

A Sermon  
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## **The Perfect Father**

Matthew 5:38-48

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48). Can Jesus possibly set the bar any higher? It's certainly a fitting climax to the way that Jesus has been elevating what he expects of his disciples. So far in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has spoken mostly in antitheses. In each antithesis, he starts out, "You have heard that it was said. . . ." He then quotes a portion of Jewish law and teaching, followed by, "But I tell you. . . ." In each case, Jesus isn't rejecting or setting aside the ancient teaching. Actually, he takes the teaching and intensifies its demands. He takes it up a notch, and tells his followers that what many of the respectable, religious folks are doing to obey the law isn't enough. They've set the bar too low. When it comes to righteousness, Jesus tells his disciples that they need to go above and beyond.

So Jesus isn't just tossing impossible ideals out there to see how his listeners will react. No, he's stating his expectations about how his followers will actually behave. He intends for them to do these things that seem beyond their capability, like not losing your temper, like avoiding lust and staying strong in your marriage, like keeping all your promises, like turning the other cheek, like giving away your possessions, and like not retaliating but instead loving those who hate and harm you. These are things we're meant to embody, to put into practice. Otherwise, Jesus wouldn't begin drawing the Sermon on the Mount to a close by insisting that those who merely call him Lord will not enter the kingdom, but only those who actually do the will of the Father (7:21-23). And he certainly wouldn't close his earthly ministry and commission his followers by teaching us to make disciples who "obey everything I have commanded you" (28:20), including what he says in the Sermon on the Mount.

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Jesus really does intend for us to be perfect. He's not using his teaching primarily as a way of just painting a hopeful picture in the minds of his hearers. Rather, he's giving a command-by-command description of how his followers should obey the will of God, and thereby reflect the very character and purpose of God. I like the way C. S. Lewis put it when he wrote: "I find a good many people bothered by . . . our Lord's words, 'Be ye perfect.' Some people seem to think this means 'Unless you are perfect, I will not help you'; and as we cannot be perfect, then . . . our position is hopeless. But I do not think he did mean that. I think he meant 'The only help I will give is help to become perfect. You may want something less: but I will give you nothing less.'"<sup>1</sup> Jesus really does intend to move us toward perfection. That's his will for those who want to follow him and be with him.

But this doesn't happen apart from the reality of God's kingdom. That's the framework in which we need to hear what Jesus is saying. He's not just giving us a set of rules that we can use to take the present world and make it a better place. He's actually describing the way things work in a different world, the world called the kingdom of God. In the realm of God's reign, which has come into this present world through Christ, conventional human ways of understanding and behaving don't prevail. Instead, God's ways prevail. This means that we who are disciples of Jesus belong to a different realm. We live in a different

world. In contrast to the present world that's passing away, we don't just return love for love and hate for hate. On the contrary, we manifest the life of God's kingdom, in the here and now, such that God's will is on display in us and through us to the world.

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Not perfect compared to others in the fellowship of disciples, or perfect compared to others in the larger world. That's not what Jesus means. That approach to perfection sounds more like what author Max Lucado describes when he looks back on part of his own upbringing. Lucado writes:

All of us occasionally do what is right. A few predominately do what is right. But do any of us always do what is right? According to Paul we don't. "There is none righteous, no, not one" (Rom. 3:10, NKJV).

Some may beg to differ. "I'm not perfect, Max, but I'm better than most folks. I've led a good life. I don't break the rules. I don't break hearts. I help people. I like people. Compared to others, I think I could say I'm a righteous person."

I used to try that on my mother. She'd tell me that my room wasn't clean, and I'd ask her to go with me to my brother's room. His was always messier than mine. "See, my room is clean; just look at his."

Never worked. She'd walk me down the hall to her room. When it came to tidy rooms, my mom was righteous. Her closet was just right. Her bed was just right. Her bathroom was just right. Compared to hers, my room was, well, just wrong. She would show me her room and say, "This is what I mean by clean."

God does the same. He points to himself and says, "This is what I mean by righteousness."<sup>2</sup>

As we assess our own righteousness in the light of God's righteousness, it's important to remember that Jesus' words about perfection are addressed to the community of his disciples. He's not just speaking to isolated individual believers who are thinking, "Sure, I'm not perfect, but have you peeked into the condition of so and so's soul lately? By comparison, my spiritual life looks pretty clean and organized." That's not how Jesus approaches spiritual development. Instead, Jesus knows that progress toward perfection is a community project, not just a personal quest based on side-by-side comparison with fellow disciples.

This is confirmed by the terminology Jesus uses in our Scripture passage. "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Some of you may have learned Jesus' injunction in the King James Version: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." "Be ye perfect." "Ye" is plural, instead of the singular form "thou." In many of our contemporary English translations, the plural form of Jesus' command gets obscured. We tend to hear it as if Jesus is addressing each of us individually, strictly one-on-one. But interestingly, one of the ways Jesus' intention gets preserved is through the way that someone in or from the American South might render it: "You all (or Ya'll) be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

So we need to hear Jesus' command as interdependent members of the body of Christ, who need one another and rely upon one another in order to grow into God's purpose for us. Perfection is something we move toward together, not just individually. True, there's a place for individual development. We don't all make the same kind of spiritual progress at the same pace. The rate of maturity can vary from one person to another. But even so, each person's movement toward maturity is intertwined with the lives of others in the congregation.

Notice that I'm speaking of perfection in terms of growth and maturity. In our text, the Greek term translated as "perfect" doesn't primarily mean sinless, spotless, or spiritually flawless. Rather, it's a word that has to do with an end or goal. In other words, the kind of perfection Jesus is talking about means the condition of being fully mature, all grown up. It means reaching the end or the goal of human life under God and in relationship with God. It means becoming what a son or daughter of God is supposed to be, namely, a spitting image of your heavenly Father, whose love reaches out to all for reconciliation and restoration. That's the end. That's the goal. That's perfection.

Early in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that he has come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. That is, he is here to bring God's commands to their goal. And at the heart of that goal is God's people acting the way that God acts. As one commentator has pointed out, so much of the Sermon of the Mount, especially today's text, is grounded in the assertion that "this is the way that God is, and therefore this is the way we ought to be."<sup>3</sup>

And what is God like? Jesus answers that question this way: "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (v. 45b). God loves all impartially, and reaches out to everyone with life-giving power and life-sustaining conditions, including those who are opposed to his goodness. This God who gives the blessings of nature to all people does the same thing with his mercy. He isn't forgiving toward some and vengeful toward others. He doesn't just welcome those who welcome him. He doesn't just love those who love him, and hate those who hate him.

There was a child who once made me a small gift and hung it on my office door knob. It was a heart, cut out of a styrofoam plate, decorated with stickers of a butterfly, a kitten, and some flowers. In the middle were the words, "God Loves Me." As I read those words back to the child, she said, "God doesn't just love me. He loves everybody." I thought to myself, "This child gets it. She understands the expansive, extravagant mercy of God toward all of us sinners." "God doesn't just love me. He loves everybody." And then she added, "Except the ones who don't care about him." Naturally I couldn't let the conversation end there. I stayed all theological and tried to stress that God's mercy doesn't have exceptions. He loves those who don't care about him, just as much as those who do.

Loving our enemies, and dealing in mercy with those who hate or harm us. Practicing stunning and indiscriminate acts of generosity and goodness to all, without exception. Being sons and daughters of God. Sharing in God's very nature. You can't set the bar any higher than that. It appears to be beyond our reach. Yet Jesus expects and commands us to do so. In and of ourselves, we're not capable of such deep, impartial, and peculiar love. But we have the empowering grace of God, and the indwelling presence of Christ, to move us toward God's goal and to perfect our love, so that it looks more and more like God's love.

In one of his hymns, Charles Wesley writes: "A heart in every thought renewed / And full of love divine, / Perfect and right and pure and good, / A copy, Lord, of thine."<sup>4</sup> The Lord's perfect heart, copied in our own. That's the goal, the purpose, of the Lord's commands. Jesus says, "Whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (5:19). "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reader*, Vol. 33, No. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Max Lucado, *Traveling Light* (Waco: Word, 2001) n.p.

<sup>3</sup> William H. Willimon, "Between Text and Sermon: Matthew 5:43-48," *Interpretation* (January 2003) 62.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Wesley, "O for a Heart to Praise My God."