

TO BE PERFECT

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME
SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2014
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
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MATTHEW 5:38-48

When I last preached on perfection, the lovely ladies who took care of putting the weekly sermon title on the board out front of the church where I used to preach had a discussion. One of them, with a fine sense of mischief and humor and irony, wanted to misspell the word “perfect.” I didn’t check to see if it got misspelled or not, but I thought that grasped the great truth that we as Calvinists, Presbyterians, part of the Reformed tradition, understand so well.

We believe in sin. We believe, as the Psalmist put it so well he said it several times, that there is none that is righteous. We believe as the Apostle Paul told the Romans that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

We believe that only Jesus Christ lived a perfect and sinless life

Indeed, a young man was once expelled from seminary because he refused to believe that. A son of the Confederacy, he was convinced that Robert E. Lee lived a life without sin.

Now there are other denominations in other traditions that believe otherwise. They believe that holiness and sanctification and perfection are possible in this life. Well, my personal perspective has always been that if we were able to live a perfect life, we’d be so proud of ourselves that we’d commit the sin of pride, and therefore deny and refute it.

This morning’s sermon is part of a month-long series based on the Sermon on the Mount. I wish that we could know the inflections, the emphases, the pauses, even the facial expressions, that Jesus used when He spoke these words. I wish we could know if He laughed out loud, or chuckled, or smiled, or shook His head in dismay. But we cannot.

So we are left to interpret. And I’ve enlisted the greatest Biblical interpreter of the 20th century as a resource in this sermon series, the late George Buttrick, who edited *The Interpreter’s Bible*, and though dozens of scholars contributed to the twelve volume set, he himself wrote the commentary on Matthew.

We have as our text this morning the final three of the six new laws that Jesus gave.

The first is the New Law on Oaths and Truthfulness in Speech.

Now I've been in a courtroom when witnesses were being sworn in, when one was asked to place a hand on the Bible, raise the other hand and swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And I've seen people demur from doing that from religious convictions based on this passage. The citation here is not an exact quotation from any Old Testament passage, but summarizes the teachings of Leviticus 19:12, Exodus 20:7, Deuteronomy 5:11, Numbers 30:3 and Deuteronomy 23:22.

Interestingly enough, I've heard this passage quoted (slightly out of context) as an argument against profanity or obscene language, and I think that is a worthy stretch. Sherman Johnson notes that: "Instead of inculcating greater fidelity to oaths, Jesus sweeps away the whole mechanics of swearing. The very taking of oaths presumes that men frequently lie and will not tell the truth unless they are compelled to do so. But Jesus followers must be completely truthful. (*IBC, p.300*)

Buttrick adds: "If lying had not become a habit, there would be no need for oaths." (*Ibid.*)

Sadly, in the world in which we live today, truth is not only stranger than fiction, it is rarer. I had a judge tell me years ago that he assumed that both sides were lying in every case he heard, and it was his job to figure out which side was lying the most and rule against them. Since he ruled against the side I testified for, I guess that tells you what he thought of me.

I've had salesmen lie to me about cars which I was buying when the deal was already done. I've had a mechanic tell me three conflicting lies about why my car wasn't ready when it was supposed to be, right in a row, as though I got to pick which one I wanted to believe.

James in his Epistle restates what Jesus said here: "Let your yes be yes and your no be no." (5:12) Would that we could all be that definite, that honest, that honorable. But we are all liars, all utterers of falsehoods, all tellers of tales.

It is just yet another sin of which we must repent and be forgiven.

The fifth new law is the New Law on Revenge.

“The world of Jesus’ day was under the law of retaliation. The Mosaic Law, the Code of Hammurabi, the Roman law all required that the wrongdoer should ‘get as good as he gave.’” (p.301) It is counter to our instincts and to those laws to do what Jesus suggests here: to turn the other cheek is to add injury to insult. To give more than sought in a law suit is ridiculous. And it was the custom in those days for the Roman army to impress citizens to carry their armor, weapons, gear, a mile at a time. To agree to do so for a second mile was working harder than expected or being kinder than required.

Yet that is what Jesus expects of us. The prophet Isaiah had said the “vengeance is mine, I shall repay, thus saith the Lord.” Therefore, retaliation, revenge, vengeance is God’s alone

And to love one’s enemy? That one is impossible!

Yet that is the sixth and final new law: The New Law on Love: Love your enemies.

We see the hatred between those who have sworn enmity in the world today: between Jews and Arabs, between Christians and Muslims, between North and South Korea (they learned that one from us!), between Gator fans and Seminole fans.

Johnson notes that the world translated here as love originally meant “to welcome, entertain, be well pleased, contented. It “denotes the love of God for man and of man for God, and the benevolent loving kindness which seeks the material and spiritual good of others.” (p.303)

Jesus is quite clear that we are to love our enemies. That to love only those we like, to love only those who love us, is the way of the world, and not the way of the kingdom of God.

Jesus ends this teaching with the sentence: which is in the future tense. It does not say, as do many translations, “You must” be perfect. It says “you shall be perfect.”

Does that mean that if we fulfill all these laws, we shall be perfect? I suspect it does.

I heard someone say that the only way we could ever be perfect is in our love, and since God’s love is perfect, if we love like God, we can be perfect in our love.

A final word from the esteemed Professor Buttrick: “But it still seems irony. Are we, frail dust, to be perfect—we, beset by such perversity that we burn our fingers a hundred times in the same fire; we tormented by a guilty past? It seems like demanding higher mathematics from a child who has not yet mastered the ‘two-times’ table. But the saying is in the spirit of this whole passage, and Jesus does not mock us....Plainly, Jesus is bidding us press on into God’s light. “(Pages 303-305)

As Robert Browning put it, “A man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?”

We are called, nay, commanded, by Jesus, in the new law of love, not only to love one another, not only to love the stranger, the one we haven’t met yet, but to love those who oppose, despise, persecute, even execute us.

There is a word for those who love like that: saints.

But the word saint, which we have come to apply to those who achieve that degree of perfection beyond the grasp of the rest of us, is the word that is applied to all who believe. If we believe, we must strive. Not to be perfect in our thoughts, our words, our deeds, but yes, that, too, but to be perfect in our love, to truly love as God in Christ loved us.

Let us pray.

O Lord of love, we are sinners, far from perfect. And yet you have told us that we shall be perfect. Lord, we yearn for that day, when the imperfections of our lives, the things that separate us from being the persons we want to be, are taken away. Help us to heed your law of love, which overcomes the lies and the violence of this world. In your name Jesus we pray. Amen.