is “to present every person *mature/perfect* in Christ.”

In 1 Cor 14:20: “Do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be *mature*.” Again in Heb 5:14: “But solid food is for the *mature*, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.”

You would think that maturity would be a mark of Christians. This sure sounds simpler than perfection. We can at least be mature, right? And yet, immaturity seems so common in the way that even believers live and act and interpret the world.

Eugene Peterson seems to get this in his paraphrase of Matthew 5:48: "In a word, what I'm saying is, Grow up. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it."

You can practically set your watch by the next religious leader, politician, athlete, or role model who falls in scandal. Something hidden is revealed that they were trying to hide. Why is maturity so rare these days? Because no one wants to be perfect, they just want to appear perfect!

### 3. Complete

Other times in the New Testament, we use the word "complete." James 1:4 says, "And let endurance have perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." Jesus comes in our incompleteness, and he wants to carry us to completion.

This is how we translate this word the only other time it appears in Matthew's gospel. In Matthew 19, Jesus encounters a Rich Young Ruler. Jesus challenges the man by listing God's expectation, and the list Jesus mirrors this section of the Sermon on the Mount in many ways. After Jesus lists all the commands, the man says, "I have kept all these. What am I lacking?" Lacking? Wait a minute. This guy says he had a perfect score. Jesus lists the commandments, and this man is a perfect 10.

Jesus says, "If you wish to be **complete**, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." The list of commands was never the end. The law was never the true judge. The law was intended to reveal the real standard – God Himself. And it is obedience to God that this man is lacking.

To be perfect is to be whole, mature, complete, striving toward that goal for which you were intended. But that still leaves us asking what perfect looks like.

If anybody had ever worked out the meaning of "perfect," it was the scribes and pharisees. They had the legal details worked out to the max. They were the supposed experts in how the judges scored every event. And Jesus dares to say, in Matthew 5:20, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of God."

Following that statement, he launches into five separate occasions on which he takes a teaching they had heard and expands or corrects it: "You've heard it said, but I say to you..." He's teaching them that "anger, adultery, divorce, false statements, retaliation, and hatred are destructive behaviors that break us apart, individually and in society."<sup>v</sup> They are the opposite of *telois*, they are broken, immature, incomplete.

Through some of the most astounding teaching in all of history as he begins to tell them what perfect is. Building on the law they know, Jesus replaces Moses by revealing to them the true, perfect character of God and the real definition of love. Carla Works puts it well commenting on this passage: **“After blessing the outcasts, the needy, the downtrodden, and those on the fringes of a society (5:3-11), Jesus talks about anger (5:21-26), loyalty (5:27-37), and retaliation (5:38-48)... Jesus tells his followers plainly what God’s perfect reign on earth looks like. In this final section of the antitheses, Jesus calls them to be bearers of the kingdom by turning the other cheek and loving their enemies.”**

**“The principle of ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’ seems to be just. The punishment should fit the crime. Jesus, however, tells his followers not to resist one who is evil (5:39). In fact, when wronged, it is better to suffer more wrong than to retaliate unjustly.”<sup>vi</sup>** Jesus teaches them that if someone attempts to shame or insult them, their actions of willing service should go a mile more.

Even more, they are called to do the unthinkable. They are called to *love* those who persecute them and pray for them (5:43-44). You are to want the good for them that you want for yourself. This, says vs. 45, is the way into God’s family: loving your enemies.

Jesus is teaching them what God is like, what wholeness and completeness and maturity are like. Jesus’ very mission is a demonstration of God’s love. And don’t you see? You want to know what perfect is like? Just look at the sun and the rain, He says. God showers them on all people – the evil and the good. God makes His sun to rise on people you would rather leave in the dark. He makes life-giving rain fall on people you think are right and the people you know are wrong just the same (5:46).

**“God, who has power over life and death, provides life-sustaining conditions even for those who are diametrically opposed to God’s goodness. You thought that loving a few people made you good. Anyone can love the lovely (5:46-47). Jesus demands love for those who are incapable of showing love in return.”<sup>vii</sup>** He demands that we desire good for those who are our enemies. He demands it because it’s who God is. And it’s who you were intended to be!

The distinguishing mark of being a Christian is not that you love people. The distinguishing characteristic is that you love those who cannot or will not love you in return. This is the standard. This is completion. This is the point you were intended for. This is the image of God made in you: that you would love others without reservation. You are to give grace with no thought of who does or doesn’t deserve it. You need to mature in this one thing to be perfect: loving indiscriminately. You must have this central piece to be whole: giving grace to those incapable of giving it back.

**Perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**

If this is perfection, are we moved by that standard? As we look closer at this challenging teaching, suddenly we’re face to face with the reality that the most exemplary characteristic of true humanity is this kind of God-given love. We applaud for some strange things in this world.

Some of them great, some of them awful. We're proud of one another for all kinds of things. We have a whole list of characteristics that we want for ourselves and for others.

What if the most praiseworthy and acclaimed attribute in your family was the giving of undeserved grace? What if your family (friends) made it a point to let all those other things we reward fall beneath generous love for others? The community of Jesus' disciples is to reflect the holiness of God in radical obedience to the will of God shown to us here in the sermon. We are summoned to the task of showing forth the character of God in the world.<sup>viii</sup> If you believe in Jesus, you are signing up to believe that this is the way.

If you're thinking today that this still sounds impossible, you're right. But God says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Friends, this is the gospel: that when we were enemies of God, He came to us. When we were hopelessly unable to meet this standard, He, the judge, decided to be judged in our place,<sup>ix</sup> so that his perfection can be ours. And its only once you know the goodness of that grace given freely to you, that you would let it pour out, sun and rain, on any and all you can.

### **Double Standards**

*I'm sure you've noticed, but here in the U.S., we like to measure things our own way. Our yardsticks are marked in feet and inches, measures that make no sense to someone from anywhere else in the world. We're based on 12's, the world is using 10's. We love fractions. They use decimals.*

*My generation of schoolkids was told a switch to the metric system was imminent and the imperial system was going away. However, various conversion movements have failed, and Americans have never gone metric. The metric system is, quietly and behind the scenes, now the standard in some industries, yet absent from others like construction. We drive a mile to run a 5K. We drink 2 Liters, but buy ½ gallons of ice cream. Pick up a 10mm bolt while buying an 8ft 2x4.*

*"Why is it that America hasn't gone full-on metric? The simple answer is that the overwhelming majority of Americans have never wanted to. The gains have always seemed too little, and the goal too purist."<sup>x</sup>*

For one reason or another, we hear about the perfect love of God but go on living with two standards, one for what we expect to receive from God and another for what we're willing to offer others. One is for what we expect to receive from God, and the other for what we're willing to offer to others. Maybe we don't think there's anything to be gained, or it'll cost too much, but for one reason or another, we ignore Jesus' way and cling to the way the world showed us first.

Jesus comes and proclaims to a lost and confused world: "Here is the new standard. I am showing you all things must be measured. I am revealing the perfect love of God and you're called to reflect it to the world." It's the way of enemy love, of refusing to be wronged, of giving

more than we're asked. It's time we switched over. Stop letting the world show you how much you should love and when. You are called to strive for what you were intended. You will not find an earthly measure for that kind of perfection.

The goal is Jesus. The standard is the love of God. It is measured by His outstretched arms on the cross and given freely to you and your enemy just the same. You will be mature, complete, whole, when you live in that kind of love.

That would be the performance of a lifetime. In a word, *perfect*.

So, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and **perfect**." (Romans 12:2)

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- <sup>i</sup> Story as recounted by Gur Tirosh, "Nadia Comaneci's Path to Perfect 10 Success is Filled of Struggle, Inspiration and Hope," *History by day*. (accessed 11 Sept 2020). <https://www.historybyday.com/human-stories/nadia-comanecis-path-to-perfect-10-success-is-filled-of-struggle-inspiration-and-hope/8.html?br t=sa& pg=p1>
- <sup>ii</sup> Bill Littlefield, "The Story of the Perfect 10 – And The Man Who Fought The Flawed Number," *WBUR*, August 12, 2016. <https://www.wbur.org/onlyagame/2016/08/12/gymnastics-perfect-10-olympics-comaneci>
- <sup>iii</sup> Joel C. Gregory, "Be Ye Therefore Perfect" (Matthew 5:48)
- <sup>iv</sup> Scot McKnight, *The Sermon on the Mount (The Story of God Bible Commentary)*, 246.
- <sup>v</sup> David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, 77.
- <sup>vi</sup> Carla Works, "Commentary on Matthew 5:38-48," [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2034](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2034)
- <sup>vii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>viii</sup> Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 329.
- <sup>ix</sup> Karl Barth, *CD, IV.1*.
- <sup>x</sup> John Bemelmans Marciano, "Why Won't America Go Metric," *TIME*, December 9, 2019 (accessed 12 Sept 2020). <https://time.com/3633514/why-wont-america-go-metric/>