

## PERFECTION VS PERFECTIONISM

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When studying the history of sculpture, students of fine art, learn of a very significant difference between classical Greek sculpture and later Roman sculpture. Both were remarkably skillful. However, the two cultures had different priorities. The Greeks were obsessed with perfection, with the pursuit of the ideal of beauty. The Romans focused on the pursuit of accurately reproducing reality. When sculpting a face, the Greeks would pursue the 'perfect'... clean skin, smooth bend on the nose, perfect eyes. The Romans didn't shy from sculpting wrinkles, scars, or crooked noses. A very educational story survives of a famous painter from Ancient Greece... There once was a young, very gifted painter called Timanthes. After several years of tuition under his tutor, he created an exquisite picture. The tutor commended him for his accomplishment: "Well done, young apprentice." Timanthes, was proud. He became so enraptured with what he had produced that he sat, day after day, just gazing at the portrait. He felt that that painting would not be surpassed. One morning, when he went to admire his work again, he discovered that his tutor had gone that morning and scrubbed out the painting! Angry... and in tears, Timanthes ran to the tutor and demanded to know why he had destroyed his treasured possession. The wise man replied, "I did it for your own good. That painting was retarding your progress. While it was an excellent piece of art, it was not actually perfect - even though it appeared that way to you. Start again, and see if you can do even better! Timanthes went on to become a famous painter, accredited with the creation of the masterpiece known as the *Sacrifice of Iphigeneia*.

Today, part four of a series of sermons on the *Philokalia*, we will talk about the notion of **perfection**. As Christians, we are called to spiritual perfection. We are called to excel, to grow, to learn, to become better people, to climb up the ladder of virtue. But when reading the *Philokalia*, we the moderns, should be prepared to be confronted with uncomfortable terminology. Such outrageous things as humility, modesty or silence. In seeking to climb up the ladder of virtue,

we are taught that the driving force cannot be pride, but love. Fear of God, love for others and respect of self. To truly understand Christian Spirituality as described in the Philokalia we are required to shift our categories of thought, we need to do away with all the inflated ideas we have of ourselves and be honest with ourselves, finally see our faults, and with such self-knowledge, humble and wise, only then be able to move forward and progress.

This helps us understand the big difference between the two concepts... perfection and perfectionism. Perfection is something that has to do with striving, setting a goal, aiming, heading in a certain direction. Perfectionism however, has to do with expecting, demanding, huffing and puffing. Perfection is approached with humility; perfectionism is driven by pride. Perfection is like an asymptote in mathematics... you can get very close, but not actually get there. In fact, thinking that you have reached that pinnacle is proof that you have not. Perfectionism is defined as that tendency in us to expect perfect performance from ourselves and others. This is not to say that all attempts to excel or achieve are perfectionist. But that “all-or-nothing” attitude, that has minor ‘imperfections’ make someone or something totally unacceptable to us, is understood in our Tradition, to be spiritually unhealthy, obsessive, extreme. And by the very fact that it is intrinsically linked with pride, the root of all sins... perfectionism is therefore also a sin.

In today’s gospel reading, which related Jesus Christ’s parable of the Tax-Collector and the Pharisee, Jesus completes his parable with a powerful moral: “...Whoever exalts their self will be humbled, but whoever humbles their self will be exalted.” Humility goes hand in hand with self-knowledge. If you don’t have self-knowledge, you will not have humility. And so, we need to ask ourselves... Are there any perfect people out there? If our answer is “no”, then we will be more tolerant of other people. Are there any perfect marriages out there? If our answer is “no”, then we are on our way to working out how to complement each other. Are there any perfect Christians out there? If our answer is “no”, then we need to be less judgemental of them. Are there any perfect church-communities out there? If our answer is “yes”, please let me know, so that I can join it too!

OK, so what does our Lord Jesus Christ himself have to say about perfection? He says: Ἔσεσθε οὖν υμεῖς τέλειοι ὡς ὁ Πατήρ υμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος τέλειος ἐστίν. (Matthew 5:48). In virtually all the English translations of the last 500 years, that phrase is translated as *Be perfect, just as your heavenly father is perfect*. And that is a big ask. But a closer look at the original Greek, reveals that *esesthe* is a verb in the future tense... *You **shall be** perfect, just as your heavenly father is perfect*. In other words, it is a promise that in striving for perfection, perfection will be granted in the future by grace. Salvation is not a destination..., it is a journey. We have heard it so many times, from our Protestant Christian friends, "I am saved", they feel that they have reached the destination, done and dusted, salvation understood to be achieved in the instant of a confession of faith. And furthermore, they like to confront the rest of us with the question; "Are you saved?". Our answer, as Orthodox Christians, is "salvation is not a destination, it is a journey". I am on the way, I am moving. I am on a journey, I am growing. Past, present and future, all need to be in the picture. "I have been saved" - in that Christ offers me the means of salvation; "I am saved" - in that I accept and confess Christ as my Saviour and that I am reborn through baptism and constant repentance; and, "I will be saved" if I will continue to be in communion with God to the end of this life and beyond.

That... my dear brothers and sisters..., is perfection.

Next week, we shall talk about VIGILANCE.