



United Methodist Church OF GENEVA

Grace in Country Music - Outskirts of Heaven

A sermon by Pastor Rob Hamilton

Delivered on August 28, 2022 on Philippians 3:5b-20 NIRV

I am part of the people of Israel. I am from the tribe of Benjamin. I am a pure Hebrew. As far as the law is concerned, I am a Pharisee. 6 As far as being committed is concerned, I opposed and attacked the church. As far as keeping the law is concerned, I kept it perfectly.

7 I thought things like that were really something great. But now I consider them to be nothing because of Christ. 8 Even more, I consider everything to be nothing compared to knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. To know him is worth much more than anything else. Because of him I have lost everything. But I consider all of it to be garbage so I can know Christ better. 9 I want to be joined to him. Being right with God does not come from my obeying the law. It comes because I believe in Christ. It comes from God because of faith. 10 I want to know Christ better. Yes, I want to know the power that raised him from the dead. I want to join him in his sufferings. I want to become like him by sharing in his death. 11 Then by God's grace I will rise from the dead.

12 I have not yet received all these things. I have not yet reached my goal. Christ Jesus took hold of me so that I could reach that goal. So I keep pushing myself forward to reach it. 13 Brothers and sisters, I don't consider that I have taken hold of it yet. But here is the one thing I do. I forget what is behind me. I push hard toward what is ahead of me. 14 I push myself forward toward the goal to win the prize. God has appointed me to win it. The heavenly prize is Christ Jesus himself.

15 So all of us who are grown up in the faith should see things this way. Maybe you think differently about something. But God will make it clear to you. 16 Only let us live up to what we have already reached.

17 Brothers and sisters, join together in following my example. You have us as a model. So pay close attention to those who live as we do. 18 I have told you these things many times before. Now I tell you again with tears in my eyes. Many people live like enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 The only thing they have coming to them is death. Their stomach is their god. They brag about what they should be ashamed of. They think only about earthly things. 20 But we are citizens of heaven. And we can hardly wait for a Savior from there. He is the Lord Jesus Christ. 21 He has the power to bring everything under his control. By his power he will change our earthly bodies. They will become like his glorious body.

Prelude

Hi! I'm Rob Hamilton, Senior Pastor at UMCG and I am glad you are sharing in worship today. Today, we are wrapping up a series we started earlier this



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month that teaches our Wesleyan understanding of God's grace and how we see that reflected in country music. If you want to see where we've been checkout our UMCGeneva YouTube page, but here is a summary.

So here's where we've been the past month as we wrap up this series on grace found in country music. John Michael Montgomery's "The Little Girl" taught us about **prevenient grace** which is **God loving us before we know it**.

We also learned that we see in God's son Jesus, the true depth of God's love for all people. For by the Jesus' life, death and resurrection, we experience the extent at which God will go to show us God's love and show us that God loves us so we can be in a relationship with God. By **accepting God's love in Jesus its just-as-if-I had never sinned which is justifying grace**. Once justified we can have a real relationship with Jesus. The kind of relationship where you'd be able to sit and have a beer with Jesus as Thomas Rhett sang.

Last week, we learned about in a real relationship with Jesus God's grace transform our lives for grace filled living in the world. Every good work and even our faith are all God's gracious gifts to us and we call these gifts sanctification. **Sanctifying grace is God's transforming work that we experience our entire lives after accepting God's grace in all our lives once we've accepted God's love into our lives** and Eric Church's song 'Like Jesus Does' helped us to understand sanctification a bit better. Now, this process of God's love transforming us through sanctification will eventually lead us to the point where we are entirely sanctified. When we are entirely sanctified, we experience perfecting grace which is what Craig Campbell will help illumine for us today. But before we go farther, let's pray:

Prayer of Illumination

Jesus,
Speak to me and to this church once again your message of love and grace. Meet us where we are, even with our sin and shame, but I beg you don't let us leave here today without changing us by the power of praise, fellowship, prayer, and your word. Amen.

Sermon

Before I jump into what I feel called to share today, I want to nip something in the bud. John Wesley, the apostle Paul, probably Jesus, myself - along with many other preachers - unintentionally create a barrier the moment the word 'perfect' is mentioned and I want to try to get that barrier out of the way at the beginning, so that we don't miss the importance of perfecting grace. I tried to make



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this point with our children already, so maybe you already gotten it. Lawrence Hull Stookey is the one helped clarify the term 'perfect' for me¹.

When we think of being perfect, we tend to think "well that can never be me" or "yes, thank you, I am practically perfect in every way." If we are talking about being perfect as existing without flaws, that may serve us well when talking about how God loves us perfectly because God loves us without any flaws. But we'll never be without flaw. Sin has made a mark on us that keeps us from being flawless. Instead, let's think of perfection

as a matter of capacity. That's what the different[jars were about right. God puts in each and every one of us a different capacity to love God and neighbor (and let me tell you that capacity is more than you think and the capacity expands). And just as a pint container can be as perfectly full as a 10 gallon container, God calls each and every one of us to be filled by God to our maximum capacity.

Sometimes God will fill us to the point of overflowing. So what it means to be

perfect is not about being flawless. **Being perfect is about living up to the full potential God has placed in your life to be loved by God and to let God love the world through you.**

If there is one thing I want us to take away today as a life challenge its a question to ask ourselves: **Am I letting God love me -and love others through me- to the full potential God created me with?**

Now where this comes from is John Wesley's understanding of salvation as portrayed throughout all of scripture. Paul the apostle figured this out too and wrote about it in Philippians, which I will talk about in a moment. But in the summary is that, "Salvation is not a static, one-time event in our lives." It is the ongoing experience of God's gracious presence transforming us into whom God intends us to be (that full potential, I mentioned). John Wesley described this dimension of God's grace as sanctification, or holiness both personal and social.



¹ This Day: A Wesleyan Way of Prayer (How Is It With Your Soul?) By Laurence Hull Stookey Abingdon Press © 2004 Abingdon Press.



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Like I mentioned last week by God's sanctifying grace, we grow and mature in our ability to live as Jesus lived. As we pray, study the Scriptures, fast, worship, and share in fellowship with other Christians, we deepen our knowledge of and love for God. As we respond with compassion to human need and work for justice in our communities, we strengthen our capacity to love neighbor. Our inner thoughts and motives, as well as our outer actions and behavior, are aligned

with God's will and testify to our union with God.

We're to press on, with God's help, in the path of sanctification toward perfection. By perfection, Wesley did not mean that we would not make mistakes or have weaknesses (like I said, being without flaw). Rather, **Wesley understood perfection to be a continual process of being made perfect in our love of God and each other and of removing our desire to sin.**²

That's what Paul was getting at in Philippians 3. Paul makes it clear in the beginning that he's a sinner. He attacked the church. He obeyed the law but didn't fully love God or others. Paul thought he knew what would bring him fulfillment in his life and set his mind on it, but then Jesus got a hold of him and now all that he used to think was important, isn't anymore. Because it all pales in comparison to knowing Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. It's in Paul's knowing Christ that he wants to know Christ better. Paul, himself says in verse 10 " *Yes, I want to know the power that raised him from the dead. I want to join him in his sufferings. I want to become like him by sharing in his death. 11 Then by God's grace I will rise from the dead. 12 I have not yet received all these things. I have not yet reached my goal. Christ Jesus took hold of me so that I could reach that goal. So I keep pushing myself forward to reach it. 13 Brothers and sisters, I don't consider that I have taken hold of it yet. But here is the one thing I do. I forget what is behind me. I push hard toward what is ahead of me. 14 I push myself forward toward the goal to win the prize. God has appointed me to win it. The heavenly prize is Christ Jesus himself.*"

² <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/our-wesleyan-heritage#EN1>



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What Paul is trying to tell us in the middle of chapter 3 is that God is willing to fill us to capacity now, so press on towards to goal. Don't hang on to past mistakes or failures. Commit to flowing Jesus with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and you can experience perfection on this side of eternity. Entire sanctification or perfection isn't something we simply wait to receive when we die and meet Jesus face-to-face -yes, we can receive perfection then. But we can experience perfecting grace here and now. Perfecting grace can be fleeting, but every time we do experiences it our capacity grows - which is why perfecting grace can be fleeting.

This is how Craig Campbell's "Outskirts of Heaven" comes to mind. In a moment you'll hear Mike Popplewell sing this song - you can read the lyrics in your bulletins or on the screen this week. But what Campbell realizes is that he's experienced perfection on this side of eternity and he wants to make sure its on the heavenly side of eternity as well. [Click here to watch.](#)

*My grandpa taught me
'Bout Buck knives and shotguns
How to cast an old Zebco
How to work a stick shift
He taught me the Bible
'Bout all 12 disciples
He made sure that I know
There's life after this
With pearly gates
And streets of gold
And if I just believe
That's where I'll go
Lord, when I die*

*I wanna live on the outskirts of Heaven
Where there's dirt roads for miles
And hay in the fields, and fish in the
river
Where there's dogwood trees, and
honeybees
And blue skies, and green grass forever*

*So, Lord, when I die
I wanna live on the outskirts of Heaven*

*Now it says in the King James
In the Almighty's kingdom
He mentions a mansion
That he's built just for me
I gladly trade it
For a farmhouse with acreage
And a backyard that's shaded
And a squeaky front-porch swing
That's where I wanna hang my wings
When I die*

*I wanna live on the outskirts of Heaven
Where there's dirt roads for miles
And hay in the fields, and fish in the
river
Where there's dogwood trees, and
honeybees
And blue skies, and green grass forever*



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*So, Lord, when I die
I wanna live on the outskirts of Heaven*

*Lord, when I die
I wanna live on the outskirts of Heaven*

*The good Lord knows me
He knows I need blue skies
And green grass forever
So, Lord when I die
I wanna live on the outskirts of Heaven*

*Songwriters: Dave Turnbull / Craig Campbell
Outskirts Of Heaven lyrics © Full Of Bulls
Music, Ole Media Management Lp li, Anthem
Music Publishing li*

Now Campbell experienced a bit of perfection with green grass, dirt roads, dogwood trees and honey bees. God does gift us with nature to be filled to capacity. The 23rd Psalm is about God's gift of nature filling us to the point of being full. That's probably why I like camping. But the process of sanctification is also relational. It's in relationships that we are pushed by God to love others and to be loved by God through other people, which can help us experience perfecting grace.

Let me start to wrap this up by telling you of one of the first time's I realized I was experience perfecting grace. In college, I was part of a summer ministry that would lead Vacation Bible Schools with churches in Northern Illinois. One summer when I was the director, my team and I were asked to support a week-long camp held at a farm in south central Wisconsin. This camp was for families with kids with special needs - some of which were significant - wheel chair bound, non-verbal kids, cerebral palsy, feeding tubes along with their parents and siblings. The point of the camp was that everyone would get to have a full-camp experience. Bible lessons and support groups for parents, while the special needs kids had plenty of help adapting fishing, rock-wall climbing and water balloon relays to their needs and their siblings got to have fun and support with other sibling without special needs too. We'd all gather for Bible lessons and songs.

The camp was powerful and profound. Children have always been a means of God's grace in my life, but these kids and their parents and the depth of the love shared in their families and with us set me to a whole new level. Parents who would do anything for their kid to be normal and not have so many trials, but who learned what love is in a way that can only come through such trials and find deep gratitude for their suffering. That's grace!

On the last day of camp, we had a picnic and even parents and siblings who couldn't attend camp came and as we gathered in the hot sun and warm grassy



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pasture we prayed before getting our lunch the grill. Prayer ends and people start mingling and connecting. Kids are excited to tell stories of their experiences. Parents are introducing each other and suddenly as I am watching this moment unfold the fullness of the week rests on me and suddenly I look around and there is no difference between us, there is no pain that isn't transcended by joy, instead there is just the love of Christ outpoured on every single person there. Heaven on earth, even though nothing was really all fixed - sorrows and struggle would find their way back in soon enough. God's grace was fully present in us and in that moment. I've been blessed to have other such perfecting moments where God is so near there is no distance between heaven and earth. 'Thin places' as some might say.³

I've had other experiences of perfecting grace, where I can't imagine life getting any better or any more full or any closer to God. I don't share this to lift myself up as someone who has arrived, because like Paul, I surely haven't. I share them, because I have learned to name these experiences for what they are: God's perfecting grace. I suspect you may have had something like that too where you've been filled by God's love and because of that experience you've grown in your capacity and desire to be in deeper relationship with God.

That's what Paul and John Wesley are trying to do, to help us see that as we mature in our relationship with God we can be filled to capacity again and again; we can live into the full potential for grace God has placed in our lives. If you haven't yet had such an experience, Paul says don't worry, just follow the example of other Christians who have and Jesus will bring you to that place of overflowing that is nearer to him - those thin places too. And that's what I want for you, so does Jesus; that's the kind of church we're trying to be - a people who live into the full potential for grace God has placed in each individual and in our whole community by by making and nurturing disciples of Jesus Christ who serve the community and the world.

I invite us to pray for God to fill us to full or beyond today. Please pray with me: *Jesus, we want to come to the point in our lives where your love fills us beyond measure. Help us to receive your abundant never ending grace. Help us to see that your grace is poured out upon us in many ways and through many people Help us let go of whatever keeps us from receiving your gift of amazing grace. Amen.*

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/travel/thin-places-where-we-are-jolted-out-of-old-ways-of-seeing-the-world.html>