

“MADE PERFECT IN LOVE”

1 John 4

“We are saved by God’s grace through faith on account of Christ Jesus.” That summarizes our faith. I could quote from St. Paul’s writings, the catechism, or any other major Lutheran confession to enforce this, but I will just use this from 1st John where our epistle lesson comes from:

Yet if we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make Him out to be a liar and His word is not in us.

The forgiveness of sins is a very concrete way of telling us that we are right with God. The catechism reminds us, “that where there is the forgiveness of sins, there is life and salvation.”

Then how do we deal with the epistle lesson today when that same 1st John tells us?

The one who fears is not made perfect in love. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God.

The Bible is filled both with stories that emphasize that our salvation rests in God’s love alone and our duty to obey Him. Are we right with God by grace alone or also by what we do in our lives? Is it all God, or both us and God?

Again we read, “The one who fears is not made perfect in love.” I don’t know about you, but I live with fears every day. No, I don’t worry about getting to class on time or being ready for tests—though I can still have nightmares about that. But that is not because I am braver. I now hesitate going up and down stairs because of a bum knee, worry about things like nursing home care (which was not in my mind as a young husband and father), and fear more death as I realize there is not much left to the generation before me. Then we have this phrase “made perfect.” If anything, age should convince a person that he or she is not perfect. You have a lot more time to see and experience all your failures and be reminded by your children of your shortcomings. How will I ever be “made perfect”?

We go on reading, “No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God.” No more sinning? Didn’t John tell us earlier in his letter that “If we say we have no sin, the truth is not in us”? What is going on here?

I was wrestling with this until in our student fellowship time on Wednesday night they were going over 1 John. It made me look at what John wrote and wonder what this really says.

I had an idea, but I needed to go back to the original Greek. In their wisdom, our ancestors in the church felt that it would be good for pastors in their training to know how to read the Scriptures in the original Hebrew of the Old Testament and Greek in the New. Perhaps this is a small example of how wise they were.

In the Greek you can express the past tense in three ways—as a simple past, as a past thing that occurred over a period of time, or as a definitely completed action. The last of those in Greek is called the “perfect.” Now you might think it is crazy for me to teach you a little Greek, but I will attempt to do it, because it kind of stands out. When you put a Greek verb in a past tense you place the Greek letter ε which is our “e” before it. But when you make it perfect you take the first letter of the verb, place it before the “e”, then the verb form. In English letters it may look like “**t**etalk.” Now look at 1 John in the Greek: (As you read this, do not worry about all that is written. Just notice the bold print where you see the “e” and the first letter repeated in the front. The θ is a “th” which comes from “t,” so the letter repeated in front of θ is the τ for the “t” sound.)

⁷ Ἀγαπητοί, ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους, ὅτι ἡ ἀγάπη ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐστὶν καὶ πᾶς ὁ ἀγαπῶν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ γεγέννηται καὶ γινώσκει τὸν θεόν· ⁸ ὁ μὴ ἀγαπῶν οὐκ ἔγνω τὸν θεόν, ὅτι ὁ θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν. ⁹ ἐν τούτῳ ἐφανερώθη ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν ἡμῖν, ὅτι τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ τὸν μονογενῆ ἀπέσταλκεν ὁ θεὸς εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἵνα ζήσωμεν δι’ αὐτοῦ. ¹⁰ ἐν τούτῳ ἐστὶν ἡ ἀγάπη, οὐχ ὅτι ἡμεῖς ἠγαπήκαμεν τὸν θεόν, ἀλλ’ ὅτι αὐτὸς ἠγάπησεν ἡμᾶς καὶ ἀπέστειλεν τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἰλασμὸν περὶ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν.

¹¹ Ἀγαπητοί, εἰ οὕτως ὁ θεὸς ἠγάπησεν ἡμᾶς, καὶ ἡμεῖς ὀφείλομεν ἀλλήλους ἀγαπᾶν· ¹² θεὸν οὐδεὶς πώποτε **τεθ**έεται· ἐὰν ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους, ὁ θεὸς ἐν ἡμῖν μένει καὶ ἡ ἀγάπη αὐτοῦ **τετελειωμένη** ἐν ἡμῖν ἐστίν. ¹³ ἐν τούτῳ γινώσκομεν ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ μένομεν καὶ αὐτὸς ἐν ἡμῖν, ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος αὐτοῦ δέδωκεν ἡμῖν. ¹⁴ καὶ ἡμεῖς **τεθεάμεθα** καὶ μαρτυροῦμεν ὅτι ὁ πατὴρ ἀπέσταλκεν τὸν υἱὸν σωτῆρα τοῦ κόσμου. ¹⁵ ὃς ἐὰν ὁμολογήσῃ ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστὶν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, ὁ θεὸς ἐν αὐτῷ μένει καὶ αὐτὸς ἐν τῷ θεῷ. ¹⁶ καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐγνώκαμεν καὶ **πεπιστεύκαμεν** τὴν ἀγάπην ἣν ἔχει ὁ θεὸς ἐν ἡμῖν.

I am sure you can’t read any of that, but you can see words with the first letter of the word repeated (or at least its root letter, like τ and θ), followed by “e” and then the verb. Those are all perfects. They are all completed actions. There is no continuing process. They are accomplished facts. There is no sense that it didn’t get done or we are not sure. It is complete, accomplished! Or as one person put it “It is finished.” Yes, the actual word John, the same John who wrote I John, used to record Jesus’ dying word on the cross is:

Τετέλεσται

Sure enough, it is perfect in Greek. Jesus completed all that was required. The deed was done. In fact it is a word from finance meaning the bill has been paid in full!

What are those perfect verbs in 1 John? “Born,” “Behold,” “Perfected,” and “Believe.” Those who love God are born of God. How are they born? Even though none of us has actually beheld God, John beheld the way God made Himself known in Jesus. What Jesus did is an accomplished fact. And what Jesus did was told to people who believe it. Those who believe are born of God. Those born of God have God’s love completed in them. They love God and therefore others. None of this is wishful thinking for the future. It is complete in Jesus who said, “It is finished.”

That is why there is nothing we have to do, nothing we should do, nothing we can even do to add to what Jesus has completed. Da Vinci’s Last Supper is a masterpiece. But because it was painted on plaster that has moisture problems it was painted over and over since it was done over 500 years ago. Recent technology has allowed us to restore it more and more to the original. What we find under the layers is an even better painting. Why paint over a masterpiece? Why add anything to what Jesus has already done for us?

Then what do we do with all the passages in Scripture that tell us to live according to God’s law? Our former pastor, Richard Osslund, did his doctoral thesis on Philip Melancthon, who was Martin Luther’s “sidekick.” Much of our former Lutheran teachings were written by him, though he always remained a layman. Pastor Osslund noted how Melancthon is the one who talked about the “Third Use of the Law,” how God’s law informs us about living a God pleasing life. Melancthon said that this always followed a “free and merry spirit.” “Merry” did not mean “happy” or “jolly,” but “at peace with God.” We follow God’s law not to gain God’s favor, but to live in it. This only applies to the believer, to the one who knows that his or her sins are forgiven by Jesus alone. That is what it means when John says:

The one who fears is not made perfect in love. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God.

We are living in forgiveness. That forgiveness frees us from sin, not that we never sin, but it does not have control over us. We live for God, the one who has freed us in Christ. We follow His commands, not because “we have to,” but because “we get to.” In Jesus we are completed—made perfect.