




**HOLY DEFECT:**  
**Metaphors and the Quest for the Perfectly  
Flawed Missionary**

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# Is there a Clear definition of Perfection in the Bible?

- **Flawless? Complete? Fully Functional?** Mature? Sincere?
  - A problem we have is that we don't have experience with perfection. We would not necessarily recognize it if we saw it.
  - Another term to use instead might be "**Ideal**" because it has less theological baggage. But that doesn't change the challenge. What does it mean to be perfect or ideal?
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# Perfect or Ideal is often approached indirectly via metaphor

“Perfectness,” an unapproachable, abstract, concept, is understood in the tension of it being compared to a more approachable, concrete object or concept. Metaphor reveals meaning through the absurd equating of the (more) abstract with the (more) concrete. (Paul Ricoeur)

One way that has been used both in the Bible and outside of it is through aesthetics. Perfectness (or being “ideal”) is related to that which is desirable to the senses--- having a sense of “beauty.”



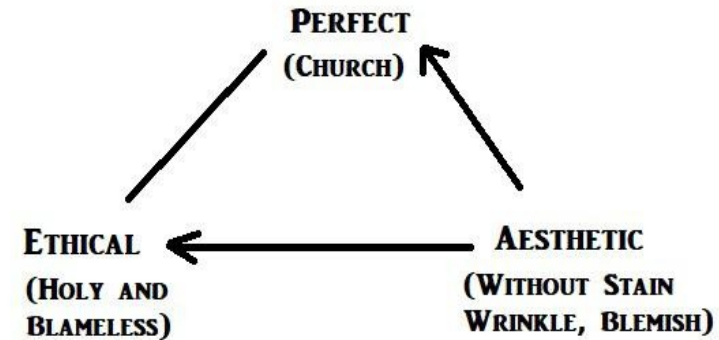
# #1. The Aesthetic Metaphor of Superficial Flawlessness: “Without Blemish”

- Ideal or Perfected Church (Ephesians 5:27)
- Perfect Sacrificial Animal (Exodus 12:5, Leviticus)
- Perfected Child of God (II Peter 3:14)
- Christ as perfect sacrifice (Hebrews 9:14)
- “Perfect” Priest (Leviticus 21:17-23)
- <Apostate> (II Peter 2:13)



Often this Aesthetic Language is Linked to Ethical Language like Holy, Blameless, and Pure.

“...and to present her to himself as radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” -Ephesians 5:27



## #2. The Aesthetic Metaphor of Natural Abundance

*“The eye desires grace and beauty, but the green shoots of grain more than either.” (Sirach, 40:22)*

**Telios (“perfection”) may be understood in terms of function or purpose**

- Righteous Person//Prosperous, fruitful tree (Psalm 1)
- Just Person//Well-watered garden (Isaiah 58:11)
- Person of Faith//Strong, fruitful tree (Jeremiah 17:7-8)
- One Who Abides in Christ//Fruitful branch of a grapevine (John 15)



# In the Heavenly State, we see both aesthetics used to show that it is ideal

- Flawless artifice (Rev. 21), “Sea of glass” (Rev. 4:6)
- Dynamic Natural Abundance (Rev. 22, Ezek. 47), “Flowing river” that nourishes fruit trees



# But Metaphors can Become Problems when they are taken too far, or are reified.

- Is something that is superficially flawless or visually beautiful **REALLY** more ideal than something that is not?
- Is prosperity/abundance a divine virtue, or evidence of being ideal before God?



# Are There Other Aesthetic Metaphors?

Can perfection be understood through the aesthetic of change and defect? Can decay and damage be beautiful?

Outside of the Bible the answer is clearly Yes.

“Wabi Sabi” is a Japanese aesthetic of transience, impermanence, and imperfection.

The Western tradition has, at times, also embraced a similar mindset, such as John Ruskin (1819-1900) *“All things are literally better, lovelier, and more beloved for the imperfections... . Accept this then for a universal law, that neither architecture nor any other noble work of man can be good unless it be imperfect.”*



#3. An Aesthetic Metaphor of Defect. Is this okay? Is this Biblical? Maybe it is Biblical even if many Christians don't identify it as such. One can interact with other faiths "so that the Gospel itself will be understood in ways the universal church has neither experienced nor understood before, thus expanding our understanding of the kingdom of God" (Darrell Whiteman)



# Metaphors of Perfecting Defect in Pastoral Theology and the Bible

Symbol	Defect	“Perfection”
Wounded Healer	Injured, Scarred	Empathy
Circus Clown	Bumbling, Comical	Connection
Wise Fool	Despised, Laughingstock	Counsel
Thorn in the Flesh	Weak	(God’s) Power
Penitent Publican	Sinful	Humility, Dependence
Jars of Clay	Mundane, Fragile	(God’s) Glory



# “Wounded Healer”

- Carl Jung, Henri Nouwen,
- Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53:4-5)
- Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 98a) (“Bandaged Messiah”)
- According to Nouwen, Our wounds do not make us better healers; and exposing our wounds to others does not help.
- But since we ALL are wounded, recognizing our commonality in this with others moves us away from pride or pity, or even sympathy alone, but to empathy.



# “Circus Clown”

- From Heije Faber. Comparing the modern hospital to a big tent circus.
- The audience is amazed, and disconnected, from the specialists and equipment in a modern hospital, much like with the skilled performers in a circus.
- However, they feel a certain kinship to the comical bumbling behavior of the clown who makes connection with the audience on a personal level. A chaplain does the same without specialized skills and equipment.
- A cross-cultural missionary seeks to make connection with people on this same level-- as equals... or even as servants.



# “Wise Fool”

- In the age of royalty, noblemen had “fools” (jesters) who entertained with music, jokes, tricks, and clever words. These fools were “artificial fools”-- commoners who had great wit and perhaps intelligence, hidden behind the facade of the fool.
- Often the fool could say what the royals needed to hear but others feared to say. Their willingness to be seen as foolish gave them the courage to say what needed to be said.
- Missionaries need to be willing to be “Fools for Christ” (Paul)-- saying what needs to be said even if (when) found foolish by the majority.



# “Thorn in the Flesh”

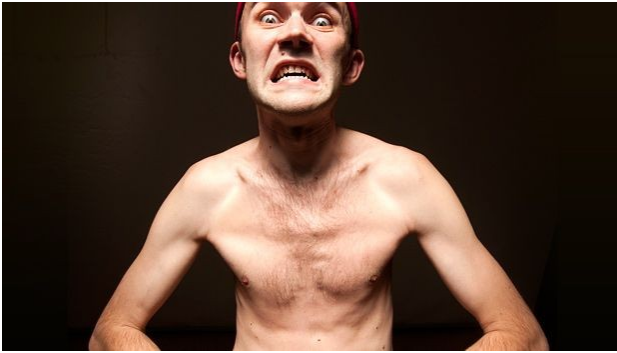
*Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. (II Corinthians 12:7b-9)*

-Our flaws and failures CAN make the power of God more evident.

-Flaws can have redemptive value and perhaps even make us more effective. But not always. Sometimes a defect is not so much a “redemptive” **Thorn in the Flesh**. Sometimes it is an **“Achille’s Heel.”**

-Consider the case of Samson. What if Samson did not look like *The Hulk*? What if he looked like a regular guy? What if he looked weak?





Which appearance might demonstrate God's power more effectively? Perhaps a physically weak person in appearance shows God's power better.



But Samson unsuccessfully struggled with Anger and Lust. St. Peter and St. Jerome appeared to grow through their struggles with anger and lust (respectively).

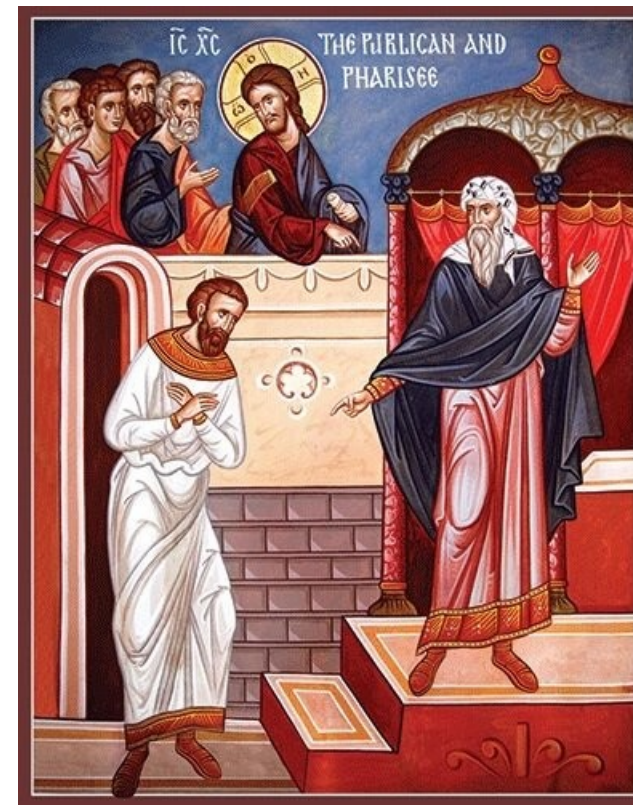
# “Penitent Publican”

-Luke 18:9-14 describes a Pharisee and a Tax Collector praying.

-Both were sinners... but one hid his failures, praying as a form of boasting. The other, called out to God for mercy.

-Our sinfulness can be humbly admitted, leading us to dependence on God.

-We can pretend that we are not damaged. Otherwise we can live and serve with the damage, or with repair that demonstrates the skill of the one who fixes.



# “Jars of Clay”

- II Corinthians 4:6-7. For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.
- Our mundanity and our fragility provide contrast and accentuate the glory of God.
- Dag Hammarskjöld stated, “The pride of the cup is in the drink, its humility in the serving. What, then do its defects matter?”



# Metaphors Expand Understanding... but can also be taken too far.

That is why I believe that there is benefit in embracing all of these metaphors, rather than taking one as being central over the others.

- Samson **may** have demonstrated God's power better through his superficial weakness, but his problems with lust and anger, destroyed his God-given ministry.
- Both Peter and Judas recognized their own sinfulness, but it led one to inspire billions in repentance, while the other is led to self-destruction.



# For Missionaries

- Missionaries should not aim for perfection, or even competence(?). An ordinary and flawed life may serve as a better vehicle of God's message, power, and glory.
- Mission Agencies may not be able to identify good missionary candidates by seeing how they match up with an "ideal." Jesus did not bat "a thousand." Why should we expect to do better?
- Missionaries need to help their relationships back home to be true supporters (comforting, grieving with, holding accountable), not just being "fans."



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The presentation is drawn from “Holy Defect: Metaphors and the Quest for the Perfectly Flawed Missionary” by Robert H. Munson. Not yet published. [www.munsonmissions.org](http://www.munsonmissions.org).

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