

"Flawless"

Text: Ephesians 1:15-23

On this the Sunday when we celebrate our Savior's return to heaven, we pray that that same Savior would continue to shower each of us with his grace and peace, until he returns to take us home. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

I walked outside early one morning this week and thought to myself, "*What a perfect morning.*" No wind, the trees are putting on their summer coats, lilacs starting to bloom, temperature just right, garden growing nicely, lawn freshly mowed, no traffic noise, no bugs yet, birds singing – just *flawless*. And then suddenly it wasn't. There were weeds in the garden and in the lawn. The sprinkler system needs work. My pickup has a strange surge I haven't been able to figure out. And the neighbor's cat still regards our garden as is its own private kitty litter box.

Life is like that, isn't it? There's always good, and there's always not-so-good. How we feel often depends on where we focus. We can choose to ruin the good by focusing on what isn't, or we can learn to appreciate the good and just deal with the bad how and when we must. One thing in particular we need to come to terms with: True perfection, true flawlessness, is almost non-existent.

This morning we examine two things that prove both parts of that statement: non-existent, and *almost* non-existent.

The text that will guide and instruct us this morning is found in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, the First Chapter:

^{ESV} **Ephesians 1:15-23** *For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints,¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers,¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him,¹⁸ having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might²⁰ that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places,²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that*

is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.²² And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church,²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

This is God's Word. Because it is God's Word, we can with full confidence base our entire existence – for time and for eternity – upon these words alone. God's Word, in fact, represents one of the few things in this life that truly is flawless. With such confidence in these holy words, we pray, "**Sanctify us by Your truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth. Amen.**"

The term "perfectionist" is deceptive, isn't it? It seems to imply not only the possibility of perfection, but that "perfectionists" actually achieve it on a regular basis. In reality, perfectionists are just those who tend to be more frustrated by life than others. They typically do great work, but they push themselves harder in an attempt to get where pretty much no one can go.

Don't get me wrong. I love perfectionists. Their houses are typically immaculate and well ordered, their yards enhance property values, their dishes are spotless, and their craftsmanship is usually awe-inspiring. Yet perfectionists are usually the first to tell you that they never really achieve perfection. What they do is never flawless. They just tend to get *closer* than the rest of us.

But then there was this one guy...

This morning we celebrate the Ascension of Jesus, which occurred 40 days after his resurrection from the dead. Since the date of Easter varies from year to year, no one claims to know the actual date of the Ascension. We do know that since Easter is always on a Sunday, and since Ascension is always 40 days after Easter, Ascension always falls on a Thursday. What we also know about the Ascension is that it represents one of the few examples of perfection and completion in this profoundly imperfect and incomplete world – the perfect end to the flawless life and the ultimate "job well done," once and for all.

And speaking of "a job well done," have you ever plopped down on your favorite chair after a long, hard day and thought that to yourself, "*A job well done!*"? It's interesting to hear how many *never* have that feeling. To many, the end of the day just represents a break, a resting period, before "the job" starts again the next day. Harder even than thinking in terms of "job well done" is to look back at the day and think

in terms of perfection, even *near* perfection. What has anyone ever done during their entire life that couldn't have been done better?

One thing: the perfection that Jesus Christ came to earth to accomplish, the work he came to do. For human beings, death brings an end to our work, but that end represents only the termination of an unbroken chain of imperfections. There is really nothing that we do that is truly flawless. That's why it is so hard to comprehend not only the life of Jesus Christ, but exactly what the Ascension represents. Christ's Ascension was the perfect end to his flawless life. It was Jesus, returning to heaven, knowing that he had completed his work perfectly, sinlessly, flawlessly. Understand that that work was a lifelong process. From the moment he was born, he had to fulfill both the positive and negative of every commandment. That means he had to avoid what the commandments prohibited and he had to carry out (do) everything they commanded. It's one thing, for example, to avoid the construction and worship of an idol. It is quite another to consistently fear, love, and trust in God above all things. One thing never to kill, another to *"help and be of service to your neighbor in every bodily need."*

That was the process of our salvation. The hardest part, of course, was Good Friday, but the *process* spanned Jesus' entire lifetime. Jesus returned to heaven at his ascension knowing that he had flawlessly completed all that needed to be done – *for us*. What he offered on the cross as our sin payment was nothing less than absolute perfection in every conceivable way. It is just astounding when you stop to think of what Jesus accomplished, on the one hand, and just how ridiculously impossible it would have been for us to supply such perfection for ourselves. And yet that is exactly what we would have had to provide if we were to save ourselves.

Ascension is the day Jesus got to go back to his Father's side in heaven, got to return to the perfect peace, harmony, joy, and contentment that he had before he left heaven to enter this sick broken world. What a great day for our Lord. His work was not only done, but done absolutely perfectly. It could not have been done any better. That is exactly why God the Father did for him what he did upon his return to heaven. Our text described it: ***"God the Father... seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. ²² And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."***

So then first on this day we stand in humble awe of just what our Lord accomplished, we thank him for it, and we rejoice in the fact that he got to go home – his work on earth flawlessly completed.

Yet just as the disciples had to shift their attention back to earth after they had watched their Lord ascend, so we too must now lower our eyes and see that we are still here. We are still passing through this sin-broken world, still forced to ***"work out our salvation with fear and trembling,"*** knowing that ***"the devil, like a roaring lion, still prowls about, seeking whom he may devour."*** From this we need to learn a valuable lesson – that life for the child of God is also a process.

The Apostle Paul understood this, didn't he? He knew that even after we are brought to faith, life will always be a process or progression. We continually strive for perfection, but we never get there on this earth. We just keep pressing on. Paul's words from Philippians 3:12-16: ***"Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."***

That's what Christians do, isn't it? We press on. We continue to learn and grow, struggling to be more and more like our Savior Jesus – knowing that not only could we never do what he did, we will never stop growing, learning, struggling... and consistently falling short.

One of the key truths of the Christian faith is the acceptance of the universal *imperfection* of humanity. Jesus didn't do what he did because man was good but because man was fatally flawed. Romans 3:9-12: ***All, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, ¹⁰ as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God. ¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."***

Jesus Christ came to earth to do what man could not do, to offer what man could not produce – flawless perfection. In fact it's a terrifying perversion of the Christian faith to imagine that we need to make ourselves worthy and lovable in God's eyes, knowing that a holy God can accept nothing less than perfection into his heaven. It's challenge enough for us just to have consistently good intentions, let alone perfection.

The good news that we learn from God's Word is not the perfection of man but the perfection of Jesus Christ. It is only because of the flawless execution of our Savior, credited to sinners by God's grace through faith, that we are saved, rescued, redeemed.

But just here we find one other startling example of flawlessness in this world. In fact we see it in every single Christian who has been brought by the Holy Spirit to trust that Jesus Christ provided the full payment for their sins. Every single Christian is, in fact, absolutely sinless, and therefore absolutely righteous, in God's eyes.

How could such a thing possibly be true when everything we do, say or think is tainted by sin? The Biblical truth is that sinlessness is ours in the eyes of our God because God equates faith with perfect righteousness. This is the amazing beating heart of the true Christian faith. Jesus got our sin; we got his perfection.

The incredible message of the Christian faith is that no matter how much sin we see in our lives, God the Father has punished his Son for every last one of those sins. Every last sin. God the Father ***"has laid on (his Son) the iniquity of us all."*** Therefore when God looks into our hearts and there finds faith in Jesus Christ, he credits Jesus' perfection to us, having placed our sins on Jesus. He looks at us, in other words, as he once looked at his Son, declaring before the world, ***"This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."*** Now, through faith in that very Son of God, you and I have inherited the flawless perfection, the sinlessness, of Jesus Christ. That means that to all who trust Jesus Christ to have supplied all the goodness necessary to cancel their debt of sin, God says exactly the same thing *to us* that he once declared to his own Son – *"You are my beloved child, in you I am well pleased."* *"Well pleased"* not because of any human achievement, but because of the sin payment supplied by Jesus Christ, and then gifted to us as an act of God's undeserved love.

Comfort your hearts with this truth as you wait for your Savior, who has gone ahead, but is ready to return at any moment. In the meantime, carry on the struggle – the process that is the life of the child of God, until that Savior returns to take you home. Amen.

ESV **Luke 24:44-53** Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, ⁴⁶ and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." ⁵⁰ ¶ Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. ⁵¹ While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵² And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, ⁵³ and were continually in the temple blessing God.

ESV **Acts 1:1-11** In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ² until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³ He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴ And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." ⁶ ¶ So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." ⁹ And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹ and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

ESV **Ephesians 1:15-23** For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, ¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, ¹⁸ having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might ²⁰ that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. ²² And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.



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The Sunday after Ascension – May 21, 2023

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 738 (Brown Hymnal)

"Hallelujah! Sing to Jesus"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The First Lesson: (Luke 24:44-53) Our first lesson gives a very basic eye-witness account of the event we celebrate on this day – the Ascension of Jesus. Note, however, in this lesson how Jesus focuses not so much on what was going to happen to him, which was clearly a most glorious event for him, as on what was going to happen to his disciples after he left. The gift that he promised to send to them was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the event we know as Pentecost.

Psalm 2 (Supplement page 30) (Brown Hymnal)

The Second Lesson: (Acts 1:1-11) Luke, having given a basic account of Jesus' Ascension in his Gospel, here gives a more detailed account of that same event. Again he points to the importance of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Once that gift was given, the understanding of the disciples was dramatically deepened or increased – so much so that from that day forward they no longer thought in base, earthly terms but as their Savior had taught them.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 222 (Red Hymnal)

"Look, Ye Saints, the Sight Is Glorious"

The Sermon – Text: Ephesians 1:15-23 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"Flawless"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 212 (Stanzas 1-5) (Red Hymnal)

"A Hymn of Glory Let Us Sing"

The Prayers followed by the Lord's Prayer

The Closing Hymn – 216 (Red Hymnal)

"On Christ's Ascension I Now Build"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States and around the world. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again.

Attendance – Sunday (25) Average (40)

This Week at St. Paul:

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| Today | -9:00 a.m. | – Sunday School and Bible Class |
| | -10:00 a.m. | – Worship Service |
| | -11:00 a.m. | – Fellowship Hour |
| | -11:15 a.m. | – Church Council Meeting |
| Tuesday | -9:00 a.m. | – Delegate Conference in Watertown |
| | | – No Confirmation or Midweek Bible Study |
| Next Sunday | -10:00 a.m. | – Worship Service w/communion |
| | -11:15 a.m. | – Fellowship Hour |

CLC News – Pastor Nathanael Mayhew has returned the call to Messiah of Eau Claire. That congregation has now called Pastor Matthew Hanel.

West Central Delegate Conference – Pastor Roehl and Delegate Mark Johnson are scheduled to represent St Paul this week at the West Central Delegate Conference in Watertown. Plans call for a Monday afternoon departure and a return on Thursday evening.

Lutheran Spokesman and Daily Rest – It is time to renew (or begin) subscriptions for both *The Lutheran Spokesman* and for *Daily Rest*. Signup sheets (one for each publication) can be found on the mailbox table. All are encouraged to consider subscriptions to these fine, trustworthy publications. Payment can be placed into the offering box and need not be specially labeled. If you would like to subscribe but cannot afford to, your subscription will be covered by the church.

Branches – Subscriptions to the CLC Women's publication *Branches* are also up for renewal. For more information please see the separate information sheet on the mailbox table. Payment for this publication is made directly to the publisher via the contact information found on the information sheet.

Summer Schedule – We transition to our summer schedule next Sunday, with worship services only at 10am. It goes without saying that we never suspend our personal and family study of God's Word.