

## “BEING PERFECT”

Matthew 5:38-48

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany (Series A)

February 19, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Seventh Sunday after Epiphany comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 5, verses 38 through 48. It is on page 684 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus teaches us our heavenly Father’s standard of perfection. Please stand as you are able for the gospel. From Matthew 5, we begin reading at verse 38.

<sup>38</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ <sup>39</sup> But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. <sup>40</sup> And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. <sup>41</sup> And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. <sup>42</sup> Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

<sup>43</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ <sup>44</sup> But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. <sup>46</sup> For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? <sup>48</sup> You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*  
You may be seated.

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What does God want from us? Have you ever asked that question? Maybe you’ve been trying really hard to do the right thing. Maybe you even feel like you’ve been succeeding—like you’re doing a good job for once. But nothing seems to go your way. You’ve been doing your best, and you figure that should be enough for God; he should help you out a little, as if our circumstances are the direct result of our performance. But things don’t get better. Maybe they even get worse. Something goes wrong, and you don’t think it’s fair. So you say, “God, what do you want from me?”

That’s a good question. What does God want from us? What does he require?

You know what God wants?

Perfection.

And to say, simply, that God *wants* perfection, isn’t quite strong enough. God *requires* it. It’s not a request. It’s a requirement. God demands perfection. We just heard Jesus say, “**You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect**” (5:48).

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This is the conclusion to Jesus’ “**But I say to you**” statements. There are six of them in Matthew 5. We read four of them last week and two of them just now. Six times Jesus says

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something like, “You have heard that it was said ..., ‘You shall not murder ...’ But I say to you, ‘[Do not even be angry, and do not insult your brother].’” (5:21-22)

Last week we also heard Jesus say similar things about adultery, divorce, and breaking oaths. And this week we heard Jesus say similar things about retaliation and hating our enemies.

In all six of these statements, Jesus teaches the full meaning of God’s Law, and he abolishes any false interpretations.

Three of the times Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said,” the statements are direct quotations from Scripture. “You shall not murder” (Ex. 20:13; Deut. 5:17), “You shall not commit adultery” (Ex. 20:14; Deut. 5:18), and “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21) are straight out of the Old Testament. In these cases, Jesus upholds the teaching of the Old Testament and builds on these statements, bringing out the full meaning of the Law.

The other three statements are not direct quotations from the Old Testament. They are more like false interpretations of the Law. Over the course of 1,400 years, teachers had figured out clever ways to twist the Law in order to make it easier to keep. So in these cases, Jesus abolishes the false interpretations and returns us to the correct interpretation, which is always closest to the actual words of Scripture.

So in all six of the “But I say to you” statements, Jesus upholds the teaching of the Old Testament and brings out the full meaning of the Law. And the full meaning of the Law turns out to be really hard to keep, especially when Jesus wraps it all up by saying, “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

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So perfection. That’s what God is looking for.

Perfection isn’t something we think about very much, because it’s just not very easy. You make one minor mistake, and perfection is gone. If I applied the standard of perfection to my woodworking projects, I would never finish any of them. I would get frustrated, throw them all away, and just give up. “Good enough” is much more attainable than perfection.

So we usually don’t measure ourselves against the standard of perfection. We usually measure ourselves against a movable target, like our personal best. Or we measure ourselves against someone else.

In sports, success isn’t measured by perfection. You don’t have to be perfect in order to win. You just have to be better than the other guy. And this applies to many things in life, not just sports. Success usually just means we are better than someone else.

Even when we do use the word *perfect*, we’re usually not talking about real perfection. We’re usually talking about something that is just “kind of perfect.”

In baseball one of the greatest individual accomplishments is called “a perfect game.” That’s when the pitcher retires every batter for the entire game. He gets everyone out. No runs, no hits, no walks, no errors, no nothing. Nobody gets to first base. In nine innings the pitcher faces twenty-seven batters and he gets them all out. It’s a perfect game.

But I’ve always found it kind of funny that a pitcher can get a perfect game without actually being perfect. In fact, he can make a lot of mistakes and still be called perfect. He can groove a fastball down the middle of the plate that gets hit high and deep to centerfield. But if the centerfielder makes a leaping catch to rob a homerun, then the perfect game is saved. The

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other team can hit the ball hard as many times as they want, but if the fielders always make the play, the pitcher gets a perfect game. He can throw a lot of pitches out of the strike zone, but as long as he doesn't walk anyone, it's a perfect game. If he hits the batter with a pitch, the perfect game is over. But if he misses so badly that he hits the batter in the on deck circle, the perfect game is still alive. He can make a lot of mistakes and still get a perfect game.

So a perfect game that is actually perfect would be more like this: you never miss the strike zone, and the batter never even makes contact with the ball. Every batter strikes out on three pitches. So ... nine innings, no runs, no hits, no walks; just twenty-seven strikeouts on exactly eighty-one pitches—all of them strikes. As far as I know, this has never happened, and I don't think it ever will. Why? Because nobody's perfect.

This level of perfection just doesn't exist, because nobody's perfect. So we lower the bar. Even when we talk about perfection, we really just mean, “about as good as anyone can reasonably expect.”

But God expects more. God doesn't lower the bar. For God, *perfection* really does mean “perfection.” No mistakes.

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Now, when Jesus says, “**You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect,**” he's not talking about sports. He's talking about morality. In the six “**But I say to you**” statements leading up to this, he is teaching what God's Law requires of us. And what does Jesus say concerning these laws and all the others? “**Be perfect.**” That's what God is looking for—perfection in every respect—absolute moral perfection in thought, word, and deed.

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So let's look at the last two “**But I say to you**” statements and see what perfection looks like. “**You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil.**” (5:38-39)

Jesus tells us to *not* seek revenge. And it's not just revenge he tells us to give up on, but justice too. That's what “Eye for eye” and “Tooth for tooth” means. It's justice. Jesus tells us to not seek justice for ourselves.

Now, this one gives us a bit of trouble, because “Eye for eye” and “Tooth for tooth” are straight from Scripture. And these words show up not just once, but three times in the Old Testament (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21). So this is the one “**But I say to you**” statement where it seems like Jesus might be contradicting the Old Testament Law.

But he's not, and here's why: In the Old Testament Law, “Eye for eye” and “Tooth for tooth” are applied to how Israel's society was supposed to function. They were instructions for how God wanted Israel's government to function. These were laws for a particular nation at a particular time and in a particular place. It was like their bill of rights or legal code. We call it the “civil law.”

So “Eye for eye” and “Tooth for tooth” is a principle of justice that gave the leaders of cities a standard for resolving disputes between citizens. If you accidentally killed someone's ox, the law required you to replace the ox. Eye for eye. Tooth for tooth. Ox for ox. As part of the civil law, this principle ensured justice.

But we run into trouble if we take this principle of justice out of the government's hands and into our own. That is, if we apply it to the moral law, which is God's will of how we as individuals are to behave.

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So “Eye for eye” and “Tooth for tooth” was intended to prevent retaliation. But if you take it out of the civil law and ignore the government’s role in justice, then you use it to justify retaliation, when the law is really supposed to prevent that.

So when someone wrongs us, we let the government worry about justice. That’s their job. Jesus teaches us to let the moral law govern our behavior. And in the moral law, “Love your neighbor” is king. So we turn the other cheek. We give more than what is demanded. And we do more than we have to. It’s simply a matter of loving your neighbor.

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The difficulty, of course, is that we don’t like all of our neighbors equally. In fact, some of them, we really don’t like at all. It is easy to love the neighbors who are good to us. But it is much harder to love the neighbors who act more like enemies.

So Jesus says, “**You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.**” (5:43-44)

So, “Love your neighbor” is a direct quotation from the Old Testament. That much is true. But “Hate your enemy” is definitely not. This is another misinterpretation of God’s Law. And Jesus exposes it. Nowhere are we given the right to hate anyone.

The word *neighbor* is an all-inclusive term. Enemies are included in the term *neighbor*. People who hate us, persecute us, or wish to cause us harm—they are our neighbors. People who simply disagree with us or may be different from us—they, also, are our neighbors. So Jesus calls us to love them.

This is hard. It’s easy enough to love people who are good to us. But it’s much harder to love people who are evil to us. But that’s the point. What credit do you have if you are good to the people who are already good to you? Virtually everybody already does that. It’s no big deal. But love—real sacrificial love—is doing good to *all* people, even those who might not be good to us. That is the kind of love Jesus wants from his disciples. And it is the kind of love that demonstrates *his* love to the world around us.

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So by the time Jesus gets to the end of his sixth “**But I say to you**” statement, we realize that the bar for obedience to the Law is really high. God is asking us to do some very difficult things. And how does Jesus wrap up these difficult commandments? He says, “**You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**”

From this standard of perfection we learn three things. And this is the whole point of the sermon. First, we learn about God’s will for our lives. We learn that God is serious about these commandments. He wants us to obey them. I don’t know how to make that clearer.

But second, we learn the painful truth that we don’t measure up. We do not attain this standard of perfection. This leaves us in a difficult spot. It means we are transgressors of God’s Law. It means we are under condemnation.

But third, we also learn something about God from this. We learn something about his nature. “**You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**”

These commandments teach us something about God’s nature and his actions.

When God asks us to love our enemies, he’s not asking us to do something that he himself is unwilling to do. The very opposite is true. He practices what he preaches. He gives us the ultimate example of loving his enemies. And this ends up being the solution to our imperfection problem.

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By our disobedience to God’s Law we have set ourselves as his enemies. But pay attention to God’s standard of perfection: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” So how does God demonstrate this righteousness? I want you to think of this not only as a command of how we should behave—it certainly is that—but also think of it as a revelation of God’s behavior. And remember, God’s not asking us to do anything he’s not willing to do. God calls us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, because that is exactly what he did for us.

When we find ourselves to be enemies of God because of our own disobedience, think of how Jesus prayed for those who persecuted him: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

And consider the way God loves his enemies. These verses come from Romans 5:

“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.” (Rom. 5:6-10)

God loved his enemies—that is, you and me—by sending his Son, Jesus Christ, to die for us. His blood justifies us. God declares his enemies to be righteous, and so we cease to be his enemies and are now called his friends. For this reason, we also have the sure and certain hope that we will share in the blessings of Jesus’ resurrection as well.

This, and only this, can truly comfort our consciences. This, and only this, causes us to stand before God in Jesus’ perfect righteousness.

God demands perfection from you. And so he gives you the perfection of Jesus.

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So what does this mean for God’s Law? Does it mean we are just off the hook? Was the first 80% of this sermon irrelevant? No. God still desires for us to keep his Law. That never changes. What changes is that God judges our performance, not by what we do, but by what Jesus has done for us. So the point is more like this: *As God has loved us, so we also must go and love our enemies.* This is the will of God. And this is the promise of God. Amen.

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The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all (2 Cor. 13:14). Amen.