

Epiphany 7A, 2011

Text: Matthew 5:38-48

Title: Be Perfect

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Today Jesus gets even more outrageous.

Last week was bad enough- no angry words, no lustful thoughts, no divorce, and no oaths. We all fall short and need to repent.

But today is even worse. These laws are even harder to keep. Let's review...

Don't resist if someone tries to hurt you, in fact, encourage them. Let people take advantage of you, and if they steal, give them more. If someone asks for something, give it to them.

Love your enemies. Those folks in the Middle East who shout, "Death to America!" and who try to kill your kids and grandkids- love them. Those folks who commit drive-by shootings and don't care who gets caught in the crossfire- love them. Whoever your enemy is, whoever you are tempted to hate the most- love them, pray for them, greet them kindly.

In fact, be perfect, be holy, be just like God.

That's it. That's all that Jesus asks.

No way. I can't do it. I can't let people take advantage of me. I can't let people hurt me. I can't let them take my stuff. I can't love those people. I can't pray for them. I can't be perfect. I'm only human, you say.

And once again we try to make excuses, we try to find some wiggle room, some way out. Nobody's perfect, we say. I can't be expected to love those people. Surely this is just a figure of speech. Surely Jesus can't be serious.

But Jesus is serious. This is what God requires of you- perfect love. Jesus is not exaggerating. This is no figure of speech. This is how you are to live.

Because this is how Jesus lived. Jesus fulfilled every one of these words.

Jesus did not resist the evil people. When He was arrested in Gethsemane, Jesus did not fight back. Jesus did not defend himself. Jesus could have called 10,000 angels to fight for him, but he did not. When Peter drew his sword to defend him, Jesus told him to put it away, and then Jesus went peacefully. Jesus did not resist the evil people.

Jesus got slapped around a lot. He was struck with fists and clubs. He was flogged with whips. A crown of thorns was jammed on his head. And Jesus turned the other cheek, and he didn't try to stop them.

The soldiers took everything from Jesus. They took his cloak, and they took his tunic, too. And Jesus hung on the cross, naked, exposed and shamed. And Jesus didn't try to stop them.

Jesus didn't just go part of the way. He went all the way to the cross, down the Via Dolorosa, outside the city, to Gethsemane. Not just one mile, but two.

Jesus gave everything. His possessions. His body. Even His very life. Jesus gave it all.

Jesus loved His enemies- the folks who nailed him to the cross. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." He forgave them. He prayed for them. And that's a good thing.

Because you are an enemy of God. You actively oppose God and His will. Whenever you sin, you are saying to God, "I am the Lord, not you. I know best. I'll do things my way."

You are an enemy of God.

And yet Jesus still loves you. Jesus forgives you. Jesus prays for you.

And Jesus is perfect, just like His heavenly father. The Greek word translated here as "perfect" is complicated. The word is teleios. The best way to describe it is in terms of a goal that has been met, a job that has been completed perfectly.

Think of football team that has met their goal of winning the Super bowl, or a marathon runner who has finished a race. Think of an artist who has completed a masterpiece. Think of a carpenter who has finished building a home. Think of a mother who has just given birth. These are all teleios. They are done, finished, completed, perfected.

Teleios includes that concept of finishing, of completing something great, and doing it perfectly.

Jesus' last word from the cross was tetelestai. It is finished. It is complete. It is perfected. It is teleios. The goal has been accomplished.

Jesus did what we could not do, what we so often fail to do.

Jesus gave of himself, completely, sacrificially. Jesus loved even His enemies and those who persecuted Him.

Jesus does all of this for you. Jesus gave everything for you. Jesus turned the other cheek for you. Jesus went the other mile for you. Jesus loves you, even though you are His enemy. Jesus prays for you. Jesus finished the job perfectly for you.

So when you hear these words, don't try to dodge them or make excuses. Know that perfection is required of you. Do your best to give freely and to love your enemies. And through God's grace, you may be able to do well.

But you will fail and fall short. Then know that Jesus has kept these words for you. He has given everything for you. He loves and forgives and prays for you, even though you are often His enemy.

Come and receive the perfection of Jesus Christ in Holy Baptism, in Holy Absolution, in the Holy Gospel and in the Holy Supper.

In these means of grace, you will be forgiven, perfected, made holy.

But it's not quite finished yet. Jesus finished. You've got a ways to go yet. But know for sure that on the last day, you will be finished, perfected, completed made holy.

When Jesus Christ raises you from the dead, and you are free from sin, free from illness, free from death, He will say once more, it is finished, it is perfect.