

Holy? Perfect? Really?
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
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Scripture: Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18
Matthew 5:38-48

A colleague in ministry told this story at a luncheon last week. It seems he was working on his sermon on Saturday when his grandson asked him what he was doing.

"I am working on my sermon," the pastor said. "You know, what I say to the people when I stand up and talk in church."

"What are you going to tell them?" the grandson asked. To which the pastor replied, "I'm going to tell them about Jesus."

"That's a good thing to say," the boy said. "Tell them that Jesus loves them."

Recognizing that the boy was onto something, and recognizing that the shoe was on the other foot, the pastor took the role of the one asking the questions.

"*Who* does Jesus love?" he asked.

"Jesus loves you and me and my sister and my mom and dad," the boy was quick to say. "Jesus even loves bad people."

"But," said the grandfather pastor, "*why* does Jesus love the bad people?"

The boy looked at his grandfather as if to wonder why he didn't understand the obvious. "Well," the boy said, "Jesus loves the bad people because he wants to make them good."

How does the scripture go? "And a little child shall lead them"

That little boy's understanding that Jesus can love the "bad people" enough to make them "good" speaks volumes about the transformational love of God. It also reminds us that the love of God in Christ is relentless. God doesn't give up. God doesn't settle for something less. God's love is uncompromising. Such is God's untiring grace.

The 19th century poet Francis Thompson wrote a poem that describes God's dogged pursuit of us called The Hound of Heaven. It opens with these lines as the author recounts how he ran from God:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears

The last line of the poem says that God drives love from us in how God drives after us, like a hound of heaven, relentless, untiring, uncompromising. Such is God's grace.

For the last three weeks we have been considering the Ten Commandments and their role in our 21st-century faith journeys. You've listened now to sixty minutes worth of my sermons about the Decalogue. But it's OK if their very mention still brings up mixed feelings. Many adults, perhaps subconsciously, still associate the commandments with childhood Sunday school lessons. The commandments still may stir thoughts and associations with the God of tough love and stern discipline, at least initially.

But as we close this series, I invite you to think about the commandments today as a sign of God's abiding grace, God's promise to never leave our side. No matter how long it takes for us to wake up to the depth of God's love, the "Hound of Heaven" pursues us until we respond with the greatest love that we can muster, for God and for our neighbors. Remember, after all, that God's introduction to the commandments, God's preamble, is a reminder that God brought Israel out of slavery in the land of Egypt. Such is God's grace.

Years after God gave Moses the two tablets, the people of Israel built a code of living based on their general outline for living. It's human nature to take almost anything good too far, and the Hebrews did that. They took what was initially only a few sentences and turned them into the book of Leviticus, a virtual library of laws that applied to every aspect of how Israel worshipped, ate, drank, slept and lived together. Somewhere in their zeal to please God, the people of Israel forgot the adage that sometimes less is more.

We heard the heart of what is known as the "Holiness Code" in our reading from Leviticus. It echoes the Decalogue and reinforces God's expectations of God's people: that they leave room for the poor and the alien to glean the fields rather than starve; that they shall not steal or lie or deal falsely with each other; that laborers be treated fairly by their overseers; that the poor be treated fairly in all things; and, that the people should

not bear grudges or take vengeance, instead loving their neighbors as they love themselves.

As we heard, each of these laws in the holiness code is punctuated with the gentle – or maybe not so gentle – reminder of their author: “I am the Lord.”

But, over the ensuing centuries, the written word proved to be not enough. God’s people strayed. They wouldn’t let go of their idols, idols of all kinds. Power became corrupt. Injustice gained the upper hand and God’s chosen people were scattered.

So, because the written word was not enough, God came into the world as the living Word, Christ Jesus. And Jesus raised the bar for God’s people even higher. Early on in his ministry, Jesus climbed a mountain and spoke to the people in a radical reinterpretation of what the people had heard before. No remedial course in God’s ways. No dilution of the law to make it a little easier for God’s people to obey. No dumbing down of God’s standards. Quite the opposite.

In Matthew 5 we hear Jesus say over and over, ‘You have heard the Law spoken for years, but I am here to tell you that there is a new deal, that God in heaven has even larger plans – and expectations - for you.’

Turn the other cheek. Give your cloak as well as your coat. Go the extra mile. Refuse no request to borrow money. And then there is the one that perhaps the most difficult of all.

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, so that you may be children of your God in heaven. (Matthew 5:43-45)

And that’s where it gets so hard, right? We want to talk back to Jesus, like a teenager saying something under our breath:

“No fair, Jesus. No fair!”

We can go the extra mile. We can give and lend money. We can hand our coat to someone who needs it. We can even turn the other cheek (sometimes). But don’t ask us to give up our love of our enemies!

They are those people who see the world so differently. They don’t do church and read the Bible like we do. They support policies and politicians, treat their neighbors and

spend their money in ways we just cannot respect or even sometimes understand. They run companies that make too much profit and give not enough back. They treat their workers unjustly. They misuse power.

Let us get this straight. You call us to be disciples, to care for the poor and the oppressed, to speak for the voiceless, to oppose injustice. We understand that. We're in.

But love our enemies? Let go of our anger? Give up the resentment that we savor like chocolate? Stop defining who we are by how we judge others?

Slow down, sweet Jesus. Surely, you don't mean there is a way to *love* these people? We're on your side, after all, and surely you are on *ours*. Let's think this through, Jesus, please!

And that, friends, is where it gets so tempting to read something different into this text in Matthew 5. To justify our attitudes and actions by telling ourselves that Jesus was really just trying to motivate us to do better than we otherwise would, but not really do the things he says. He can't mean it literally, we tell ourselves.

Or maybe we tell ourselves that Jesus was talking to a particular people in a particular time, persecuted Christians who had plenty of bad people after them. That was then, we think. Jesus would say something different in today's ambiguous, complex world.

Or, we might invoke the "G word." We promise to do our best and, at the same time, tell ourselves that God's grace compensates for those times when we fall short, and that lets us off the hook. God is God, after all. We're just human. We have our limitations. But that response only cheapens the grace of the cross of Christ.

So, what can we do?

We can go back to what Jesus actually said. Jesus doesn't tell the disciples and his followers that their enemies are right in what they do. He doesn't try to pretend away that his followers are being persecuted. He doesn't defend the persecutors. Jesus also doesn't say that we are wrong to feel the things we inevitably feel – anger, resentment, disappointment. Those aren't the most positive emotions, but Jesus doesn't say we can just not feel those feelings. As one who was both fully divine and fully human, Jesus knew those feelings.

But when it comes to acting out of those feelings, that is a different matter:

First, Jesus says we are to love enemies with *agape* love, the love that is possible only with God. *Agape* is not a love we can muster by ourselves; we will only fall short. Nor does *agape* love help us manufacture affection or conjure up some kind of substitute warm fuzzy that we can speak or magically access but not really mean.

Agape love is the kind of self-giving love seen most supremely in Christ. It is a love that depends on something happening outside of us. It is of divine scope and power. It's bigger than us, however big we think we are.

Second, Jesus tells us to pray for our enemies. That is something we *can* do. Give them – and all the feelings we have for them – up to God. Call for reinforcement by the one who gave us all a design for living in the first place.

Third, Jesus says, be “perfect.”

Perfect? Really, John? Look, I didn't make it up. It's right there in Matthew 5:48, “Be perfect, as your God in heaven is perfect.”

I know what you are thinking. You're thinking, “John, we were with you. We were just beginning to get on board about praying for enemies and giving our worst motivations up to God. We were feeling it, like we could do it. Then you throw perfection at us.”

Well, I didn't. Jesus did. And I agree, if those are your emotional reactions. There that Jesus goes again. It was enough that in Leviticus Moses told the people, on God's behalf, to be holy. Now Jesus ups the ante and commands that we be “perfect.”

Can we be “perfect?” Flawless? Doesn't that fly in the face of all that we know, deep down inside, about our brokenness, our sin.

So, given that reality, is this just fool's errand? Or, maybe, as we said before, Jesus is just trying to motivate us. Maybe Jesus is thinking that by challenging us to be “perfect,” we will get to “very good” or at least “good” and that's better than “average.” That Jesus – he could always be a football coach if this whole Son of God thing doesn't work out.

But none of that is what Jesus is doing in Matthew 5. The word in scripture *is* “perfect” but its meaning is not the same as flawless. It's meaning is “complete,” “mentally and morally mature” and to be of a “full age.”¹ The Greek word in scripture is rooted in the

¹ The New Strong's Complete Dictionary of bible Words

word, *telos*, which means a goal, a point that is aimed at. But the form of that word that Jesus uses describes that state of one who is already there, one who is complete.

So, are we to think of the life of discipleship as something that is really just our best effort? Are we to settle for two steps forward and one step back, being satisfied that we are still one step ahead of where we were? If we love and pray for our enemies every now and then, is that enough?

No, friends, I don't think that is what Jesus has in mind in this passage. Jesus is telling his followers that we are to be as relentless, as untiring, as uncompromising in how we show agape love for all others as God is with us: The same God whose Son came into the world only to be killed; the same God who responded by forgiving our sins and giving us new life and resurrection in Christ.

So, we love God because God first loved us, and the way we love God is by loving others, as God asks in both covenants, the Law and the Gospel.

Thanks be, then, to this Hound of Heaven, who pursues us for as long as it takes for us to reach completion.

Thanks be to the Son, who, as the boy said, can love even bad people into being good.

Thanks be to the Holy Spirit, that enables us to "agape" love all of our neighbors, even our enemies.

Amen.