

AIM FOR PERFECTION

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Date: 19-10-2025

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 13: 9, 11-14 (NIV)

2 Corinthians 13: 9, 11-14

⁹ We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and our prayer is for your perfection.

¹¹ Finally, brothers, goodbye. Aim for perfection. Listen to my appeal. Be of one mind, live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you. ¹² Greet one another with a holy kiss. ¹³ All the saints send their greetings. ¹⁴ May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

I have entitled today's message 'Aim For Perfection'. You would have noticed in v.9 where Paul says, "Our prayer is for your perfection." Again, in v.11 he says, "Aim for perfection."

When we see this word 'perfection', especially in the context of our Christian life, it could be quite scary. But be assured, this word perfection here does not mean absolute sinless perfection, but it means spiritual maturity. All of us who have received the Lord as our personal Savior and become God's children, need to grow. That is very important.

At the same time I also want to bring to your notice the last verse which we always use as benediction. ¹³ May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." If you look at Paul's letters, you'll see that he always starts with a greeting, usually reading like "grace and peace to you from God, and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

The two themes grace and peace were very important for Paul. You see that also his letters always ended with some kind of a benediction. Most of them would read like this: "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you." Sometimes, it would end like: "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with your spirit," and in about two epistles he uses, "Grace be with you."

But in this particular letter, he uses this very special benediction: "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." We don't know why Paul used this benediction, and down the ages, churches all use this. It's a wonderful benediction and it also brings three very important themes – grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Now, in the context of what we said, "Aim for perfection" which Paul mentions in v.9 and v.11, or equivalently 'aim for spiritual maturity', let's look at these three themes and see how it applies to us.

The Corinthian church had many problems, just like any other church today. One of them was disunity, especially if you look at the first epistle to the Corinthian church, he brings that up very strongly. Another major issue was that they had a complacent attitude. In India, very often we hear of the standard attitude: It's okay! Chalta hai! Unfortunately, that's an extremely bad attitude to have in our Christian life, because sometimes we can get used to regularly reading the bible, going to church, and going through the motions and being complacent or being happy with that. And that's very dangerous.

And that I believe is one of the reasons why Paul wrote this: Aim for Perfection. If you read v.5, it says, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith." Test yourselves. Now there's something good for us too. Don't just assume; don't be complacent. Instead we should make it a regular habit to examine ourselves, to test ourselves to see where we are. That's very important. So, in this context, let's look at these three themes.

THEMES

1. THE GRACE OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST.

Grace means unmerited favor and love. It's a free and undeserved gift to humanity, particularly in the context of salvation and spiritual strength. Very often, we associate this word 'grace' only with salvation. Sometimes, we think that grace is required for our salvation. After that, it is our responsibility. Unfortunately, that is a burden that we have put on ourselves. I know that this was a major problem for me. I thought it's all about myself. And many live under a lot of guilt because they try to live the Christian life in their own strength.

But remember, grace never ends with salvation. It's available throughout our life, and we need it desperately. Ephesians 2:8-9 is very familiar for all of us in the context of grace and salvation. *"For it is by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not from yourself; it's a gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast."* We know that we need grace for our salvation. But how about grace for the rest of our Christian life?

2 Corinthians 8:9 *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor so that you, through His poverty might become rich.* Now here, this grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is used in the context of Jesus' incarnation. His coming, the king of the universe, the creator of the universe, coming down to our world, becoming poor, living as a human being.

2 Corinthians 8 and 9 are two great chapters on Christian giving. If you read the previous verses, he starts by quoting the example of the Macedonian church. This particular church was in deep poverty. But Paul says that out of their extreme poverty, they were rich in generosity. They were abounding with joy. Imagine that! Extreme poverty, but they were extremely joyful. And not only that, they were generous. How can you be generous when you are poor? That's what the Macedonian church did.

Last week we celebrated Thanksgiving Sunday, and Pastor reminded us of all that God has done for us and how we need to be grateful to God. Paul uses this phrase 'grace of giving' in ch. 8. He asked the Corinthian church to excel in the grace of giving.

So, I believe in our spiritual maturity or in our Christian life, another major area. And I believe that this is an area where, definitely as Indian churches, we are not doing very well. So much so, pastors have to tell, again and again, about giving generously and sacrificially to the church. This is an area where the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is needed to help us to look at Jesus' example, and to be generous and sacrificial when we give. Not because we have a lot to give, but because of what God has done for us.

John 1:16 *From the fullness of His grace, we have all received one blessing after another.*

We need to remind ourselves that all that we have, whether it's our health or wealth or education, whatever we have, our family, anything we have is all, as this particular verse reminds us, from the fullness of His grace, we have received one blessing after another, spiritual blessings and material

blessings. We need to remind ourselves that all that we have is because of what God has given us. Do I acknowledge that all that I have is given by God? Therefore, am I grateful to God? Am I thankful to Him? Am I living in that kind of gratefulness?

Before closing this particular theme, let me quote another verse in the context of spiritual maturity. In 1 Corinthians 15: 9-10, Paul says, *"For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God, I am what I am. And His grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me."* Beautiful verse!

What Paul is saying is: I am what I am by God's grace. But he adds immediately, "His grace to me was not without effect" or as some versions say, "His grace to me was not in vain." Meaning – I utilize that full grace.

Now, the question for us to ask is: God saved me, and God is helping me on a day-to-day basis; His grace is available to me. Am I using it to grow in the Lord? And Paul says, "I worked harder than all of them." And he immediately adds, "Yet, not I, but the grace of God that was with me."

Therefore, let's make it a point that we should never be complacent where we are, but we need to grow. And God's grace is available in abundance for the asking. So, in summary, God's grace is available to each one of us in our spiritual journey, and therefore, it's our responsibility to make good use of it and grow in the Lord.

2. THE LOVE OF GOD THE FATHER.

When we hear this particular phrase 'love of God the Father', John 3:16 immediately comes to mind. *"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."*

It's so wonderful to see how God's love works very well with God's grace. In fact, God's love and grace always run together. Let me read a verse which brings both themes together strongly.

Ephesians 2: 4-5 *But because of His great love for us, God who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. It is by grace you have been saved."* Because of God's love, we received the grace of God.

1 John 3:1 *How great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!*

In my bible, both the sentences end with an exclamation mark. That reminds us – it's unthinkable. How great is the love the Father has lavished on us. We who did not deserve even a little bit, but God's grace was lavish so that we should be called children of God. And John reminds us that's what we are. We are God's children. But remember, that's all because of God's love.

Therefore, we can always be assured of God's great love and not just at the time of salvation, but throughout our life. And we should always be aware. Unfortunately, Satan is very good in telling us and bringing to our knowledge all the wrong things we have done, and to tell us that God doesn't love you. That's one of the first things Satan will do to you. So always be reminded of God's love. And always be reminded that you are a child of God.

Let me ask you a question. You know this verse, but does it thrill you when you read it? Let me admit that it doesn't thrill me. somehow, when we read such verses, we are not able to understand the

depth of them. Why is it that we are not able to get thrilled when we read a verse like this? I believe the problem is unfortunately that our minds are all the time full with the kind of things which give us identity or security, maybe our position, maybe our wealth, our family, education, whatever it is. Those are the things which give us that sense of identity or our sense of security.

I believe that's a big problem for the whole world and definitely for us too. Therefore, we need to always ask this question of ourselves: How can I get back this joy in spite of all that I go through? How can I have this joy knowing that I am God's child and I'm loved lavishly? How can I be thrilled about that? And I believe the way to do that is to be transformed in our thinking.

Paul reminds us in Romans 12:1 *"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."* I think that is something we need to do on a day-to-day basis. Jesus said, *"Love the Lord, Your God with all your heart, with all your mind."* How do we love God with our mind? We do that by transforming our thinking. We need to think. When we read such verses, ask ourselves: What does that verse mean? what does it mean to me and how can I apply it? Once we do that, only then can such verses become part of us.

We need to renew ourselves and remind ourselves that we are loved and God's love is available to us till the last breath we have in this world.

3. THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

This particular phrase appears only in this particular verse, and nowhere else in the New Testament, even though this theme is kind of implied in many verses. That is very interesting. Let me read a few verses for you to remind us that we are privileged to have the fellowship of the Holy Spirit on a permanent basis.

John 14:16 says, *"And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever – the spirit of truth."* To be with you forever. That's why I said we have God's Spirit residing in us on a permanent basis, permanent resident, permanent fellowship.

John 14: 26 says, *"But the counselor of the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."* So, God's Spirit's role to stay in our heart is to teach us all things and to remind us of everything. That's a wonderful role. God's Spirit would do that very faithfully.

John 16: 13 *"But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth."*

Romans 8 – the entire chapter is on life in the spirit. But let me read two verses.

8:26-27 *"In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will."*

Beautiful verses. the Spirit helps us in our weakness. Don't ever forget that. are you weak? Yes, all of us are weak, but God's Spirit helps us in our weakness. And he says, *"But the Spirit Himself intercedes for us."* God's Spirit is interceding for us. Why? Because we don't know how to pray. *"The Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will."*

Now, that's the kind of fellowship we have of God's Spirit. Now, be encouraged that God's Spirit is permanently residing and helping us. But then, what is our role? God's Spirit as a permanent resident would always do His job, that is to remind us, to teach us, to guide us.

What is our role? Our role is to be sensitive. I've seen it many times – God's Spirit prompting me that something is not right. Or maybe when I did something wrong, immediately God's prompting comes. You messed up. But also comes with a solution. Ask for forgiveness, get on with life. And God's Spirit will do that always. Our job is to be sensitive, to tune ourselves, to find what God wants us to do. And I believe we need to do that. That's vital in our walk with the Lord on a day-to-day basis. If you want to grow spiritually, then we need to listen. That's what God's word says: Live by the Spirit. God's Spirit will do the job to tell us what to do, what not to do.

What are some of the hindrances for us to live a perfect life?

What are some of the hindrances for us to live a life of spiritual maturity? What are some of the problems we are facing and how can we get over them?

We must remember we are in the battlefield. If you remember, during the period of Lend, our theme was spiritual warfare, and we saw many aspects of it. Very often we might tell our friends, "You come to Jesus, all your problems will be solved." That's the biggest lie.

Come to Jesus, your problems will start. Why? Before coming to Jesus, you never bothered. Sin did not make any difference. But the moment you accept Jesus into your life, God's Spirit tells you: That is not right. The problems that your friends, colleagues or others face and you face will be the same. God will never insulate us from problems which others have, but God will give us the strength to face them.

Therefore, always remember that we are in the battlefield. We have three powerful enemies working against us, waging war on us on a day-to-day basis.

- Sinful nature or as the Bible calls it, flesh
- The world
- Satan.

Unfortunately, we give too much credit to Satan. We blame all our problems on Satan, but Satan is smart. Our #1 enemy is our sinful nature. But Satan would use our sinful nature and the world and its standards to make us ineffective.

Therefore, we need to see how to have victory. Day-by-day, moment by moment, we are prone to sin. We are prone to take wrong decisions, and that's where we need God's help. God's Spirit's help. Don't get discouraged. That is most important.

We have divine resources to get out these enemies, to have a continuous victory in our life. These are:

- God's word,
- Holy Spirit – a permanent resident in our heart,
- Prayer – we can go to God in prayer anytime,
- Fellowship with like-minded Christians – to build one another, help one another, to encourage one another

What steps can we take?

- We need to spend quality time in reading God's word, and also on meditating and applying it to our lives. It's impossible to grow as a Christian if you do not have regular intake of God's

word. God's Spirit would use God's word to teach us and to correct us. If you don't have God's word, what would God's Spirit do? How would God's Spirit help you and guide you?

I was challenged about 2 weeks ago. I was listening to a sermon by Pastor Erwin Lutzer, a pastor at the Moody Church in Chicago. As a young man, he memorized entire John's gospel, the epistle to the Romans – not as a pastor, but as a young man. What I'm trying to say is don't get scared. But we all need to take reading God's word seriously. It's very good to memorize good key verses. No excuse is good enough.

We must make it a point to read and meditate on God's word. Make it a point to be fresh and ask God's Spirit to open God's word to you so that you understand. It's an excellent idea to ask yourself after reading, what is at least one thing that you learned today. What did God's spirit teach you? Then try and remember that throughout the day.

Very often, God's word brings key themes for us, and also sometimes warning, sometimes encouragement, or important guidance steps. So make it a point to make God's word literally reside in you.

In summary, be reminded of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Let me encourage you to have a few things to pray for. What can you pray for especially to have spiritually maturity? Let me read 3 verses, all from Paul's letters to these churches.

Ephesians 1: 17 *I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know Him better.*
Lord, help me to know You better.

Philippians 1: 9 *And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.*

Lord, help me that my love for You would abound more and more, would grow more and more. Lord, help me to love you more and more.

Colossians 1: 10 *And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please Him in every way, bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God.*
Lord, help me to live a life worthy of You. Help me to please You in every way.

I'm sure that you know God's grace is available to us in abundance. God's love is available to us in abundance just to assure you that I'm with you. And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is with us to guide us and to help us.

Amen.
