

The Perfect Mystery

In the name of him who has reconciled us in his body of flesh by his death, dear friends in Christ: Nobody's perfect. You've heard it said many times. You've said it yourself. Nobody's perfect. And it's true. Speaking of humanity in general, nobody *is* perfect.

But what do we mean when we say that phrase? In what kind of situations do we use it? The answer is simple: we use it to dismiss imperfections either in ourselves or in others. "Yes, I messed up or made this mistake or committed this sin or have this personality fault or annoying habit, but what do you expect? Nobody's perfect." So also when we look at others and see their faults: "Bob drinks too much. Sally is cheating on her husband. Ernie can't control his temper. Beth is a notorious gossip. My son is shacking up with his girlfriend. Dolores curses like a sailor. Joe is lazy, goofs off at work, and steals tools from his job. Margaret can't control her kids and lets them treat her like trash. But hey, who am I to judge? Nobody's perfect."

You see what it is: it's the perfect excuse for being less than perfect. It's a way to brush off bad behavior. It makes the unacceptable acceptable. In other words, it makes evil good. It takes the holy Law of God and says, "Yeah, well these violations don't matter. They're nothing to get worked up about. There's no need to fear the Lord's wrath. He understands. Nobody's perfect."

Really? Who are we to make that judgment? Who are we to tell the Lord what to think? Who are we to say to him that his fierce burning anger over even what strikes us as the smallest and most insignificant sin is misplaced? "Relax, Lord. Chill out. Get over it. Nobody's perfect."

But the Lord demands perfection. He will accept nothing less of us. God hates sin. It infuriates him. He hates those who commit sins. He sends them to hell where his wrath is poured out upon them forever. No sinner can enter the Lord's presence. Jesus said "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of God."

When you or anyone else excuses sin with "nobody's perfect" or any similar phrase, it diminishes God. It insults his holiness and perfect justice. It turns him into an indulgent grandparent who let's your kids get away with stuff you would never put up with because he doesn't have to live with them and their obnoxious behavior. And not only does it insult God's justice, it denigrates the work of salvation Jesus achieved for us by his suffering and death on the cross. If we can brush off sin with "nobody's perfect", then it doesn't take the death of God's Son to save us. But that was the price. That's how serious each and every one of our sins is. We dare not forget it.

Writing to the Christians at Colossae, Paul describes their standing with respect to the Lord before the Gospel came to them. "You were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds." He means full scale rebellion; nothing good going on. This is the default human condition: to be by nature an enemy of the Lord, angrily spitting in his face and telling him off at every turn, and doing the things he despises most – and for it rightly deserving his righteous wrath and condemnation.

That's who and what you were, Paul tells them. But your hopeless situation changed. The Gospel came to you, the good news of what Christ did to save sinners by his suffering and death on the cross – what Paul calls here “the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints”.

A *mystery*, Paul calls it. Biblically speaking a mystery is a divine secret that the Lord reveals to those who are his own. It's like the parables. Jesus speaks them publically, but explains their meanings only to his disciples. The rest of the world is in the dark. They don't understand. The Sacraments are called mysteries. In Baptism outsiders see water being poured on someone's head. They don't get it. Believers see the gift of spiritual rebirth in the Holy Spirit. They see someone being united with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. So also in the Lord's Supper, outsiders see people consuming a little wafer of bread and taking a sip of wine. Believers see Christ giving us his body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins.

The mystery Paul speaks of here in today's text is the Gospel itself: the death of Jesus as the sacrifice of atonement for the sins of all people. It is the *perfect* mystery for three reasons. First, because no one could ever have even come close to guessing it. That in love God would give his Son to save those who so thoroughly reject him and everything that's good; that the Son would be willing to take on human form and subject himself to such horrific torment to rescue his enemies—who could have imagined such a thing? No one! If you read something like it in a fictional novel, you'd think “This is unbelievable. No one acts that way!” But that's just it. God *does* act that way. His ways are a mystery to us.

The second reason the Gospel is the perfect mystery is that by it the Lord declares perfect those who hear and trust in it. The enemies of God, those who are spitting venom at him and committing every crime imaginable, by Christ's death and resurrection are reconciled to God. Through faith in Christ they are presented to the Father as holy and blameless and above reproach. It's as if they never sinned even once. They are perfect in his sight. They are perfect because the Father doesn't see them and their sins, he sees Christ and his perfection in them. He sees Christ and his atoning death covering them. And they remain perfect in his sight so long as they continue in the faith, not shifting from the hope of the Gospel they heard.

The third and final reason the Gospel is the perfect mystery is that by it believers are being made perfect. Paul says he toils with all his might to teach and proclaim the mystery of the Gospel in order to bring his hearers to Christian maturity. Christ is perfect. And by the Spirit and Word of Christ we are being made more Christ-like; that is to say, perfect. Yes, it's an ongoing process that won't be completed in this life, yet it is the goal we should all be pressing toward. Instead of dismissing our faults with a flip “Nobody's perfect”, we should be digging deep, searching the soul, rooting out our imperfections, despising them like God does, confessing them for the sins they are, and receiving Christ's perfecting word of forgiveness – with gives the strength and will to do better.

Let us then make this our goal as we push on toward attaining Christian maturity, and while we wait in hope for the day Jesus raises us from death to the glory of the world to come and no one will ever be able to say again “Nobody's perfect.” In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!