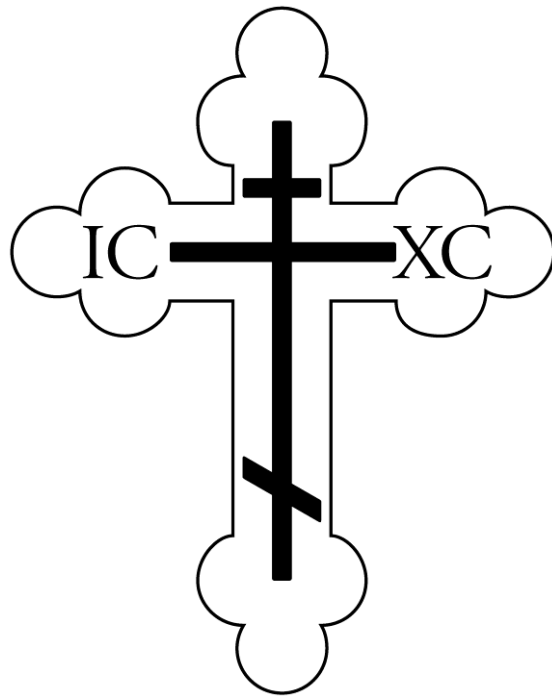


# A Journey Toward Perfection

**Deny Yourself, Take Up Your Cross, and Follow Me**

*The Beatitudes as a Road Map for Our Journey through Life*



Helen Kamenos

Bible verses from King James Version

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Cross on cover page from: <http://www.ocf.org/OrthodoxPage/icons/clip/cross.gif>

This book is dedicated to all those who seek the love of Christ.



I thank God for everything. I thank Him for blessing my life and my spirit, for being with me throughout the most difficult times. I thank God for giving me the patience and perseverance to complete this book. I thank God for revealing Himself to me in a way that, I hope, will bless all those who read this book.



I especially want to thank my mom who taught me to love God through the stories of God's miracles she told me when I was a young girl.



I would also like to thank my whole family who supported me throughout the trials and tribulations I faced in recent years, which led me to a deeper relationship with God and to the writing of this book.

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# Chapter 1: Lights of the World

***Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven. (Matthew 5: 14-16)***

The life of the man called Jesus of Nazareth is well documented not only by Biblical sources, but also by Jewish and Roman historians and scholars. Various ancient writings verify that He lived 2,000 years ago and was crucified with criminals. His brief three year ministry changed the world forever. Was He a prophet, a wise man, a good man, or actually the Son of God as He claimed? What was it about this man that caused so many to follow Him and even be willing to die for Him? Those who believe Jesus was simply a good man, wise man or a prophet must still be able to explain why He would claim to be the Son of God. This contradicts sound judgment. Today, a man who might claim to be the Son of God would be considered mentally unstable, at the very least, possibly even insane. Jesus is an enigma to many, yet to Christians, He is the Son of God, part of the Godhead, part of the Holy Trinity. This is difficult for our limited minds to fathom, yet as Christians, this is our faith. We believe that Christ was fully God and fully man, our Creator and our Savior.

During His three-year ministry, the disciples traveled with Him day and night. They knew Him intimately, and they believed His claims. They believed that Christ was God, one person of the Trinity. The disciples believed Him so faithfully that they willingly died horrible deaths rather than renounce their faith. They believed He rose from the dead on the third day. They claimed to have seen Him bodily after His resurrection, not as a spirit, and claimed to have eaten and drank with Him. If the Roman and Jewish leaders wanted to dispel the rumors that Christ rose from the dead, and thereby crush the Christian movement, all they had to do was to produce His dead body, yet they never could. At first, some claimed that the disciples stole His body, but this would have been impossible with Roman Centurions posted to guard the tomb. Besides, would anyone be willing to die for what they knew to be a lie? This rumor simply faded away. Instead, the martyred disciples were the lights of the world that ignited a fire that burns to this day.

To unbelievers, the Resurrection and Christ's claim to be the Son of God must be the greatest lies ever perpetrated by one man. To Christians, Jesus is the light to which we are all drawn. He is the light that gives us hope. He is the light, which even unwittingly draws unbelievers. That light is centered on love; *"He that loveth not, knoweth not God; for God is love"* (I John 4:8). Even unbelievers acknowledge the power of love. God is the source of love. But why would an all-knowing God descend from His throne of glory to become a man in a world full of evil, knowing He would be rejected and even crucified? Christ became man to save us from the curse of sin and to offer us the gift of eternal life. He became a man to allow us to "see" God or to know Him, to invite us into a relationship with Him, and to teach us how to love by being a role model for us.

God dwells in a distant place, in a spiritual dimension. He is not of this world. We cannot experience Him through our physical senses. Only certain prophets had firsthand knowledge of God because He chose them. He spoke to them, sometimes audibly, and sometimes through angels, dreams or visions. When Christ became man, He entered our dimension, our reality. The more we understand Christ, the better we understand God. *"Philip saith unto him, Lord, show us the Father, and it sufficeth us. Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not*

*known me, Philip? He that hath seen me hath seen the Father*” (John 14:8-9). By getting to know Christ, we can know God.

As Christians, we also know that Christ became a man to die for our sins, so we can be reconciled to God. When we become reconciled to God, we will be given the gift of eternal life, dwelling in His presence. He is our Savior. He is our Intercessor with God. He became the sacrifice required for our forgiveness. This was a pure act of divine love. Our sinless Christ died an unbearable death for us because He loves us and desires a relationship with us. He accomplished this through the Holy Spirit, which dwells within all believers. Christ explained to the disciples that it was necessary for Him to go to His Father, so He can send down His Holy Spirit to live in us. Through the Holy Spirit, we can experience God firsthand. He listens to us and speaks to us. He comforts us, guides us and loves us. He imparts the knowledge of God to us and grants us wisdom. The Holy Spirit blesses us and works through us to bless others. Developing our relationship with God is key to living a fulfilled life in Christ.

Jesus also became a man to teach humanity genuine, pure, and perfect love. Jesus taught us how to love by the way He lived His life. He is our role model of divine love. Jesus sought out sinners, the needy, the poor, and those discarded by society. He healed the lepers, the blind and the deaf. He forgave all, even those who crucified Him. He felt compassion for the thousands who came to hear Him speak, so He fed them. He felt compassion toward the dying, so He raised them from the dead. Jesus never refused anyone. He freely gave to all who sought Him out and to all who asked anything of Him. He came as a servant to serve. His love extended to everyone, even those who hated him. *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”* (John 3:16).

However, God’s love for us extends beyond this one act of sacrifice. To fully comprehend God’s love for us, we need to understand the man, Jesus. We need to understand His journey through life, what He endured, what He suffered. We can only truly grasp His love for us by walking in His shoes, by traveling life’s journey as He did. God wants us to become like Christ, *“For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren* (Romans 8:29). By walking in His shoes and living life as Christ did, we can actually experience God and His immeasurable love for us. God becomes real to us. As a result, we become lights to the world, proof of God’s love. Our lives become evidence of God, confirmation of His existence, proof of His goodness.

Christ taught His followers that *“Ye are the light of the world”* (Matthew 5:14). According to Christ, we are to illuminate others to the truth, the truth of God, and we are to do this by being examples, following in His footsteps. *“Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me”* (Matthew 16:24). As Orthodox Christians, we are taught to strive to be like Christ. We have been taught that if we make Christ our role model and try to live as He did, we would live life as a true Christian. We would love God, and we would love others as ourselves. However, many do not fully comprehend the depth of love, which was intended by Christ. We may be aware of His parables and teachings, but for some reason, there is a disconnect in our daily lives. We embrace Christ’s teachings, yet the challenge is for us to live out His teachings on a day to day basis. *“The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak* (Matthew 26:41).

It was Christ’s love for us, which ignited His early followers and which ignites our faith today. Christ became a man, not only to save us, but to teach us how much God loves us and to teach us how to love. By following Him, by following His example, we, too, can experience His divine love. As Christians, this is our purpose, our life-long journey. Our journey is toward Christ,

toward an intimate relationship with Him and toward His divine love. Our journey is toward a loving God who extends His open arms to us even as Christ's arms were extended on the cross. Jesus invites us into a personal relationship with Him, which allows us to mature as Christians. As we choose to follow in Christ's footsteps we become transformed. This journey is life-changing. We will begin to develop attributes of Christ that will support us through the trials and tribulations of our lives. We will experience God's presence in our lives and His love for us. As a result, we will be able to develop a true bond with God, a union that will fill us with His divine love. The deeper our relationship to Christ becomes, the more we will desire to be like Him. This desire sets us on the path toward Christ. That path is our journey toward perfection, toward becoming more perfect in Christ. This journey is toward God.

The journey toward perfection is for all those who desire to experience God's divine love in their lives. It is for all those who seek God and desire an experiential relationship with Him. This journey is for all those who wish to discover God's peace and joy. Christ gave us a road map to follow through the Beatitudes given to us at the Sermon on the Mount recorded by Matthew. The Beatitudes actually outline a path for us to follow in Christ's footsteps. By following this path toward Christ, God is revealed to us and becomes a beacon in our lives. Two thousand years ago, a fire humbly and meekly exploded into our reality. That fire was Christ. For those who seek God, that fire continues to burn brightly in our hearts today.

## **Chapter 2: The Excellency of God's Ways**

**“Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”  
(Matthew 5:48)**

When Christ began his ministry, He taught a revolutionary new message that went beyond the Ten Commandments and the laws given to the Jews by Moses. It was a message never heard before. Even today, we do not have a genuine appreciation of Christ's message. It is a message difficult for our minds to understand. It is a message that only our hearts can begin to comprehend. Through Christ's teachings, we can begin to discover the nature of Christ and the nature of God. We can begin to understand what kind of man He truly was. He did not just talk about how to live a godly life. He taught us by example, by the way He lived His life. Through His teachings, Christ was describing Himself, He was describing God, and in the process, He was describing a godly way of life.

Naturally, God maintains very high standards. After all, He is God! His standards rise to nothing less than *perfection!* Christ taught us that we are not only expected to live up to God's commandments, but we are called to reach beyond the laws of Moses, we are called to be perfect. This was a kind of perfection no one had ever heard before, a kind of perfection no one could fathom. Christ taught that the only way to attain the perfection God intended for us was to live a life of perfect love through Him. He taught that through a relationship with God and through His perfect love, we can truly experience the joy and peace of this more perfect way, a virtuous life, true Christian living.

Many of His most powerful teachings on living a virtuous life have been recorded in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount in chapters five through seven. Throughout these passages, Christ

describes this more perfect way, revealing how difficult it is and why "*many are called, but few are chosen*" (Matthew 22:14). For those who actually heard Him speak 2,000 years ago, being a godly person took on a new dimension. In Matthew 5, Christ proclaimed:

*<sup>21</sup> Ye have heard that it was said of them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: <sup>22</sup> But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca (worthless), shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire...<sup>25</sup> Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. <sup>26</sup> Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.*

In this passage, Christ teaches us that those who are angry with their brothers without a cause are in as much danger of being judged by God as those who kill. Even calling someone "Raca" (worthless) or "fool" can cause one to be in danger of hell fire. How is it possible that someone who kills another is equally guilty, in God's eyes, as someone who has called his brother a fool? Beyond that, how is it possible that one who is angry with his brother without a cause is also just as guilty? Christ tells us to reconcile with our brother before we end up in front of God, the judge, who will cast us into prison or hell. In verse 26, we are told that we must pay for every sin, even the tiniest of sins. This seems so harsh, but Christ doesn't stop there. Here are a few more excerpts from Matthew 5:

*<sup>27</sup> Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: <sup>28</sup> But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.*

*<sup>29</sup> And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. <sup>30</sup> And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.*

What man has not looked lustfully at a woman? Doesn't plucking out our eye or cutting off our hand seem a bit extreme? Not according to Christ, who tells us that this is better than having our whole body be cast into hell. Christ continues in Matthew 5 with:

*<sup>38</sup> Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: <sup>39</sup> But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. <sup>40</sup> And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. <sup>41</sup> And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain (two). <sup>42</sup> Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away.*

*<sup>43</sup> Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. <sup>44</sup> But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good*



*to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;*

<sup>45</sup> *That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.*

<sup>46</sup> *For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? Do not even the publicans the same?* <sup>47</sup> *And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? Do not even the publicans so?*

<sup>48</sup> *Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.*

Through his teachings, Christ is describing Himself. Christ was perfect! Through Christ as a role model and through His sermon and parables, we are able to "see" God. We can know God. This is why Christ could say, "*If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also: and from henceforth ye know him, and have seen him*" (John 14:7). Christ taught by example. He did not just "talk the talk," He also "walked the walk." Christ, Himself, turned the other cheek when he was beaten and crucified. He never retaliated toward those who wished to kill Him. If anyone asked Christ for anything, He gave it to him. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, and comforted those who suffered. He never turned anyone away.

Christ's most difficult teaching is "*Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you*" (Matthew 5:44). This definitely sounds godly because only God in His perfect love can do this. Right? Christ added that everyone loves those who love them, even the evil publicans. In Christ's times, the publicans were the Jewish tax collectors who worked for the Romans. They were known for their dishonesty and greed, not only collecting taxes for the Romans, but also collecting an additional share for themselves. Christ taught by example. Christ *did* forgive his enemies. Even as He hung dying on the cross, He asked God to forgive those who crucified Him "*for they know not what they do*" (Luke 23:24). This is God's perfect love freely offered to all, to you and me. Christ taught us how to love selflessly.

After proclaiming all these revolutionary explanations of God's laws, Christ summarizes it all by clearly saying "*be perfect*" in verse 48. Christ often said, "*Follow me*"; He meant follow His example. Many who first heard these teachings, simply walked away because they believed these standards were impossible to attain. Even today, many do not take these teachings seriously. They, too, believe that perfection is impossible. Are we capable of following His example? Can we be perfect? What does it mean to be perfect? He would not have commanded us to be perfect, unless He knew that we had the potential of perfect love. Christ even said, "*Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest in your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*" (Matthew 11:29-30). As an average human being, it does not seem that simple. Based on Christ's standards, how often do we sin each day? How can we live a life of perfection? How can we learn to love perfectly? The answer is that we can't, not without Christ. In Philippians 4:13, Paul reminds us, "*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*" As a matter of fact, this is the purpose of our lives. We are called to become perfect in Christ. Only Christ can make us perfect. We may have heard this said or read it in our Bibles, but what does this mean?

Christ makes the whole process sounds so easy, but when we face trials and tribulations in our lives, everything seems more complicated. As a matter of fact, even in the comfort of our quiet lives, it can still be difficult. How can we, as Christians, put these teachings into practice and make the journey toward perfection possible for us? It certainly seems as if the early Christians had figured

it out. After all, so many were martyred for their faith in Christ, and the rest lived in daily fear of persecution. Today, we do not live under the threat of martyrdom, at least not in most places in the world. We have not had our faith tested so dramatically, but our faith is tested every day. We live in a sinful world, full of temptations. Because our faith is tested every day in circumstances that are not life-threatening, we are actually in greater danger. It is easier to become complacent and allow ourselves to sin. At least the little sins are OK, right? They are not so bad. Everyone does it. What's wrong with an occasional little white lie? God will forgive us. This is how we rationalize our sinful behavior. When was the last time you asked God for forgiveness for calling someone a name or for the little lie you told that wouldn't hurt anyone?

For God there is only good and evil. There are no gray areas. Christ taught perfection, so that we can recognize evil and repent. He taught us perfection, so that we can understand perfect, selfless love. If we were ignorant, we can more easily be forgiven, but we, who know Christ and His teachings, know what is wrong or evil. To some degree, even nonbelievers know the difference between right and wrong. For us Christians, the Holy Spirit will always remind us, if we are willing to listen. We can rationalize to try and justify our actions, but we will still experience guilt because we *are* guilty.

Why would we want to be perfect? Christ wanted us to follow His example. If we become like Christ, we will experience God's awesome love, and we will learn how to love perfectly, as Christ did. We will learn how to love selflessly. Our goal, then, is to find peace and joy by living our lives in God's love, giving and receiving that pure divine love. The only way we can attain to that kind of love is through the Holy Spirit working on our hearts and transforming us. This requires that we put ourselves on the path toward perfection. *"But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things* (1 Corinthians 13:10-11). Paul described this journey toward perfection as the process of becoming mature in Christ. It is a life-long process that all faithful followers of Christ undertake.

*"Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."*

Is it really possible to attain perfection? Why would God call us to perfection when He knows this is such an impossible goal? He knows no man is sinless, perfect. In Matthew 19: 16-26, a story is told of a young rich man who came to Christ and asked what he had to do to have eternal life. Christ told him to keep the commandments. The young man told Christ that he had kept all the commandments from youth, so he asked what else he should do. Christ told him that if he wanted to be perfect, he should give up all his riches to the poor and follow Him. The young man walked away saddened. Christ explained to his disciples, *"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God,"* and the disciples responded, *"Who then can be saved?"* Christ told them that, *"With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."* The rich young man could not give up his riches to follow Christ. His riches still maintained a hold on him that was so strong he could not relinquish them. This revealed the rich man's heart. He was willing to follow the commandments, but his riches were more important to him than God. Yet, Christ said that all things are possible with God. Our love for God should be so great that we would be willing to give up all our worldly treasures for Christ. We should turn ourselves toward heavenly desires. Worldly treasures are temporal and can only be enjoyed in this lifetime, while heavenly treasures reap eternal rewards and will be enjoyed forever. Yet, when we love Christ, He sends us the Holy Spirit to strengthen us and to teach us how to love God.

God created us for fellowship with Him to share in His love. He wants us to experience His awesome and perfect love and to have a relationship with Him. According to 1 John 1:3, *"That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ."* Like any true father, He

wants us to be blessed, to experience only good in our lives. He wants us to be with Him eternally, so that He can love us, and we can love Him. Being perfect, He cannot bear the presence of evil. This is why Christ died to pay for our sins. Because of Christ's sacrifice, we can enjoy His fellowship, His love, and His blessings throughout eternity. In order to benefit from His sacrifice during our earthly existence, we must take the journey toward Christ, following His example. Christ told the adulteress, who was about to be stoned, "*Go and sin no more*" (John 8:11). In their various epistles, Paul, Peter, and John often admonished the early church to avoid sin. John went so far as to say, "*He that saith, I know him (Christ), and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him*" (1 John 2:4).

When we are baptized, we receive a gift from God, the remission of our sins. By being immersed in the water of baptism and brought out of the water, we participate in Christ's death and resurrection. We die to our old sinful life and are made a new creature. During baptism and chrismation, we are anointed with oil, and we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit within us to guide us in our daily journey through life. When we take Holy Communion, the Eucharist, it is for the remission of our sins to once again be cleansed of our iniquities and be made one with God. We are made perfect through Christ. By the shedding of His blood, our sins have been washed away. When we have fellowship with God, we desire to be like Christ, to live a godly life, to be obedient to God. This is what it means to truly love God. The desire to be like Christ is a consequence of having fellowship with God. In other words, this is the effect a relationship with God has on us. It transforms us.

In Matthew 22:37-40, Christ simplified all of God's laws down to two commandments: "*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.*" In these two commandments, all the laws are fulfilled. According to Sparks (as cited in Gillquist and Wallerstedt, 1993), "The new commandment, that of love, superseded the Ten Commandments, which demanded much less." Through God's divine love, we can become perfect through Christ. That does not mean we will never sin, but it does mean that we will desire to repent for our sins and that we allow God to transform us as we travel in our journey through life. As God transforms us, we begin to live a life filled with love for God and love for everyone. Living a life of selfless love for all, keeps us from sin. Anyone who has experienced pure, unselfish love has experienced God. "*Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love*" (1 John 4:8).

### The Journey

What does becoming perfect actually mean? It is developing maturity as a Christian. It is a process. This process requires us to develop an intimate relationship with God. This is God's desire, the reason why He sent His only Son. Christ came to this world as a man to make a way for us to be reconciled to God, so that we are able to have a relationship with Him. As we get to know God, His desires for us become our desires. Our motivations change, so that even when we sin it becomes a learning experience. The change occurs in our hearts. Christ had to die to offer us a way to be forgiven, but He also died to be able to send us the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit dwells within us, and through Him, we are able to develop our relationship with God. A relationship requires a give and take; it requires two-way communication. This is the crux of our journey. We are to develop our communication with God, bringing us closer and closer to Him. This journey is a lifetime of walking toward God, in the direction of God. We walk because we cannot run. It is a gradual process of our own transformation that occurs as we become closer and closer to God. Throughout our journey, the Holy Spirit works on our hearts.

In the Bible, the word "perfect" can mean without blemish, but generally refers to a process of becoming complete or full. During our journey in life, we develop a full relationship with God, which transforms us and makes us complete. Our beliefs determine our actions. Therefore, as we

get to know God, as we develop our relationship with Him, we are transformed. God works on our hearts, and when we listen, we reach the point where we desire repentance for our sinful ways. As we slowly recognize the evil in ourselves, our own lack of love, selfishness, and disobedience, we are able to repent and come into agreement with God's will. This begins our transformation, the process of reuniting ourselves to God, becoming what God intended us to be. Throughout our lifetimes, we work toward this union with God, toward becoming perfect. As we turn toward God of our own free will, we are given the gift of His grace, the presence of God within us through the Holy Spirit. God's grace enters our hearts and brings us closer and closer to God. The more we come into agreement with God's will, the closer our union with God becomes, and the more we are transformed. The early church fathers called this the ascent to perfect union. We reach perfection or perfect union when we are filled with His grace. This process occurs through our hearts and gradually creates agreement with God's will in our minds, until our spirit is filled with God's grace and love. When this happens, there is no room left for sin.

We develop this maturity through our own free will by allowing God to work in us. We become full when God fills us with His divine love, which overflows in us into an outward expression that we cannot help but share with others. This is how we learn to selflessly love others. We become complete when we are filled with His love because this is what God intended for us. *"But God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it"* (1 Corinthians 10:13). Filling our hearts with God's love is our way to escape temptation. When we stand before God, in heaven, we will be perfected, in perfect union with God, without blemish, without sin, by the blood of Christ who died for us. However, during our lifetime, we are called to develop our maturity in our faith. We are called to take steps toward reaching perfect union with God. Becoming perfect does not just happen. It is a lifetime journey that we take with God.

The saints, who we celebrate, are examples to us of those who have reached a greater measure of perfection. They allowed themselves to become full of God's love, even as they were persecuted and martyred for Christ. These saints were so filled with God's love that they attracted innumerable followers to Christ. They became lights that shined brightly before men. Many did not start out as perfect. The saints are examples to us because they were just sinful people with faults, just like us. Paul persecuted Christians before he was converted. Matthew was a tax collector. Tax collectors were known for collecting a little extra for themselves. Peter denied knowing Christ three times. Thomas refused to believe that Christ had risen until he touched His wounds. Christ had many sinful followers, such as prostitutes and people who were demon-possessed prior to being healed. Christ said, *"I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance"* (Mark 2:17). Therefore, since we are all sinners, He came to call all of us to repentance. If these saints could become perfected through Christ, surely, all of us can. As we take this journey toward Christ, not every moment of our lives will reflect perfection, but we will experience moments of God working in our lives transforming our hearts, bringing us closer to Him. Even when we sin, we will experience the desire to remove that sin from our hearts. That desire to repent, the desire to purify our hearts and minds, will lead us into a deeper relationship with Christ.

Becoming perfect is the great battle waged within ourselves. *"For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places"* (Ephesians 6:12). This is a battle against evil and against the devil. This is a battle for our hearts and minds, for our lives. It is the battle for our free will. The outcome of this struggle will determine our future, our eternal lives. Only through Christ can we be victorious. The most difficult question is how? What do we have to do to be victorious through Christ? Paul best described this battle in Romans 7:

<sup>18</sup> *For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will (the desire) is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not.*

<sup>19</sup> *For the good that I would (want to do), I do not: but the evil which I would not (do not want to do), that I do.*

<sup>20</sup> *Now if I do that I would not (that I do not want to do), it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.*

Paul expressed what we all have experienced, when we try to live a godly life. We desire to do that which is good, but we continue to sin. When we want to do good, we don't; when we don't want to do evil, we do. He tells us that, if we act contrary to our desire, it is not us who have done evil; it is sin that dwells within us. In verse 24 he expresses what we feel when, frustrated in our efforts, we experience guilt: "*O wretched (pitiful) man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?*" Paul's answer, of course is <sup>25</sup> "*I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.*" This simply means that we serve God through our hearts and our *desire* to do good, through our sincere intentions. Through faith in Christ and with the help of the Holy Spirit in us, our intentions remain pure; we serve God in our mind and in our spirit. Our desire will slowly work on our free will and bring us into closer union with God.

If all we need to do is to desire to do good, does this mean that it is acceptable for us to sin? Of course not! We must always seek to make forward progress on the journey toward perfection. Through our desire to do God's will, we will move forward, closer to God, closer to perfect love. The important thing to remember is that we cannot fool God. He knows the deepest recesses of our hearts and our true desires. We can rationalize our actions to ourselves or to other people, but we cannot rationalize our actions to God. We can deceive ourselves, but we cannot deceive God. It means we must recognize when we have sinned, we must confess our sins, and we must repent. If we rationalize our sins, if we come up with excuses why we have sinned, we are not truly admitting our sins, so we can never truly repent. To repent does not simply mean we ask for forgiveness. It means we are making a change in ourselves. It is the most important part of our journey toward perfection. We can never move forward in our journey, unless a change occurs in us. If we rationalize our actions, our desire fades. Our intentions are no longer pure. The result will be that we will continue to sin.

God's ways lead us in the right direction or on the path toward perfection, toward perfect love. With the Holy Spirit as our guide, and if our intentions are pure, we can make progress on our journey. This means that we will often need to examine ourselves, our actions, our feelings, and especially our intentions. Slowly, our mind, our own free will, comes into agreement with God's will, and we are transformed. This does not happen overnight. That is why our path toward perfection is a lifetime journey. Unfortunately, we are often deceived into believing that we are not capable of making the journey, that we are not capable of that kind of perfect love. Therefore, we give up and take our sights off of God. As a result, we move away from God, away from a perfect union with God, away from a more godly life. We just use the excuse that we are not perfect. However, Christ taught a different message. Our intentions and our desire for union with God will slowly make our hearts perfect, and God will respond to that desire. He will fill us with His grace and love. He will transform us. It is true that we are not capable of moving toward perfection through our own efforts. By having faith in God, by keeping our sights on God and listening to the Holy Spirit, we can begin to make the journey toward perfection. It doesn't just happen. It is a lifetime of God's work in us. Through faith, we learn to listen to God, and we allow Him to work in us and through us.

As we travel along our journey toward perfection, we also become more "Christ-like". Christ is our goal. His perfect love will draw us to Him. He is genuine perfection in human form, without blemish, without sin. As we examine Christ, His teachings, and His life, we can gain a better understanding of what characteristics are necessary for becoming more perfect. What path must we take to travel on our journey toward perfection? Life places many paths or choices in front of us. What choices do we need to make that will lead us toward perfection, toward union with Christ? If we love God and desire to do good, how can we internalize Christ's message to set ourselves on a journey closer to God, so that we can truly experience the joy and peace He promised us?

As we examine what characteristics are needed in us, we come to the realization that we need to better understand what kind of *thinking* is required in us to travel on our journey to perfection. We need to understand how God thinks, and then we, ourselves, need to begin to think like God. This is how our free will comes into agreement with God. We need to value what God values. Our thinking, our values and beliefs, determine our actions, and therefore, need to be in agreement with God. By studying the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-12, we can learn what characteristics Christ values, and as a result, we can internalize His teachings. Christ's thinking can begin to become our thinking. Through Christ's Beatitudes, we also learn how followers, who possess these characteristics, will be blessed. A godly way of life is not easy, but the rewards are great for those who persevere and continue to love God with all their hearts and all their minds. We need to understand this kind of thinking in order to truly appreciate the excellency of God's ways.

## Chapter 3: Being Humble

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."* (Matthew 5:3)

The poor in spirit are those who are humble. Humility is the modest estimation of one's own importance or rank. Those who are materially poor are lowly and humble in their possessions. They may live in a modest home or no home at all. They may have only basic clothing and may often go hungry. They know that their rank or status in society is at the bottom because they are poor. They live in simplicity in humble circumstances. Similarly, those who are poor in spirit also live in humility, but their humility comes from within, not because of a lack of possessions. They understand their position when compared with the almighty perfect and loving God. They acknowledge that they are no better than any other human being. They clearly understand that we are all sinners. In order to understand genuine humility, we must look to Christ for the perfect example.

We believe that Christ is one part of the Godhead, the Trinity. We believe that Christ shares the same nature as God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. We believe that Christ is fully God and fully man. In His human nature, He shared all of our human characteristics. He experienced happiness and joy. He experienced temptation, hunger, thirst, and physical pain. He experienced sadness, disappointment, grief, and loss. He understands what it means to be human in all our frailties. In His divine nature, He shares all the characteristics of God. Therefore, Christ *is* our creator. He is divine...all-powerful...all-knowing...present everywhere at all times...infinite...eternal...perfect...and beyond our understanding. In describing Christ, John proclaimed (John 1:1), "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" Christ is God!

Contemplate this: Christ, our all-powerful, incorruptible and Holy God who created us, willingly left His place of glory, His throne, where He was worshipped by all the angels, and He chose to become an ordinary human like us, one of His creatures. This is humility in perfection. Our God chose to become an ordinary man. As a matter of fact, our God did not only come to live among us, He came to serve us. He knowingly chose to take on corruptible flesh which can die, and astoundingly, He chose to allow Himself to be despised, rejected, persecuted, beaten, disgraced, and crucified with criminals. And why did Christ our God, chose to allow Himself to suffer these indignities? Because He loves us that much!

Suppose, for a moment, that you are God the Father. As a parent, would you allow your one and only son to be despised, persecuted, rejected, beaten, and then be crucified? Would you allow him to experience such hatred? Think hard. Would you? How would you feel as you watched all this? Wouldn't your heart be pierced to the core by the pain your son was enduring? God knew all this in advance, yet He still sent His Son to save us. Fortunately, for us, God loved us enough to allow His Son to take on the flesh of man to teach us His ways and to save us. Christ, our God, truly humbled Himself. He could have called upon His angels and powers at any time to destroy all His enemies, but He did not. This is true humility. It is the kind of humility that can only come from His perfect love for us.

Zechariah, the prophet, declared, "*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass*" (Zechariah 9:9). Kings rode on horses, but common people rode on donkeys. When Christ came into Jerusalem, after He had raised Lazarus from the dead, He came in riding on a donkey with a huge crowd hailing Him like a king. He came to Jerusalem, despite the fact that He knew He would be captured and crucified. This required perfect love, perfect courage and perfect

humility. Today, we celebrate this event on Palm Sunday. Christ became man and came to serve man. He did not come in His glory. He came in humility and in meekness as the suffering servant. He willingly came as the sacrificial lamb, to reconcile us to God. He came to offer us gifts; the gifts of...