

**Seid vollkommen, wie eurer  
himmlischer Vater vollkommen ist!  
(Wie) Ist das möglich?**

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**ATS Symposium  
Vollkommen, sündlos, perfekt:  
Herausforderung und Wirklichkeit**

**4.-6. Juli 2014  
Seminar Schloss Bogenhofen**

# Introduction

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## ○ Perfectionism:

- Moral perfection—victory over sin in this lifetime.
- Matt 5:48
  - “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.”
  - Herbert E. Douglass: “The classic locus for biblical perfection.”

- ◉ No significant variation:

- “just as”

- “as”

- “your Father in heaven”

- “your heavenly Father”

# Translation

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## ◉ *esesthe*

- Imperative present: “you must be perfect”  
“be perfect”  
→ **Command** (immediate fulfillment)
- Indicative future: “you shall be perfect”  
“you will be perfect”  
→ **Promise** (future fulfillment)

# Translation

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- ◉ Bible versions:

- Imperative present (a command)

- ◉ Commentators:

- Imperative present (a command)

- E.g., C. S. Keener, R. T. France

- Indicative future (a promise)

- E.g., D. A. Hagner, A. B. Bruce

- Both (indicative future with imperatival force)

- E.g., L. Morris, E. Schweizer, J. Nolland

# Translation

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## ◉ Context:

- Matt 5:17-48:discussion about the law
- An OT quotation?
  - Matt 5:48 “Therefore **you shall be** perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.”
  - Deut 18:13 “**You shall be** blameless before the LORD your God.”
  - Lev 19:2 “**You shall be** holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.”

# Translation

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- The quotations are not literal.
- No indicative future is used in the section.
- Both forms would fit the context:
  - Imperative: other imperatives
  - Ind. future: vs. 45
    - *hopōs* (vs. 45): purpose (“that/in order that”)
      - “That you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.”
    - *oun* (vs. 48): inference (“then/so”)
      - “So, you will be perfect as perfect is your heavenly Father.”

# Literary structure

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- ◉ Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:3–7:27):
  - A. Introduction 5:3-16
  - B. Central section 5:17–7:12
    - 1. The fulfillment of the law 5:17-48
    - 2. True and false piety 6:1-18
    - 3. Right perspective about life 6:19–7:12
  - C. Conclusion 7:13-27



# Literary structure

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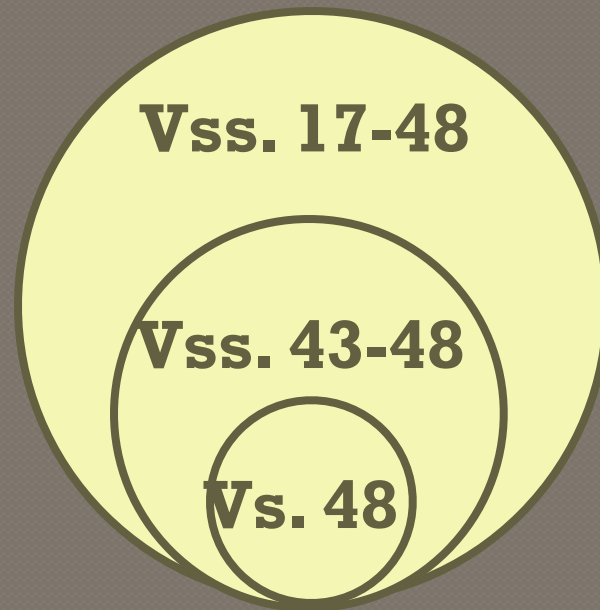
1. The fulfillment of the law	5:17-48
(a) Jesus vs. the rabbis	5:17-20
(b) Practical examples	5:21-48
(1) Murder	5:21-26
(2) Adultery	5:27-30
(3) Divorce	5:31-32
(4) Swearing	5:33-37
(5) Retaliation	5:38-42
(6) Love	5:43-48

# Literary structure

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## ○ Matt 5:48

- Immediate context: 5:43-48
- Larger context: 5:17-48



# Background

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- Rabbinic activity in Israel
  - Pharisees:
    - Religious group
    - Ceremonial purification & law observance
  - Scribes:
    - Professional class (rabbis)
    - Experts on the law
    - Threefold function:
      - Preservation
      - Teaching
      - Administration

# Background

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- ◉ Oral (rabbinic) law:
  - Casuistic interpretations
  - Lowered the standards
  - Heartless formalism
- ◉ Jesus:
  - Did not follow the rabbinic tradition.
    - Piety
    - Teaching
  - Often accused of breaking the law (Matt 15:2; Mark 7:5; John 5:16; 9:16, 24, 31).

# Interpretation

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- ◉ Jesus and the law:

- “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (vs. 17).

- ◉ The permanence of the law:

- “Truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished” (vs. 18).

# Interpretation

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- ◉ Jesus' critique of the rabbis:
  - “Whoever breaks any of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven” (vs. 19).
- ◉ Jesus challenges His disciples:
  - “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (vs. 20).

# Interpretation

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- ◉ Six practical examples (vss. 21-48):
  - “You have heard that it was said to those of old” (vs. 21; cf. 27, 31, 33, 38, 43).
  - This is not how Jesus quotes Scripture
    - “It is written” (Matt 4:6, 7, 10; 11:10; 21:13; 26:24, 31; etc.).
    - “Have you not read?” (Matt 12:3, 5; 19:4; 21:6, 42; 22:31; Mark 2:25; 12:10, 26; Luke 6:3).
  - “You have heard”: oral (rabbinic) traditions
  - Not OT quotations

# Interpretation

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## ◉ Example #3 (vss. 31-32):

- Rabbis: “Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.”
- Jesus: Divorce is a divine concession because of sin and only in the case of adultery (cf. Deut 24:1-4; Matt 19:7-9).



# Interpretation

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- ◉ Example #6 (vss. 43-48):
  - Immediate context
  - Rabbis: “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.”
  - Lev 19:18 “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”
  - Two differences:
    - What about “as yourself”?
    - The OT nowhere teaches hate for the enemies.

# Interpretation

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## ◉ Lev 19

- No revengeful attitude towards the enemies (vss. 17-18).
- Foreigners should be treated with respect and benevolence (vss. 33-34; cf. Deut 10:19).

◉ Rabbis: “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.”

◉ Jesus: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

# Interpretation

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- Three reasons to love the enemies:
  - This shows the legitimacy of our filial relation with God.
    - “So that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven” (vs. 45a).
  - God’s love is unrestricted.
    - “For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (vs. 45b).
    - Love for the enemies is a reflection of God’s character.

# Interpretation

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- To restrict love to one's circle is (too) human.
  - “If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?” (vss. 46-47).
  - To love the enemies is to migrate from the human level to the divine level.

# Interpretation

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## ◉ Conclusion:

- “So, you will be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (vs. 48).
- *hopōs* (vs. 45): “that,” “in order that”
  - Purpose
- *oun* (vs. 48): “then,” “so”
  - Inference

To be perfect means to love as God loves.

# Interpretation

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- ◉ The six practical examples (vss. 21-48):
  - Traditional interpretations:
    - Replacement of Moses' law
    - Amplification of the scope of the law
  - Contextual interpretation:
    - Condemnation of the rabbinic casuistry

# Linguistic analysis

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- ◉ “Perfect” (*teleios*) in Matt 5:48:
  - *teleios*: 19x (3x in Matthew)
  - Word group: 29x
- ◉ Two main meanings:
  - Full-grown, mature, adult
    - 1 Cor 14:20 “Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be **mature**” (ESV).  
- NRSV: “adults”

# Linguistic analysis

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- Eph 4:13 “Until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to **mature** manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (ESV).
  - NRSV: “maturity”



# Linguistic analysis

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- Heb 5:14 “Solid food is for the **mature**, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil” (ESV).
  - NKJV: “full age”

# Linguistic analysis

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- Perfect, fully developed, complete:
  - Matt 19:21 “If you want to be **perfect** [*teleios*], go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (NKJV).
    - NASB: “complete”

# Linguistic analysis

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- Col 4:12 “That you may stand **mature** and fully assured in all the will of God” (ESV).  
- NKJV: “perfect”
- Jas 1:4 “We all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a **perfect** man, able also to bridle the whole body” (NKJV).

# Linguistic analysis

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- Phil 3:12-15

“Not that I have already obtained this or am already \*perfect [*teleioō*]... . Let those of us who are \*\*mature [*teleios*] think this way...” (ESV).

\*- NRSV: “reached my goal” (cf. NIV)

\*\* - NASB: “perfect”

# Linguistic analysis

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- ◉ *Teleios* in the LXX: 20x
  - Unblemished, undivided, complete, whole.
  - Two Hebrew words:
    - *tāmîm*: complete, finished
      - total commitment to God
      - no compromise with pagan practices
      - blameless, honest
    - *šālēm*: undivided, complete
      - undivided devotion to God
      - sound, safe, peaceable

# Linguistic analysis

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- ◉ *Teleios* in Matt 5:48, *tāmîm* or *šālēm*?
  - Difficult to know.
  - Matthew Black: word-play (paronomasia)
    - Vs. 47: “to greet” → “to ask for the peace [*šālôm*] of”
    - Vs. 48: “perfect” → *šālēm*

# Linguistic analysis

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- ◉ *Teleios* in Matt 19:21 (the rich young man):
  - Vs. 20 “What do I still lack?”
  - Vs. 21 “If you want to be **perfect**, go, sell what you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.”
  - What did he still lack?
    - Mature, full-hearted piety, a self-surrender and undivided discipleship.
    - He needed to surrender himself.

# Linguistic analysis

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- „Christus las im Herzen des Jünglings, dem nur eines fehlte; doch dieses eine war lebensnotwendig. Der Jüngling bedurfte der Liebe Gottes in seinem Herzen.... Wollte er die Liebe Gottes empfangen, mußte er seine maßlose Eigenliebe überwinden.... [Er] mußte ... sich völlig Jesus weihen und seinen Willen unter göttliche Leitung stellen” (*LJ*, 512-513).



# Theological implications

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- ◉ Matt 5:48: moral perfection, sinlessness?
  - Spiritual maturity in the context of the love commandment.
    - Luke 6:36 “Be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful.”
  - Unrestricted love
    - This is how God loves.
    - This is how His children will love as well.
    - There is no merit in loving only those who love us.

# Theological implications

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- ◉ What level of perfection?
  - Relative: that which a human being is able to achieve
  - Absolute: to be fully perfect as God is perfect
- The standard: God Himself.
  - “You shall be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

# Theological implications

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- ◉ Immediate context: love commandment
  - Can we really love as God loves?
- ◉ Larger context: proper fulfillment of the law
  - Can we really and absolutely be free from anger (vss. 21-26), lust (vss. 27-32), deceit (vss. 33-37), and retaliation (vss. 38-42)?
  - Can we really reach such level of perfection in our feelings, motivations, and thoughts?

# Theological implications

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- ◉ Unless Jesus does infinitely more for us than simply give a better code of ethics than that of the rabbis, He has but mocked our weakness, and exposed our incapacity.

# Theological implications

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- ◉ What is our real problem?
  - The rich young men (Matt 19:16-22)
  - He kept all the commandments.
  - But, he still lacked one thing to be perfect.
    - To sell all his possessions and give it to the poor.
  - Was Jesus teaching perfection by good works?
  - Is perfection to be equated with human actions?

# Theological implications

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- Is it something that we can attain by doing or not doing certain things?
  - By what we eat?
  - How we dress?
  - What we have?
- Not that what we do or do not do is not important, but we should not belittle the divine ideal of perfection by limiting it to external actions.

# Theological implications

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- ◉ What was the rich young man's real problem?
  - He suffered from a heart disease.
  - He could keep the commandments in a formal, legalistic way, but his heart was not fully devoted to God.
  - What he needed was a real transformation of heart.
    - An impure source cannot produce but impure results.

# Theological implications

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- „Von Natur aus ist das Herz böse. ... Die Quelle des Herzens muß gereinigt werden, ehe der Strom klar werden kann. Wer versucht, den Himmel durch seine eigenen Werke, durch das Halten der Gebote zu erreichen, versucht Unmögliches. Es gibt keine Sicherheit für den, der nur eine gesetzliche Religion, eine äußere Frömmigkeit besitzt. Das Christenleben verbessert oder verändert nicht das alte Wesen, sondern gestaltet es völlig um“ (*LJ*, 155).



# Theological implications

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- ◉ How can an evil heart,
  - really love as God loves?
  - be absolutely free from all kinds of sinful desires, motivations, and thoughts?
  - be perfect as God's heart is perfect?

Unless Jesus does infinitely more for us than simply give a better code of ethics than that of the rabbis, He has but mocked our weakness, and exposed our incapacity.

# Theological implications

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- „Es ist für uns unmöglich, aus eigener Kraft dem Abgrund der Sünde zu entfliehen, in den wir gefallen sind. Das Trachten unserer Herzen ist böse, aber wir können sie nicht anders machen.... Erziehung und Bildung, Willensübung und menschliche Anstrengung haben ihren eigenen Wirkungskreis, sind aber in diesem Falle machtlos. Sie mögen eine äußere Verbesserung der Sitten herbeiführen,

# Theological implications

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- können aber das Herz nicht verändern; sie sind nicht imstande, die geheimen Triebfedern des Lebens zu reinigen. Es muß zuerst eine Macht im Innern wirken, ein neues Leben von oben kommen, ehe der Mensch von der Sünde zur Heiligkeit bekehrt wird. Diese Macht ist Christus. Seine Gnade allein ist fähig, die toten Seelenkräfte wieder zu beleben und sie zu Gott, zur vollkommenen Heiligkeit hinzuleiten“ (WZC, 10).

# Theological implications

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- ◉ Our problem is not what we do or do not do.
- ◉ Our problem lies within our heart.
  - Whatever we do is stained by sin.
  - If the rich young man sold everything he had and give it to the poor, would he then reach perfection or be saved?
  - What was the real lesson Jesus tried to teach him?

# Theological implications

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- ◉ Jesus just used an extreme, practical example to show him what his problem really was.
- ◉ This means that even if he sold everything and give it to the poor, he could NOT be saved, as his supposed faithful obedience to God's commandments could not help him either.

# Theological implications

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- ◉ In the resulting dialog with the disciples (vss. 23-26), they understood that absolute perfection is in fact a human impossibility.
  - Disciples: “Who then can be saved?” (vs. 25).
  - Jesus: “For man this is impossible, but for God all things are possible” (vs. 26).

# Theological implications

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- ◉ Sinfulness of human nature in Matthew:
  - Jesus: “If **you** then, **being evil**, know how to give good gifts to your children...”  
(Matt 7:11).
    - “Being evil”: human sinfulness
    - “You”: Jesus excludes Himself

# Theological implications

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- ◉ Sinners with a sinful heart are asked to be perfect, to love God, neighbor, and even enemies with a pure and whole heart; in fact, as God Himself does.
  - Is this really possible?
  - Jesus says, “no” (Matt 19:26).
  - This is why we need God and His grace from the beginning to the end.



# Theological implications

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- “Christ gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity... He made an offering so complete that through His grace every one may reach the standard of perfection. Of those who receive His grace ... it will be written in the book of life, **‘Complete in him—without spot or stain’**” (*RH*, May 30, 1907).

# Theological implications

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- ⦿ This does not mean the call to be perfect is merely rhetorical or that we should not...
  - seek perfection,
  - obey God's commandments or do good works,
  - grow in sanctification.
- ⦿ But, there will never be perfection without God's grace.

# Theological implications

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- ◉ It is only when we acknowledge our impossibility that God's possibilities come into play.
  - “For man this is impossible, but for God all things are possible” (Matt 19:26).
- ◉ Perfection in Matt 5:48:
  - Sinlessness or unrestricted love?
  - Relative or absolute?
  - A command or a promise?

# Conclusion

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- ◉ Matt 5:48 has nothing to do with moral perfection as defined by perfectionism.
- ◉ Even if we define perfection as maturity or completeness, this is not a human achievement.
- ◉ Human perfection must, then, be relative—that which a sinful human being is really able to achieve by the grace of God.

# Appendix

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- ◉ “We should remember that our own ways are not faultless. We make mistakes again and again. . . . No one is perfect but Jesus. Think of Him and be charmed away from yourself” (*TMK*, 136).
- ◉ “No one who claims holiness is really holy. Those who are registered as holy in the books of heaven are not aware of the fact, and are the last ones to boast of their own goodness” (*FLB*, 140).

# Appendix

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- „Die Behauptung, ohne Sünde zu sein, ist schon an sich ein Beweis, daß der, welcher solche Ansprüche erhebt, weit davon entfernt ist, heilig zu sein. Weil der Mensch keine echte Vorstellung von der unendlichen Reinheit und Heiligkeit Gottes besitzt oder davon, was aus denen werden muß die mit seinem Charakter übereinstimmen sollen;

# Appendix

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- ◉ weil er weder von der Reinheit und erhabenen Lieblichkeit Jesu noch von der Bosheit und dem Unheil der Sünde einen richtigen Begriff hat, darum sieht er sich selbst als heilig an“ (*GK*, 473).

# Appendix

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- “He [Christ] is a perfect and holy example, given for us to imitate. We cannot equal the pattern; but we shall not be approved of God if we do not copy it and, according to the ability which God has given, resemble it” (*Test.*, 2:549).



# Appendix

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- „Vollkommenheit durch unsere eigenen guten Werke können wir niemals erreichen. Wer Jesus im Glauben erblickt, weist seine eigene Gerechtigkeit zurück. Er betrachtet sich als unvollkommen, seine Reue als ungenügend, seinen stärksten Glauben als schwach, sein kostbarstes Opfer als dürftig, und sinkt in Demut am Fuß des Kreuzes nieder. Aber aus dem Wort Gottes spricht eine Stimme zu ihm.

# Appendix

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- ◉ ‚Erstaunt vernimmt er die Botschaft: ‚Ihr seid vollkommen in ihm.‘ Kol 2,10 (KJV). Vgl. Kap. 1,28. Nun hat seine Seele völligen Frieden. Er muss nicht mehr länger suchen, um irgendetwas Wertvolles an sich selbst zu finden, irgendeine verdienstvolle Tat, mit der er sich die Gunst Gottes verdienen müsste.

# Appendix

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- ◉ Indem er ‚Gottes Lamm, das der Welt Sünde trägt‘, betrachtet (Joh 1,29), findet er durch Christus Frieden, denn ‚Begnadigt‘ steht bei seinem Namen geschrieben und er nimmt das Wort Gottes an: ‚Ihr seid vollkommen in ihm.‘“ (*GW*, 112).