

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

Do you remember when you were in school and had “track and field” in P.E.? Personally, “track and field” was something I always dreaded, because I was never very good at running, jumping or going over high objects more than a few feet off the ground. The high jump was one of my least favorite events, as I usually bumped the horizontal bar off very early in the competition. As the coach raised the bar after each successive and successful jump, the lump got bigger in my throat, because I knew I would soon be disqualified long before the rest of the class. I could never achieve their level of jumping no matter how hard I tried.

In recalling our study of the Sermon on the Mount we remember that Jesus said our righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees to make us eligible for heaven (Matt. 5:20). Now that’s a high bar! The scribes and Pharisees were the religious leaders and examples of the Israeli community, known for their careful observance of the Jewish law, following it faithfully to the letter.

Beginning in verse 21 of chapter 5, Jesus gives 6 different examples of the Old Testament law that the scribes and Pharisees taught others to follow as they did. But Jesus points out that their observance of the law did not get to the heart and spirit of the law. With each of the 6 examples He “raises the bar” higher.

1. Yes, you should not commit murder. But more, you should not even get angry with another. The bar is raised higher. And the lump in our spiritual throat begins.

(George Horine of the USA was the first recorded high jump world record-holder at 6’ 6 ¾” in 1912.)

2. Yes, you should not commit adultery. But more, you should not even lust after another. And the bar is raised higher. And we wonder if we can possibly succeed.

(John Thomas of the USA brought the world record to 7’ 3 3/8” in 1960)

3. Yes, if marriage tragically comes to divorce, you must give the other a certificate. But more, you must hold marriage in such high esteem that you would only consider divorce if the other was unfaithful. And the bar is raised higher again.

(Valeriy Brumel of Russia upped the world record to 7’ 5 ¾” in 1963)

4. Yes, don’t make any oaths unless you verify them by swearing before God Almighty. But why make any such promises at all? The higher bar is simply to be a person of your word. And the bar goes higher.

(Dwight Stones of the USA captured the world record of 7’ 7 ½” in 1976)

5. Yes, there is a limit as to how far you should exact justice – equal for equal and no further. But more, you should avoid retaliation all together, offering to surprise the other with extravagant kindness. That puts the bar way up, and the lump in the throat starts to choke.

(Zhu Jianhua of China achieved the world record of 7’ 10” in 1984)

6. Yes, we are to love others – but even our enemies? That is putting the bar practically “out of sight.”

(Javier Sotomayor of Cuba set the present world record at 8’ ½” in 1993, which has now held for 24 years.)

And just when I think that I will just try to do the best I can at anger, lust, and all the others – Jesus adds a final requirement at the end of chapter 5: *“Therefore, you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”* Well, that’s the bar raised to the sky. That’s the “impossible dream.” That’s the “final straw” that broke this camel’s back. And I wave the white flag and call “uncle.” I give up.

And that's exactly where Jesus wants us. That's the "poor in spirit" kingdom citizen He described at the beginning of the Beatitudes, the beginning of His sermon. And remember that the promise for that "poor in spirit" individual is the kingdom of heaven.

The truth is that all of God's moral laws are meant to drive us to our knees and call for "help." The Old Testament moral laws were our "tutor" to lead us to Christ.

Galatians 3:24 *Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith.*

And Jesus' fulfillment of the Law in raising the bar even higher is also meant to drive us to our knees for "help" and get us to look to only Him for success. We can't do the impossible in our own self-efforts. Rather, He is asking us to do the supernatural. Remember:

Luke 1:37 *"Nothing will be impossible with God."* [Angel Gabriel to Mary]

John 15:5 *"Apart from Me you can do nothing"* {Jesus to His disciples}

Philippians 4:13 *"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."*

In truth, Jesus' charge for us, his disciples, to be "perfect" is at the heart of the gospel. And in the remaining time we have today, I want to show you ...

1. **God's standard for heaven is perfection (the bar is exceedingly high)**
2. **Positional perfection is the status of all believers (the bar has been reached)**
3. **God's goal (will) is to bring us to perfection (we ever strive to attain the bar)**

GOD'S BAR IS EXCEEDINGLY HIGH

James 2:10 *Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.*

Romans 3:12b *There is none who does good, there is not even one.*

Romans 3:23 *All have sinned and fall short of the glory [bar] of God.*

1 Peter 1:15-16 *But like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."* (quoting Leviticus 11:44)

Summary: One sin brings imperfection. All are imperfect. God demands perfection.

The world record is an amazing 8' ½", but God's bar is set as high as the heavens.

THE BAR HAS BEEN REACHED (positionally)

Hebrews 10:10,14 By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are [being] sanctified.

Colossians 2:9-10a For in Him [Christ] all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete [or, perfect].

2 Corinthians 5:21 He [God the Father] made Him [God the Son] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Summary: Jesus' substitutionary death as the perfect Lamb of God has paid for the sins of all who receive Him as Savior. Our receiving of Christ satisfies the Father who now sees us as complete, or perfect through the perfection of Christ in us.

John 1:12 *But as many as received Him, to them He have the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.*

Receiving Jesus means believing in His name, which means "Savior"; that is, in Jesus having saved you in paying the price for your sins. With that sincere act of faith, God the Father claims you as His child, for He sees Jesus in you and you are righteous in his sight.

Furthermore, the word “perfect” (Greek: “teleios”, from “teleo”) is to accomplish, to end, to complete, to finish, to fill up. “Teleo” is the word Christ cried out on the cross, when He said “it is “finished,” or “completed” or “perfected.” Through Christ’s work on the cross we are “teleo” = “perfected.”

Romans 4:5 *But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness*

So, in God’s eyes you as a believer are already doing high jumps over the bar of perfection. You are “saint” so-in-so. Having taken on Christ as your righteousness you are fully qualified for heaven.

Important parenthesis: As you hear all of this, do you find yourself on the “outside looking in?” Do you not understand this “positional perfection?” Do you wish you had it? You can! – by trusting Jesus as your provision for sins and calling Him Savior and making Him Lord of your life.

Heavenly Father, I pray right now for anyone hearing my voice that does not know You, but wants to do so. May they this moment in the quiet of this prayer say to You: Dear Heavenly Father, I claim Jesus as my Savior. I believe He died for my sins and rose again from the grave as Your divine Son to prove His right to save me. Please make me perfect in your sight through the perfection of Jesus my Savior. And come to live in me through Your Holy Spirit. I give my life to You this day. Amen.

WE STRIVE TO ATTAIN THE BAR (in reality)

Now we have one more important aspect of this perfect bar to consider. And that is that we realize that we are not sinless. Though believers are perfect “positionally,” in God’s eyes, we are not at all perfect in the reality of our circumstance. We are barely doing spiritual high jumps over a low bar, much less the bar of perfection. Some might be a few rungs higher than others, and a few might even attain the height of a champion. But none are close to the bar of perfection in everyday actions. It is “out of sight.”

But it is clearly God’s will that we daily move toward the perfection of Christ, that He has already attained for us.

Romans 8:29 *For those [God] foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son ...*

1 Thessalonians 4:3 *For this is the will of God, your sanctification ...*

Colossians 1:27-28 *God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete [or, perfect] in Christ.*

That we are to strive for this perfection is best seen in Paul’s challenge in Philippians 3.

Philippians 3:12-16 *Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. 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, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.*

We might feel that we are starting at the lowest possible bar. And with Christ’s help, we succeed, perhaps in holding back anger. Then God raises the bar, asking us to lay aside our gossip, or to take notice of our needy neighbor. And as we take on that challenge, depending upon his help, we find yet another victory. We make it over a higher bar than we ever thought possible.

Yes, there will be times we fail to make it over the bar set for the new challenge – but always because we fail to trust Him completely. God will never ask us to do what He won’t equip us to accomplish. As we learn to yield to the Holy Spirit, exhibiting His love, His joy, His peace, His

patience and all the rest of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) we find more and more victory and the bar raises again. And each time the bar raises we have become more like Jesus.

We forget what lies behind and we reach forward to what lies ahead, pressing on for the goal of becoming more like our Savior. This is the life-long process of sanctification, or becoming conformed to the image of Jesus. It is the process of dying to self more each day and taking on more of the life of God so freely given.

All the while, we have our “positional perfection” in our spiritual pocket. We are sailing over the highest bar when it comes to being cleansed for heaven. Yet at the same time we are in the process of “taking off the old” and “putting on the new” – discovering the new creature we are in Him. (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Go for the gold! He is worth every struggle to get there. And when you do achieve a spiritual victory be sure that He alone received the praise and glory. For without Him you could never have gotten over that bar.

So “therefore you are to be perfect” has a dual meaning. You are to be positionally perfect in Christ Jesus as you trust in Him as Savior and Lord. And you are to strive daily for in knowing Jesus better and becoming more like Him in personality. Kingdom citizen – you are to be holy in all your behavior, for He is holy!

And someday you will sail over that highest bar right into heaven and into the arms of Jesus!