

# Trinity Sunday

## May 26, 2002

*Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke*

### **Our Perfect God Perfects His People**

1. The Triune God is Perfect in Every Way
2. The Triune God Perfects Us with Law and Gospel

#### **2 Corinthians 13:11-14**

*NIV 2 Corinthians 13:11 Finally, brothers, good-by. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you. 12 Greet one another with a holy kiss. 13 All the saints send their greetings. 14 May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*

Fellow servants of the Triune God,

Trinity Sunday is a good time to ask, “What does the doctrine of the Trinity mean to you?” The fact that we Christians “worship one God in three persons and three persons in one God, without mixing the persons or dividing the divine Being”—is that significant to you? Is it a vital teaching of the Bible that you cherish? Or is it a mentally-taxing, vaguely threatening abstraction that leaves you cold? Does the line at the end of the first part of the Athanasian Creed cause you a bit of uneasiness? “Whoever wishes to be saved must have this conviction of the Trinity.” Does it get you wondering about the correctness of your convictions?”

I fear that that is sometimes the reaction to occasions like today when we delve into heavy-duty doctrine like the Biblical teaching of the Trinity. We may come away thinking, “Wow! That’s way beyond me!” And then—unfortunately—we may leave it there, as if the whole teaching were just a step from being irrelevant and impractical.

But the Bible never teaches us doctrine simply for doctrine’s sake. The Bible’s teachings are always designed either to help us know the true God better or to help us know ourselves better. The closing verse of today’s second lesson is a case in point: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” This is what someone has called “the practical doctrine of the Trinity.” This is doctrine we can use. I hope that when we’ve finished today you’ll go away today thinking that our God is perfect and that he is working every day to perfect us for life now and life eternally.

#### **1. The Triune God is Perfect in Every Way**

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” That verse is the reason that this passage is read on Trinity Sunday. Most of us have heard it many times as an invocation at the beginning of the service or as a benediction at the end. Here are all three persons of the Trinity mentioned in the same passage, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is not some throwaway line at the end of a long letter. This is a precious, awe-inspiring theological gemstone that should be pondered and gazed at and turned every-which-way in order to more fully contemplate every aspect of its beauty. This verse reminds us that we worshipers of the Triune God are children of the perfect God.

The word perfect is a word that we don't hesitate to use in describing God. We did just that in the hymn we just sang. ***“Trinity sacred, Unity unshaken; Deity perfect, giving and forgiving.”*** And in a few minutes we'll sing those familiar words of “Holy, Holy, Holy,” saying of God that he is ***“perfect in pow'r, in love, and purity.”*** This what the Bible says, too. God's ways and his Word and his knowledge are all perfect. Moses taught the Israelites about God this way: ***“He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.”*** (Deut. 32:4)

But if that's all we knew about God's perfection, I think we'd experience more than just the uneasiness I mentioned before. God's perfection in contrast to my *imperfection* is not a pleasant thought. God's holiness set next to my sinfulness produces shame and fear. We know what God should by rights say to us: “I'm holy and perfect. I asked you to be holy and perfect, too, but you're not, so go away.”

That's why the perfection of the Triune God that we see at the end of 2 Corinthians is so encouraging. This is not the perfection of God's power or purity, but the perfection of his love. “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This perfect love comes our way without our meriting it. Paul wrote earlier in this letter, ***“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.”*** (8:9) And the love of God the Father. In a world where love frequently fails or is at times totally absent, God the Father defines and personifies love. ***“This is love,”*** the apostle John says, ***“not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”*** (1 John 4:10) And, finally, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. By the power of the Word and sacraments, the Holy Spirit has drawn us out of spiritual ignorance and certain death to membership in the Holy Christian Church, where we share with fellow believers the love of God and the grace of Jesus Christ.

This is perfect love. It's perfect because God initiated this love. ***“We love because he first loved us.”*** (1 John 4:19) It's perfect love because God doesn't place limits on this love. Paul says here that ***“God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them.”*** (5:19) And, last of all, God's love is perfect because it endures, despite our sins and our repeated provocation. What the LORD said in the past and repeated through his prophet Jeremiah, he still says to us: ***“I have loved you with an everlasting love.”*** (Jer. 31:3) God is perfect, but thank God, his love is perfect, too. Far from being a bit a Christian boilerplate stuck to the end of this epistle, the apostolic blessing is an opportunity for us to ponder how practical and comforting is the perfect love of the Triune God.

But it's one thing to contemplate the perfection of God—especially the perfection of his love. It's another thing completely to hear God call us to perfection. And he does just that: ***“Aim for perfection,”*** it says here. Just that word “perfection” can make us tense. Misunderstood or taken out of context, that word has connotations of pressure to pursue unattainable standards. Why, if there's one article of faith every person holds in common, it's, “Nobody's perfect.” But hang on. The perfection God is calling for from us in this verse is, I believe, different from the flawless, idealistic perfection that we've just attributed to our Triune God. And yet there's no mistaking that the Triune God is at work to perfect us.

## **2. The Triune God Perfects Us with Law and Gospel**

The portion of 2 Corinthians we're reading contains the final greetings at the end of the letter. This is Paul's last chance to write something before he folds the letter and hands it to the messenger who will carry it to Corinth. He says, ***“Finally, brothers, good-by. Aim for perfection...”*** This issue of perfection was obviously important to Paul. Just a few verses earlier

he wrote, **“And our prayer is for your perfection.”** (13:9) Does that sound unrealistic and doomed to failure? It may. I wonder how many of us have ever prayed, “Lord, make my child perfect,” or “Make my spouse perfect.” The realist in us says, Never mind perfection, a little improvement would be fine! And that’s actually what Paul is praying for.

The dictionary says that there’s an obsolete meaning of “perfect.” It used to mean “mature.” It’s in this sense that the Bible says Noah was a “perfect” man and that Job was a “perfect” man. Neither man was sinless. But both were men of integrity in that they lived their faith consistently. This is what God is asking Abraham to do when he appears to him in Genesis 17:1 and says, **“I am God Almighty (El Shaddai), walk before me and be blameless (or perfect).”** Some of us memorized 2 Timothy 3:17 in the King James Version. Do you remember how it went? **“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”** As Paul uses the word here, “perfect” does not refer to moral flawlessness or sinlessness, but to being mature, grown up in the faith, and well-equipped for living a Christian life of good works.

This was the challenge in Corinth. Read 1 Corinthians and see that those supremely gifted believers in Corinth could sometimes conduct themselves as if they were mere infants in the faith. They quarreled. They behaved with breathtaking disregard for others, offending the poor, the weak in faith, and those outside the church. They showed an almost incredible lack of knowledge of basic Christian beliefs. Their stunted spiritual stature ensured that any gains from their rich array of spiritual gifts were going to be miniature indeed.

We face the same challenge. Spiritual immaturity is the bane of life in the church and in the family. Immaturity in the Christian manifests itself in much the same way as immaturity manifests itself in children: in our selfishness, our impatience, and our inability to control our words and actions. Meanwhile, if we also isolate ourselves from the Word we ensure that we won’t be brought to repentance by the law or be strengthened by the word of God’s grace in the gospel. The result is something that many observers of contemporary Christianity have seen and mentioned: It’s hard to tell the Christians from the non-Christians just by observing their day-to-day lives.

The cure is the same today as it was in 55 AD when this letter was written. In 1 Corinthians and here again in 2 Corinthians, Paul goes to work with God’s law. He speaks of the day of reckoning when we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ and receive what is due us for the things done while in the body. He pleaded with the Corinthians and with us not to receive God’s grace in vain. He wrote to us all, **“Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting (there’s that word again!) holiness out of reverence for God.”** (2 Cor. 7:1) He prayed for the perfection (spiritual growth) of Corinthians and he also called on them to aim for it.

But Paul also knows it’s not possible to restore people to God’s image just by pounding them with the law. The law is necessary and essential in the work of perfecting the saints, but without the gospel no real improvement is possible. That’s why Paul adds the assurance: **“And the God of love and peace will be with you.”** The God whose love moved him to reconcile us to himself, overcoming hostility and establishing peace by the power of his everlasting love, will be with us as we aim for perfection. And that’s why the words of the apostolic blessing are so precious to us. Not only do they hold before us the perfect love of the Triune God, but these words are more than a wish. This is a statement. This is pledge from the Triune God to believers. As you strive to do God’s will and grow in your faith through the use of the Word and sacraments, the grace of

the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit will be with you.  
The perfect God perfects his people. Amen.

