

## “Journey to *Teleios*—God’s Wholeness”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, Pastor, Church of the Covenant Lynchburg, VA 2/16/20

Matthew 5:48

As a Baptist pastor, I remember my maternal grandfather teaching me from a young age what the “law” of the Hebrew Scripture is. He would always say that the “law” is God’s ultimate command for us, and then he would quote Jesus as summarizing the law in these words, “Be ye perfect even as your father in heaven is perfect.” And then he’d follow up with, “Daniel, are you perfect?” I, of course, would respond, “no.” And then he’d say, “exactly. You’ve broken the law just like all of us.” Now this scared me as a young boy. As I grew older though and began to study for myself what the law of God entailed, I would cling to another bit of scripture in which Jesus explicitly said *“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. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”* I thought I was really making headway, all in my search to understand what God required of me. Little did I know that I was still missing a crucial concept: Wholeness. In the same Scripture my grandfather seemed to kind of hang over my head as a measuring stick of God’s standard, i.e. “perfection”, there was a deeper more profound truth that I still hadn’t stumbled on, and wouldn’t until many years later. The Greek word that the author of Matthew used for our later translated English word “perfect” carried with it something much deeper and I think much more important. The Greek word used is *“teleios.”* This word is quite interesting because it contains the word-part “tele” like from telescope, telephone, television, and as we can easily conclude it relates specifically to distance. The word itself as *“teleios”* means completion, and not just simple completion, but like a ripening fruit it specifically refers to growing into completion or maturity—spiritually, physically, mentally—over time. It represents what I like to think of as a final state of “wholeness”.

We can see how *“teleios”* is used with slight variation in this scripture in John 19:28-30: *“Later, knowing that everything had now been finished (teleo), and so that Scripture would be fulfilled (teleioo), Jesus said, ‘I am thirsty.’<sup>29</sup> A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus’ lips.<sup>30</sup> When he had received the drink, Jesus said, ‘It is **finished (teleo).**’ With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit”* So when Jesus said, “Be perfect like your Father in Heaven.” He wasn’t necessarily saying “be sinless” like I had been taught as a child. But *“teleios”* hints at something a bit healthier and far more realistic. “Be complete” or “Be whole” is probably more accurate. And what I love, is that the word-part “tele” indicates that it is definitely not instantaneous, but instead a process over time.

The concept of making something complete or whole is not new, but as ancient as creation itself. The Indian philosopher Karabi Sen likens it to us at our birth. She says, *“To be born is to be exposed; exposed to the elements, exposed to rejection, to abandonment, to needs that must be attended to. Thus it is that the baby howls when it exits the mother’s womb. The world invades it. The parents rush to give it what it is crying for, to restore to it the divine peace of satisfaction. They rock it to sleep, give it the nectar of milk that will quieten it, are overjoyed to see that innocent smile on its sweet face for the first time. They believe they have given the baby back its wholeness”* (from “The Restoration of Wholeness” in *Integral Review*, Feb 2015, Vol. 11, No. 1).

As you know, for I have re-educated us on it nearly weekly, within the Jewish tradition is the concept of “*tikkun olam*.” *Tikkun* is the Hebrew word for “*repairing*” or “*making whole again*.” I often refer to it as “*restoration*.” *Olam* means world. This is the active work that God is doing, restoring the world, which includes us, to wholeness—*teleios*. On the micro level, that is with the individual, a personal “*tikkun*” or “*teleios*” is restorative in nature, yet has transformative qualities. The Buddhist idea of “*bodhichitta*” I think gives us clues as to what wholeness can entail. *Bodhichitta* holds within it a notion of personal awakening or “*maturing*” that invigorates the soul to a new awareness of things. Often the result is *mindfulness*. Many Christians refer to this awakening as “*spiritual growth*”: *Teleios*.

The concept of “*completion*” is an ancient one. Even in my people’s native language of Choctaw, one of the oldest words we have for God is *Hushtahli: Sun Completer*. *Hashi* means *sun* and *tahli* means *to complete*. This designation for God is independent of Western thinking, and perhaps tens of thousands of years old, but highlights the importance of “*wholeness*.” That a people would assign to their Creator the word “*completer*” of the capstone energy source, that is the sun, speaks to the importance of “*completion*” itself. God is in the business of making things whole. Making us whole, completing us. This process over time is to be embraced, accepted. It is the journey itself, and it will have peaks and valleys, hardship and joys. We must embrace it and follow our paths through it. The journey is sacred but it leads to wholeness. Do not fight it. Flow with it.

Completion is what most of us desire. And God completes us often in ways that we do not quite understand, but we typically know it when we see it or feel it. Jesus alludes to this in the context of the very statement he made about “*perfection*,” well “*teleios*.” When Jesus said “*be teleios as your father in heaven is teleios*,” he was talking about loving all people, even the ones that hate you. This is the magic key to wholeness. You will never be whole until you forgive, until you find love in your heart for those who despise you most. We all struggle for such peace that comes with finding true love emanating from within us to all those around us. It is not easy but necessary. Find it in your heart. Love yourself enough to seek wholeness, to be at peace in unity by loving all. If you withhold your love, your enemy wins. If you give it, even for you own sake, wholeness finds completion inside you. This doesn’t mean ignore injustices; it means simply do not be driven by hate, but instead by the enormity of love and a desire for internal and external wholeness.

It’s that sensation of relief when someone has their whole family gathered in one place, or that feeling of connection and wholeness when gathered with a special group of friends, or better yet, just one friend. When lovers look into each other’s eyes and sigh in contentment. Or perhaps when you are present here with this community. *Teleios*. We are made whole with one another. We need each other in one another’s lives. We complete one another as God completes us. This isn’t to say that when you climb a mountain alone and look over the outcropping, standing on a rock, viewing creation above and below that you don’t feel connected to the one who made us all. That too, is *Teleios*. Wholeness is finding your place in creation itself, where you’re fit snugly, perfectly, right where you belong. *Teleios*. So be whole, and embrace your journey to wholeness.

Only if my grandfather were alive to ask me, “*Daniel are you perfect?*” I’d answer him kindly, “*No, but I am on the path to teleios.*”

Shalom