

# Are Christians Ever Really Perfect?

I was privileged this week to speak at [Old Bethel United Methodist Church](#) in Indianapolis as part of their Legacy series, which is taking a look at some of the foundational beliefs and practices of the Methodist movement. Specifically, I was asked to speak on one of John Wesley's distinctive theological emphases. So, of course, I chose his most controversial: the Doctrine of Christian Perfection.

I chose this topic, because it has been so often misunderstood and yet was of such critical importance to the spread of early Methodism. At the end of the day, we are left to decide whether or not Wesley's doctrine was clear and is it true? For that matter, we must decide what Wesley was really trying to say in the first place.

Just this week I read a quote from a scholarly work on Wesley, which says he never claimed a "sinless perfection". It is true that he never claimed this for himself, but he did claim it as an expectation (and a sometimes reality) for everyday Christians. I've read the material and it is unmistakable.

Now, a whole lot of extra stuff goes into this claim, especially how Wesley defined sin as *a willful transgression of a known law of God*, and also what it means to say one is "sinless" (Wesley specifically meant that a person no longer intentionally commits sin; this does not mean they do not commit unintended sins).

We also should consider the method of Wesley's writing on the

subject, when tended towards the defense of this concept of holiness as an expectation for God's children. So, sometimes his words carry more force and persuasive intent than they might in another context. It can make him sound quite dogmatic and as though the issue is a simple true/false dichotomy. Because of this, many people have found his claims hard to swallow.

And yet these claims are formed in the context of a deep reading of scripture. We would do well not to dismiss them without careful thought and much prayer.

At the end of the day, what I believe Wesley was trying to say is that God is ever calling us forward in faith to embrace a different way of being. We are to evaluate our thoughts, our desires, and our actions in the light of God's holiness, and to seek the Holy Spirit's power in altering our own sub-standard realities, until we become like Jesus.

So, are Christians ever really perfect? From a performance standpoint, I think the evidence clearly points to an answer of "no". But this really isn't Wesley's main point. Because holiness (or sanctification) is never about performance; it is about the heart.

And for Wesley, as with the Biblical authors, God – and God alone, in cooperation with our faith – is able to take a stony human heart and produce from it a heart that is made of flesh and capable of loving God and other people as God loves.

**And God loves perfectly!**

When Christians submit themselves fully to God, through faith

in Jesus, and allow the Spirit to work in and through them, holding nothing back out of selfish desire, then something incredible can and does happen. They don't suddenly become perfect in their performance, but they do become perfected in love.

And this is what Wesley's Doctrine of Christian Perfection is all about.

If you would like to learn more about this, you can now view my entire lecture (just 26 minutes) below, or [online here](#).

# Sermon Planning Resources for 2018

I am always on the lookout for tools that help me improve my productivity. Since sermon planning and writing is the most public aspect of pastoral ministry, and is also an activity which usually takes a significant portion of a pastor's working hours each week, I am particularly interested in tool that help me to simplify my own sermon preparation.

In the past, I have shared some of the insights I have gleaned from Chad Brooks, over at the [Productive Pastor Podcast](#). This really is the go-to place for learning about productivity in ministry.

One of the things productivity enthusiasts suggest is to customize whatever tools you choose and make them your own. So, for the last couple of years I have been using a modified version of Chad's Productive Pastor Sermon Worksheet, that was modified to fit the structure I tend to use in my sermons and my preferred way of thinking through a Biblical text.

As I continue to refine my sermon writing process, I've found the need to simplify this tool even further for the coming year. This newest version of my worksheet removes all of the design fluff I had in earlier versions, and attempts to simplify the organization, while providing enough room for notes.

I have organized it according to the following sections:

- What I am preaching about (Sermon Title/Text).

- My message in one sentence (Bottom Line).
- What they need to know (Teaching), with a section for exegetical notes.
- What they need to do (Application).
- Why they need to do it (Inspiration).

With experience, I am coming to agree even more fully with Andy Stanley and others that we must be crystal clear in our preaching, focusing on one point and fully explaining the text and its call to action. My hope is that this tool will be helpful to you, as well. Use it as is, or modify it, and make it your own.

[Sermon Planning Worksheet 2018 \(PDF\)](#)

You can also find my other resources for ministry over on the [Resources](#) and [Children's Ministry Resources](#) pages.

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## [Do You Have Compassion for Your Lost Neighbor?](#)

For the last few days, I've been reading James Emery White's new book, [Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World](#). It is a summary study of the largest generation in American history, and (according to researchers) likely the last distinguishable generation that we will ever see, due to the increasingly rapid pace of substantive change in our culture.

The purpose behind the book is to identify the characteristics and worldview common to this generation, which currently makes up 24.9 percent of the population, and to suggest methods that will be needed to reach them with the good news of Jesus.

The challenges of leading people to Christ are great, no matter which generation we are talking about, but they are even more substantial with Generation Z, because they represent the first truly post-Christian generation in our country's history. Many individuals in this group have absolutely no experience of the gospel. They have never been part of a church, they have no knowledge of scripture, and they live with a purely secular worldview. This means they do not have the basic underlying framework that previous generations have had, and which has been an essential component of evangelistic efforts in America.

Unless we in the church change our methods (not our message), this generation will be lost; indeed, they already are, according to the statistics.

## **We Have a Compassion Problem**

Though the church faces many challenges to the spread of the gospel, one of the greatest challenges is a loss of compassion for the lost among Christians.

I don't mean **empathy**. According to [Edwin Friedman](#), the word empathy did not enter into the English language until the 1930s, and it's original use implied the act of placing one's self (mentally and emotionally) inside a piece of artwork.

Somewhere along the way, it came to mean placing one's self mentally and emotionally in another person's situation. In other words, to feel another's pain. And because none of us likes to feel pain the result of this sort of empathy is usually a desire to remove whatever is causing the other's pain, either by removing the other from the painful circumstances, or more often, removing the thing which is causing pain in the first place, whether that is a physical stressor, an emotional stimulant, or a spiritual malaise.

The problem with this, of course, is that pain is necessary to growth. And our cultural aversion to pain has led to generations with an increased sensitivity to it. It should come as no surprise that we now live in an age, where a person can be socially ostracised, fired from their workplace, or even charged legally for expressing ideas, which are emotionally painful or offensive to others. And the problem is only getting worse.

The solution to the problem is not to find ways to become more accommodating to this cultural shift. The world does not need more empathetic Christians.

**What the world needs is more Christians who have genuine compassion for their lost neighbors.**

Compassion is a genuine concern for the sufferings and misfortunes of other people, and it is closely linked in scripture with the following responses: mercy, kindness, and love.

But right now, Compassion seems to be in short supply among God's people.

A lack of compassion was God's complaint against the prophet Jonah, and is arguably the point of the whole story, even though we tend to trivialize it by focusing on the big fish. At the very end of the story, in chapter four, we find Jonah sitting on the east side of the city of Ninevah, waiting to see what God would do to them.

Jonah was mad. God had sent him to this place to declare God's coming judgment and wrath for their wickedness, something the judgmental Jonah was looking forward to seeing. But something unexpected happened. Unlike Israel, who never seemed to listen to her own prophets when God sent them, the people of Ninevah took seriously what Jonah said to them. They repented of their sin, ceased their wicked ways, and everyone, from the king down to the animals, fasted, while the people prayed for God's forgiveness. As a result of their penitence, God changed his mind and chose to preserve the city.

So, there sat Jonah in a huff, like a spoiled child, grumbling at God for not following through with his original plan to destroy the city. Jonah felt like God had made a fool of him. He was thinking only of himself.

### **Jonah lacked compassion.**

God taught Jonah a lesson by causing a plant to grow quickly and give him shade, and then just as quickly killing that plant with a worm, so that Jonah would feel the full heat of the sun. Johna's response was to complain even louder. Bitterness had taken hold in his heart.

Then God called him out on it. He said, "Jonah, you feel sorry (pity/compassion) about this plant that only lived a brief



time, even though you didn't plant it. But Ninevah has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness. Shouldn't I feel compassion for such a great city?"

Jonah only felt pity for himself, really. But God was calling him to feel compassion for those who were lost. The book ends here, and we never find out if Jonah's heart was transformed. My fear is that it was not, because my experience has been that followers of Jesus still often lack compassion for anyone but themselves.

Viewing the lost like Jonah leads to judgment, condemnation, and the desire to see God's wrath poured out. But this is rarely, if ever, because of a concern for God's righteousness. It is usually out of a selfish concern; Christians want to feel better about themselves.

Compassion, on the other hand, leads to a genuine outpouring of mercy, kindness, and love toward people, who are already hurting. Compassion causes a heart to cry out for God's mercy on behalf of others. It seeks to offer the hand of friendship, through kindness. And it pours out such overwhelming love that maybe, just maybe, the recipients of that love will turn towards the God of all love and be saved.

Let's dispell the myth that compassion equals compromise. God did not ask Jonah to change his convictions about righteousness and sin, and he isn't asking the church to change ours. Like Jonah, he is asking us to consider those who live in spiritual darkness – to really look at them – and to have genuine concern for their plight. Then trust in God's mercy, even as we become conduits of his grace.

If we have any hope of reaching Generation Z (or any generation) with the good news of Jesus, we must become more compassionate towards our lost neighbors.

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## How Much Do You Love Jesus?

There is a question we need to begin asking and answering more earnestly in the Church.

### **Do you love Jesus?**

**For some of us in the Church, the question itself is offensive.** We think it is too emotional, too touchy-feely. We believe in God and want to go to heaven, and we know this means believing in Jesus; but all that love talk is just uncomfortable.

**For some of us in the Church, the question is metaphysical.** We love to feel and express love in our souls. The high of feeling loved is what we crave, and we worship to get that high that will carry us through the week, until our next fix.

**For some of us in the Church, the question is quizzical.** We may believe that Jesus saves people from their sins, but the idea of *loving* someone we can't see may sound good, but it just isn't real or possible.

**For some of us in the Church, the question is frightening.** We want to love Jesus, but we aren't sure what that will entail. And frankly, we have been hurt too many times already, when we risked expressing and receiving love.

For some of us in the Church, the answer to the question is no. For others, the answer is maybe. For the rest, the answer is yes. The problem is that many of us have never asked or answered the question truthfully. And this really is the only question that ultimately matters, because the way you answer it affects every part of your life.

Maybe you have answered this question in your own soul, and have received peace in the Holy Spirit that you are God's child through faith. You do love Jesus. He is your Lord, your Savior, and your God, even though you don't always show it very well.

If this describes you, then praise God, for only he can change a heart of stone into a heart of flesh that can love as God loves.

Now it is time to ask yourself the harder question.

## **How much do you love Jesus?**

Do you love Jesus enough to let go of your old life and embrace a new way of living?

Do you love Jesus enough to confess the sin in your life and ask him to take it away?

Do you love Jesus enough to change your work habits, or maybe even your job, so that you can make him your top priority?

Do you love Jesus enough to live simply, so that you can use the wealth God gives you to bless the poor?

Do you love Jesus enough to forgive people who hurt you, even though they don't deserve it, and even though they haven't asked?

Do you love Jesus enough to tell other people about him and the good news of what he has done in your life?

Do you love Jesus enough to let him call the shots; to really direct your steps?

Do you love Jesus enough to walk into places that are dark, dirty, and dangerous, if he asks you to?

Do you love Jesus enough to follow him, even if it leads to your death?

Do you love Jesus enough to make your relationship with him the most important part of your life?

When we confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord, we are saying that our allegiance has changed. We are no longer to be driven by self-interest, by fear, by longing for the things of this world. When we say that someone is Lord it means that we live under their protection, but also under their direction.

When we say that we love Jesus, it means that our desires should be for him, our loyalty to him, our trust in him. And if we really love him, the answer to these other questions will be yes.

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## Removing Idols from Our Lives

If you have spent any length of time in a church, you have probably heard some talk about idols. Not the American Idol sort, but the kind that people have worshipped throughout time.

The first place in Scripture where most people are exposed to the concept of idols is Exodus 20, where God is laying out the Ten Commandments for his fledgling nation, Israel, in the desert.

*“You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea. You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children; the entire family is affected—even children in the third and fourth generations of those who reject me. 6 But I lavish unfailing love for a thousand generations on those who love me and obey my commands. (Exodus 20:4-5, NLT)”*

If you have been in church for any length of time, you have also probably heard someone compare things in our modern lives to these physical idols talked about in the Bible. Christians sometimes think that they are far removed from the sort of idolatry for which Israel was condemned. But the truth of the matter is that, while we (most of us) no longer construct physical idols in the form of statues to be worshiped, we are nevertheless often guilty of setting up other objects of worship in our lives.

We just don't always realize it, because we have trouble identifying what an idol looks like today.

## **What does an idol look like?**

Simply put, an idol is anything that pulls your attention away from pursuing God.

An idol can be a physical thing like property, it can be an intangible concept like wealth or fame, it can be a philosophy like self-reliance or atheism, it can be an activity or identity like sports or a club, it can even be a relationship with another person like your spouse or kids, or it can truly be another god like people worship in other religions.

Some things are idols for everyone, meaning that there is no way to incorporate those things into your life without it becoming an idol. This is the case with another religion.

Other things are not intrinsically idols for all people, but can become so when they work their way into our hearts in such a way that they become the focus of our desires.

Usually, the things that people idolize are good gifts that have taken on too much meaning in their lives. Often, the only way to identify these things is to ask the Holy Spirit to convict us of our idolatry.

But, when he does, we must also be willing to act – sometimes in radical ways – to remove the idols from our lives.

## **Why it matters to identify and remove idols in our lives**

Jesus was crystal clear that it is impossible to serve God, when our desires are for other things. Using the example of money, that great Idol of all cultures, he said,

*“No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and be enslaved to money. (Matthew 6:24, NLT)”*

And money is just one example of the things which start out innocently enough, but can easily begin to consume our attention and wrestle our love away from God. When we begin to pursue these things instead of Jesus, we are guilty of idolatry, because we worship created things in place of our Creator.

## **Removing Idols One at a Time**

For a long time now, I have wrestled with the realization that

I have had some budding idols in my life. Some things that often pull my attention away from Jesus and what he would have me hear and do. They seemed innocuous enough that, at first, I ignored the affect they were having on me.

It was only when I tried to give these things less of a footprint in my life that I fully realized just how destructive they have become. And now that I see those distractions have created fractured desires in me, the only thing I can do is to root them out and remove them from my life one at a time.

For me, the biggest culprit in my life – the thing that distracts me from hearing God's voice more often than anything else at this moment in time is social media. If you have been reading this site for long, you know this has been an [ongoing struggle](#) for me. It is just one of many contributing factors in the [distraction](#) and [busyness](#) people consume themselves with in our culture. It isn't intrinsically an idol, but it is the one thing that has a grip on me personally.

So, it is time to let it go. After trying multiple ways of reducing my use of social media and failing, I'm convinced that I need to completely sever the ties, if I am ever to fully focus on where God wants to speak into my life.

As of yesterday, I no longer have profiles on Twitter and Facebook (the biggest problems for me). I don't know if I will ever be back on these services. I may be, but only once I have removed its place of influence in my life. At the very least, I sense God telling me to give them up for the rest of this year. After that we will see.



My sincere hope is that, in these coming months, I will develop a deep desire for seeking intimacy with God and more meaningful relationships with people in my sphere of influence, rather than wasting the time God has given me on superficial friendships and the pursuit of meaning, through an online persona.

Please hear me, I am not making a prescription for other Christians. You must reflect on your own life and ask the Holy Spirit for guidance on which things are vying for more and more of your attention. But I urge you to take seriously what the Spirit reveals to you. Letting go of things – even good things – that are pulling your desire away from God is a necessary part of living as a disciple of Jesus.

The only irony of this decision for me is that few people will probably ever see this post, because the vast majority of my website traffic comes from social media. It is one reason I struggled so hard with letting go. But now that I have let go of relevance I can embrace obscurity in the arms of my Lord.

I'd say that is a pretty good trade.

Jesus must become greater; we must become less.