Grace, Not Perfection
Ephesians 2:8–9

For most of my ministry, I've prepared sermons by following the lectionary—the scripture passages laid out for us through the church year. But beginning today, and for the next nine weeks, we're starting a new sermon series called *"The Truth Will Set You Free"* (John 8:32) There's a reason for this. As a pastor, I've come to realize something through conversations with so many of you: nobody goes through life without suffering. Every single person carries it. Charlie Chaplin once said, "Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in the long shot." And he's right. On the surface, some people may look like they have it all together—happy, successful, problem-free. But if you step a little closer, you'll always find suffering and wounds hidden beneath the surface.

This world isn't perfect, and neither are we. There are no perfect parents, which means every child grows up experiencing some kind of lack or disappointment. And so, as adults, we spend our lives trying to overcome that sense of not being enough. Take this example: A child brings home a test with a score of 98. But instead of celebrating, the father always says, "Where are the other two points?" What happens to that child? They grow up endlessly chasing perfection, unable to rest, unable to accept mistakes. Or consider someone who never received enough love growing up. That person may spend a lifetime trying to make themselves indispensable, striving to be "lovable" in order to earn the affection they missed. This is how our childhood wounds shape us. The desire to fill those gaps becomes part of us. It forms patterns inside us, unconscious voices that push us, drive us, and influence how we think and act.

But here's the problem: those inner voices often become heavy burdens. They whisper false messages that set us chasing after goals we can never reach. Think about it—if a human being, who by nature cannot be perfect, spends their life trying to become perfect, what happens? They end up miserable. And often, so do the people around them.

Friends, what we need is the courage to face those inner voices honestly—the voice of that wounded child still speaking inside us. But we don't stop there. We don't let that voice drag us down. Instead, we bring it to God. We listen for God's truth—the truth that comforts, heals, and sets us free. That's when maturity comes. That's when true freedom comes.

And that's the journey we'll take together over these next nine weeks. Each week we'll name one of those false messages that holds us captive, and together we'll listen for the truth of God that sets us free. Not all the voices will sound the same to each of us. Some will echo more loudly than others. But with open hearts and awake spirits, we'll discover both the lies we've been carrying and the freedom God longs to give us. Today we begin with the first of those voices—the lie that says, *"You must be perfect."* And we'll hear together the good news: God's word of grace that frees us from perfectionism.

The Heavy Burden of Perfectionism

Imagine you've just cleaned the windshield of your car. You worked hard, wiped it thoroughly, and it looks spotless. But then, as you look more closely, you notice a tiny smudge in the corner. Do you shrug it off—or does that little spot bother you so much you grab the cloth again? Which one are you?

As for me, I don't mind—even if the whole car is dusty, I can live with it. But for some of you, that one little spot may be unbearable. Often, people like this grew up hearing messages like: "You must do thing right. Don't make mistakes." They were corrected more often for what

was missing than praised for what was good. Over time, they built an inner image of themselves: "I have to do things the right way. Only then am I a decent person."

Or maybe you had to grow up too soon—taking on adult responsibilities and holding yourself to strict standards, as if perfection were the only way to stay safe. A voice took root inside: *"You must always be upright. You must not make mistakes. Only then are you worth something."* That voice can make us hardworking and responsible—but it also drives us relentlessly. It wears us out, and it wears out the people around us. The more we chase perfection, the more anxious we become about not measuring up. Even a small mistake brings shame, or anger—not only at ourselves but at the people around us who aren't "perfect" either. That's the heavy burden of perfectionism. It doesn't set us free. Instead, it blocks us from enjoying the joy of God's grace.

The Bible even gives us a picture of such a perfectionist. Do you know who it is? The Apostle Paul. Who was Paul? He was someone who staked his life on the law. He was determined to be flawless. In Philippians 3, Paul describes himself: *"I was circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews. As to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless."* (3:5–6)

Yes. Paul was the model of perfectionism—zealous, strict, untiring. But what was the result? He exhausted himself, and he made life miserable for those around him. His eyes were trained only to see the faults in others. His heart burned with anger. He even stood by, giving approval, when Stephen was stoned to death. He led the persecution against Christians, convinced that he was in the right. That's the tragedy perfectionism can create: *"I must always be right. I must never fail."*

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But God's grace came even to Paul. On the road to Damascus, while he was burning with anger and on his way to arrest Christians, Paul met the Lord. And what happened? Scripture tells us that his eyes were blinded, and he could no longer see. In a way, this moment reveals something deeper—he had already been blinded by his own anger.

But it was in this blindness that Paul experienced salvation and grace. He hadn't realized how blind he really was—how captive he was to anger—until God opened his eyes to see it. That is grace. Because only when we recognize the false inner voices that hold us captive can we begin the journey of transformation.

Many of these false voices in us work at the unconscious level. That's why the first step is simply to notice them. When you make a mistake, when you face something you believe is wrong, and that old shame or anger rises up inside—don't just follow it. Stop for a moment. Pay attention to what you're feeling. And when you recognize it, you suddenly have a choice. Do I follow this emotion? Or is there another way to see this situation? That's where change begins.

So what happened to Paul when the scales fell from his eyes by the grace of Christ? A new journey began. He was becoming a new person. His eyes—how he looked at himself and at others—were changed. Before meeting Jesus, Paul lived as though salvation depended on his own flawless effort, on being perfect in keeping the law. He thought only if he could be faultless and complete would he be saved. But after meeting Christ, Paul confessed something entirely different: that salvation is not by our own effort or by the perfection of the law, but by grace. He admitted he was imperfect, vulnerable, swayed by sin. And yet, he trusted in the grace of God who loved him anyway.

That's why Paul could say in today's scripture from Ephesians: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not a result of works, so that no one may boast."* (2:8–9)

From Not Enough to Good Enough

It's okay not to be perfect. It's okay to make mistakes. Even if your life feels cracked or broken, it's still okay. There's an old folk tale from India called *The Cracked Pot.* Long ago, there was a water bearer who carried two large pots every day to fetch water from the river. He balanced the pots on a long pole across his shoulders.

One of the pots was perfect. Every day it delivered a full measure of water without losing a drop. But the other pot had a crack, and by the time they reached the house, half the water had leaked out. How do you think the cracked pot felt? It lived in shame for years, always seeing itself as a failure, always comparing itself to the perfect pot. Finally, one day the cracked pot spoke to the water bearer: *"I am so sorry. Because of my flaw, you don't get full value from your work. I am broken. I am not enough."*

But the water bearer smiled gently and said, *"Have you noticed the flowers along your side of the path? They don't grow on the other side. I knew about your crack, so I planted seeds along your path. Every day, as we walked back from the river, you watered them. For years, I've picked those flowers to decorate my master's table. Without you, there would have been no beauty at all."* The cracked pot was stunned. What it thought was its greatest failure had actually become its greatest gift.

The same is true for us. None of us are perfect. None of us ever will be. But God can take even our cracks, our flaws, our brokenness, and make something beautiful. That is grace. We are saved not by perfection, but by grace.

So when you feel ashamed at your imperfections, pause and whisper: *"It's okay not to be perfect. I am good enough."*And when others fall short, remember God's grace. See them through grace-filled eyes. If we live this way, our lives will become more beautiful, more joyful, more free. Yes. We are saved not by perfection, but by grace. Amen.