

February 19, 2017  
Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18  
Matthew 5:38-48

### Be Perfect Therefore

Be perfect, Jesus tells us today in his Sermon on the Mount. Be perfect, he teaches us. This is the next lesson for those who follow him and want to have life in God's kingdom. Be perfect therefore, he instructs us, as your heavenly father is perfect.

It seems impossible, but not any more impossible than what Jesus has been teaching us. He began by telling us those who are blessed by God.

And it isn't the successful or the ambitious or the important. But the poor in spirit and the meek and the merciful and those who are grieving.

And those who long for peace and righteousness. Next, Jesus instructed us that we must be faithful through and through. That we must not let our hearts contain anger. Or adulterous thoughts. Or deception.

Whatever is not in the heart of God, must not be in our hearts. And today Jesus is telling us that we must be perfect. That we must not seek revenge. That we must turn the other cheek. And go the second mile.

And love our enemies and pray for our persecutors. On second thought,

I take it back. This IS more impossible than anything Jesus has taught before.

Be perfect, Jesus says, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Be flawless. Be without fault. Get everything right, without any mistakes. Don't slip up or you will fail. We feel the pressure to be perfect every day and now here is Jesus telling us he expects perfection too; he expects us to love our enemy AND to be perfect like our heavenly Father. That doesn't sound like good news, it sounds like bad news. It sounds impossible.

That's how this teaching from Jesus sounds. Impossible. We know this world. We know ourselves. And loving our enemies, well, it's just not reasonable. It's just not practical. It's just not possible. But Jesus says, I don't want you to do what is possible. I want you to do what is improbable. What is holy. What is otherworldly, Kingdom of God stuff. I want you to be perfect.

Now 'perfect' is the word we hear Jesus says. It's a complicated word for us in English. The word in Greek, 'teleios', is a bit more nuanced, thank goodness. Teleios means end or result. It means that something has achieved its intended outcome and reached its goal. It is the oak tree

of the acorn. It is the butterfly of the caterpillar. It is the ta-da moment of completion when you are who you were made to be. Be complete, Jesus is saying. Be fulfilled. Be perfect.<sup>1</sup>

Being who you are made to be in Christ, that's what discipleship is all about. Being a disciple is not a qualification. Or a label. Or a possession that we buy. It's a condition. It's a process of becoming, day by day, more like Jesus. As impossible as it may seem. Having the mind of Christ. Having the heart of Christ. Having the Spirit of Christ in us. At school. At work. At home. Always living toward that completed goal. In recent years, I have heard people using the word, 'adulting'. Really, it's a brilliant word. It means doing all the things you do to become an adult. Learning how to pay your cell phone bill. Getting the oil changed in your car. Budgeting for rent and utilities instead of that trip to Cabo San Lucas. Learning to clean out the lint trap in the clothes dryer lest it catch fire. Adulting is what we all have to do, intellectually, socially, emotionally. It's our goal. In the same way, spiritually, we are 'adulting'

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/02/epiphany-7-a-telos/>

as Christians. We are maturing and developing by the deep compassion of God into this impossible and otherworldly Kingdom of people.

Be grown up. Be completed. Be perfect, therefore, Jesus says, as your heavenly father is perfect. Therefore, Jesus says. Be perfect, therefore.

Therefore—notice that key word there. Be perfect, therefore. Why?

Because of the imperfection in the world around us. Because of the immaturity and incompleteness. Because if you love those who love you, what more are you doing? Because if you greet only the brothers and sisters you like, what more are you doing? If you just do what is possible, what more is there to believe in and have hope in?

**THEREFORE** be perfect. And this is how to be perfect and complete:

You have heard it said, an eye for an eye. But I say to you: do not resist an evildoer. You have heard to said, love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you.

There is more to God's love than the juvenile love of the world. You can do the impossible if you practice. Because practice makes perfect.

First, practice knowing who you are. We have a story, as Christians. We know the beginning of the story and the end. We know God creating all

things in love. And in the end God will restore everything in love. And right now, we are somewhere in the middle of everything. But who we are in that story doesn't change. Who God is doesn't change. The story doesn't change. We are always made in God's image, intended to be God's ambassadors for the kingdom that is to come.

We are ambassadors of God. And we must act accordingly. No matter how childish the world around us is, we must be grown-up. No matter what someone else does, we must live with love. No matter how someone else acts, we must act with grace. There is a parable about a holy man who was practicing his morning meditation under a tree by a river. He noticed that the river was rising, and a scorpion was caught in the roots of the tree nearby. It was about to drown. So the man reached down to free the scorpion. And every time he did so, the scorpion tried to sting him. A man passing by stopped and said to the holy man, "Don't you know that's a scorpion, and it's going to sting you?" The holy man replied, "That may be, but I'm still going to try to save it. I can't let who the scorpion is change who I am."

We are ambassadors of a love that is not changed by hate. We are ambassadors of a hope that is not undone by evil, but overcomes evil with good. That overcomes the cross; that overcomes the grave. That overcomes darkness with light and life. We know who we are. And secondly, we must practice knowing who we are not. We must practice not being people who seek revenge. We must practice not being those who love only those who love us. We are not like Gentiles and tax collectors who refuse to grow up.

Therefore, says Jesus, therefore, turn the other cheek, when someone strikes you. Go the second mile, when you have to go one. Give to whoever asks. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you.

The world says this is weakness. They see it as dangerous surrender in a violent world. Because there are only two ways in life. You eat or you are eaten. You oppress or you are oppressed. You are the powerful or the powerless. But Jesus says there is another way, a Third Way, as theologian Walter Wink calls it.<sup>2</sup> It is a way that opposes evil without

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Wink, *Violence and Nonviolence in South Africa: Jesus' Third Way*, Walter Wink, 1987, 22-23.

mirroring it. Turning the other cheek is not cowering in fear, it is resistance. Going the second mile is not submitting to the enemy, it is resistance. Giving your cloak when someone demands your coat isn't surrender, it is resistance.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr used this third way to resist racial injustice.

He made it clear that his movement was not about submission but about meeting oppressive power with an equal spiritual power. He wrote in 1957, that the goal was not to defeat an enemy “but to win his friendship and understanding... [What we do] awakens a sense of shame within the oppressor but the end is reconciliation. The end is redemption.”<sup>3</sup> This is God's goal. Our hope is God's hope. We are not victims or oppressors. There is another way.

As disciples of Jesus, we must practice being who we are and knowing who we are not. We must practice because practice makes perfect.

That's the third point. We must practice giving the benefit of the doubt.

We must practice not jumping to conclusions. We must practice

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King Jr Speech, YMCA/YWCA at the University of California on June 4, 1957

remembering that God sends rain on the just and the unjust and that God cares about all people and desires redemption for them all. Our goal is believing the impossible. That God can do the impossible. That God can take any Good Friday and make it Easter Sunday. And practice makes perfect.

Julio Diaz, a 31-year-old social worker always ended his day at his favorite diner in the Bronx. One night as he stepped off his train and walked toward the stairs that led up to his favorite restaurant destination, a teenage boy approached him and pulled out a knife. Diaz said, "He wanted my money, so I just gave him my wallet and told him, 'Here you go.'" As the teen began to walk away, Diaz said, "Hey, wait a minute. You forgot something. If you're going to be robbing people for the rest of the night, you might as well take my coat to keep you warm." Diaz said later that the would-be robber looked at his would-be victim, "like what's going on here?" "He asked me, 'Why are you doing this?'" Diaz replied: "If you're willing to risk your freedom for a few dollars, then I guess you must really need the money. I mean, all I wanted to do was get dinner and if you really want to join me ... hey, you're more than

welcome.” Diaz said: "You know, I just felt maybe he really needed help," So, Diaz and the teen went into the diner and sat in a booth. "The manager came by, the dishwashers came by, the waiters came by just to say hi," Diaz said. "The kid was like, 'You know everybody here. Do you own this place?'" I told him, No, I just eat here a lot. "He says, 'But you're even nice to the dishwasher.'" I told him: "Well, haven't you been taught you should be nice to everybody?" "Yea," said the kid, "but I didn't think people actually behaved that way." Diaz then asked the boy what he wanted out of life. "He just had almost a sad face," Diaz said. The teenager couldn't answer Diaz — or he didn't want to. When the bill arrived, Diaz said, "Look, I guess you're going to have to pay for this 'cause you have my money and I can't pay for this. So if you give me my wallet back, I'll gladly treat you." The teenager "didn't even think about it" and returned the wallet, Diaz said. "I gave him \$20 ... I figure maybe it'll help him. I don't know." Diaz said he asked for something in return — the teenager's knife — "and he gave it to me," Diaz said. "I figure,

you know, if you treat people right, you can only hope that they treat you right. It's as simple as it gets in this complicated world."<sup>4</sup>

Be ambassadors of God. Turn the other cheek. Go the second mile. Give your coat if someone asks for your wallet. Love your enemy. Pray for your persecutor. Be grown up and mature in faith. Practice, practice, practice the impossible. Believing in the redemption of all of God's creation. Perfect, therefore, as our heavenly Father is perfect.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.npr.org/2008/03/28/89164759/a-victim-treats-his-mugger-right>