

BE YE ALSO PERFECT

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Text: Matthew 5:48 Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.

The little phrase, "We are all human," has been used many times to cover a multitude of sins. Whenever the faults or failings of some man in the public eye become particularly noticeable, his friends excuse him with the plea, "Oh well, we are all human." When we ourselves discover to our chagrin that we are not as good as we thought we were, or as we wanted people to believe we were, we try to pass off the knowledge lightly with the cheerful little phrase, "Oh well, we are all human." And because we are all human, there are times when we are quite willing to have ourselves excused for our very apparent faults on the grounds of our common humanity.

This little phrase, "We are all human," has gained such popularity as it has because it is true. There is no denying the fact that saint or sinner, black or white, Jew or Gentile, bond or free, we ARE all human. There is not one among us who is perfect, or altogether free from sin. Each one of us is heir to the death that came into the world through sin. Each one of us is alienated from God by his inherent sinful nature. Try as we may, each one of us finds that he is always just a little short, or sometimes a long way short, of perfection. It is not necessarily wrong to use our common humanity as a good reason for our human faults and failings. But it is sinfully wrong to use it as an EXCUSE for not trying to be better, because while it is true that we are all human, it is also equally true that there is in each one of us something divine. Spiritually, we are akin to God. Man was made in God's own spiritual image. He is not therefore justified in using his humanity as an excuse for degrading or debauching his God-like spirit.

We shall not take time in this particular sermon to dwell at length on the lesson of the parable of the mote and the beam. The parable is too well known, and the lesson too obvious. Before we criticize or condemn others for their sins and faults, we should be quite certain that our own vision is unobscured by our own faults or sins, so that we can see clearly to criticise our brother. Only the eyes that are free from sin, that can see clearly, that can read motives and hearts as well as external acts, are competent to judge the conduct of another wisely and justly and charitably.

But sometimes it seems impossible for us to escape seeing the very obvious faults of those about us -- particularly the faults of the men who serve us in the ministry. Every one of them is human. No one of them is perfect. But in judging and criticising good people, we sometimes forget the very obvious and quite sensible fact that a black blot or smudge on a pure white background looms up quite conspicuously, while a black blot on a dark gray background will scarcely be noticed. Sometimes, therefore, it is the best people who are most

severely criticised, because their few faults contrast so vividly with their otherwise exemplary life.

Imperfect though we may all be, I believe we are safe in laying down the premise that God will always choose the best possible man for any specific task or responsibility he has to perform. If he desired to call a man to the responsibility of priesthood or ministry, he would not choose a notorious drunkard, or a professional gambler, or a murderer, or a common thief -- at least not while he continued in his sin. But he would choose the best man available from the standpoint of morality, ability, capacity, training, and desire. The man called, being human, would almost certainly have his faults, which would hinder him in the performance of his called duty, but those faults might not obscure the fact that the man was outstandingly good in almost all other ways, and that God can use his good qualities while helping him to overcome his faults.

Let us bring you some illustrations to drive home what we mean. I have known some men of the ministry who had very extravagant tastes, who were always looking for more money, whose eyes seemed forever to be on the dollar sign. But otherwise they were good ministers, capable of great things, men of spiritual and moral power. I know many men of the ministry who would be better servants of God if they would spend more time in reading and study, but who manage to do a great deal of good as it is. On the other hand, I know other men who spend too much time in reading and study, and not enough in prayer, in seeking the wisdom of God, in visiting their flock and meeting their spiritual needs in their own homes. I know ministers who travel from place to place, preaching the same old sermons over and over again from the same manuscript or notes, who are otherwise exemplary men of God. I know an occasional man who is a powerful orator, and an inspired preacher, but whose bad grammar ruins the effect of what he says. I know men who are saints in every sense of the word, except that they can't hold their temper. I know good, devout, capable ministers who have curtailed and hampered their ministry by their devotion to some important doctrinal or theological hobby, which after all is only one aspect of the total gospel of Christ.

These faults are obvious. They prove that the men who have them are human. But God is using them in spite of their imperfections, because they are the BEST he has, considering the WHOLE man. And if we turn to ourselves and frankly survey our own lives to see wherein we have fallen short, we shall see that in most cases we are not so good as the men we have criticised, if we judge with the wisdom and the vision of God.

May we repeat, God will use the BEST man he has available for any specific task or responsibility. But there may be times when this simple and sensible rule cannot be so easily applied. Some theologians have taught that once a man is given authority to represent God, that authority remains, separate and apart from the man's personal or moral life. According to this theory, even a moral degenerate or a consummate scoundrel may continue to hold authority and represent God -- his spiritual and moral qualifications having nothing to do with the legal right to act in God's stead. We cannot accept this doctrine, and we believe that common sense and human nature itself will reject it. The Spirit of God, by which direction is

given to the men who represent him, "dwells not in unholy temples." Man cannot be divided into two parts --one good, and worthy to represent God, and one bad, excusable on the grounds of an unavoidable humanity. There must be at least a degree of high moral and spiritual worthiness in the man who is called to represent God. The man who is morally unsound, unrepentant, not even striving to overcome his humanity and increase his godliness, can not be God's representative.

Let us illustrate again. Suppose that a man is commissioned as a federal judge, and given broad powers over the people and the legal processes of his jurisdiction. But while exercising his judgeship, he also carries on some criminal activities --he becomes, say, a murderer, or an embezzler, or a common thief, or a notorious adulterer. How long do you suppose the public --people such as you and me -- would permit him to sit in judgment over other men, to interpret law and prescribe punishment, while he himself was so unworthy? Just so, the people have a right to demand that the men who administer the affairs of God, who teach his word, who adjudicate his laws, should be men of unassailable moral character. Though we should be willing to make some allowances in charity for every man's humanity and weakness, it still remains a fact that certain moral and spiritual standards are required of men who act for God, just as certain moral standards --not always too high -- are required of the men who serve the people in public offices of respect and trust and responsibility.

Authority is two fold. It is first moral, and then legal. When the President of the United States desires to appoint a man to a Federal judgeship, to continue our example, he first chooses a man who by his abilities, his qualifications, and his high moral character can command the respect of the people he will serve. Such a man already has MORAL authority. People are willing to trust him. When the Presidential commission arrives, authorizing him to sit as judge, LEGAL authority is added; but the legal commission would be no good if nobody trusted him as judge, nobody brought a case before him, and everyone who came unwillingly applied for a change in venue. So, in the same way, giving a man a license to preach, or to serve in any priestly capacity as God's representative is an empty form, unless the man chosen, by his exemplary life and fine spiritual and moral character already has the MORAL authority which makes him acceptable to the people he is to serve.

We should be intolerant, then, of the man who flagrantly and habitually violates the moral and spiritual law --the man who won't try to do better --the man who simply excuses himself by saying we are all human. We should discourage those apologists who attempt to excuse and cover up this kind of sin by pleading that we are all human. But we should be infinitely patient and charitable and forbearing with the man who is human --who has his faults, but who recognizes them, and tries to overcome them and go on unto perfection --the man whose virtues far outweigh his faults. We are our brother's keeper; we are responsible oftentimes for placing temptation and offense in another's way. But in another sense, we are NOT our brother's keeper. We are responsible to God only for ourselves. Each may choose for himself; none can choose for another. If we would go on unto perfection, it will not be by picking out someone else's faults, or by making his choices, but by judging ourselves, and choosing always that which is good. Let us go on unto perfection.