

Perfect

Matthew 5:38-48

February 20, 2011

And this is where Jesus takes complete leave of his senses.

He began so well ...

*Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor;
the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them!*

*Happy are those who mourn;
God will comfort them!*

We know all about feeling spiritually weak and empty and needy. We know all about mourning, mourning the disappointments and failures and losses that come to each of us. So it is good news to hear that God sees us, that God cares for us, that God will comfort us, that God will welcome us as we are into his own kingdom. This is good news!

But then it starts to unravel ...

Is it good news to hear that we will be able to enter the kingdom of heaven only if we are more faithful than the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees is doing what God requires?

Is it good news to hear that if you call somebody a fool (even when they're acting like a fool!) that you are no better than a murderer?

Is it good news to hear that if your right hand causes you to sin, you should cut it off? Cut it off? I know this is only a metaphor -- I sure hope Jesus means it only as a metaphor! -- but still! Why talk about cutting off hands and plucking out eyes?

And now this ...

If someone insults you and slaps you on your right cheek, what does Jesus say you should do? Let him slap your left cheek too!

If someone sues you for the shirt off your back, what does Jesus say you should do? Let him have what he wants and throw in your coat as well!

And if someone is persecuting you, making your life miserable, doing everything in his power to bring you down and humiliate you, what does Jesus say you should do? Love him! Love your enemy! Love each and every one of your enemies!

But Jesus! That's crazy! What would happen to me if I did what you suggest? It's impractical. It's humiliating. It's dangerous. It's senseless.

And then, the kicker ...

You must be perfect.

You must be perfect. Is that good news? Is there anything helpful about this command? Are any of us likely to take this seriously? You must be perfect?

Whenever any of our children got into trouble for one reason or another, their favorite defense was this: You just expect me to be perfect! And, of course, we would argue: No, we don't. We don't expect you to be perfect, we just expect you to clean your room, or tell the truth, or make a little more effort with your homework, or whatever. We're not perfect and we don't expect you to be perfect. We just expect more from you. We expect you to make a better choice.

You see, we were in agreement, parents and children, that it would be entirely unreasonable to expect them, to expect anybody, to be perfect, which is why we, the parents didn't think it a fair argument.

But Jesus does expect it. You must be perfect! That's what he says, without apology, without qualification. And now, it's my job as the preacher, the interpreter of the words of Jesus, to tell you what Jesus really means! But I can't. I can't tell you anything different from what you have already heard, because you and I both know exactly what Jesus means. He means what he says! You must be perfect!

Miah Han, our church organist, has been working hard, preparing for an April 10 organ recital. She practices every day, hours a day, preparing music for our worship services, but also rehearsing her recital pieces, again and again and again. And it's only the middle of February! The recital is nearly two months away, but Miah has been working on the music for weeks, even months. She already plays the pieces well -- very, very well -- so what is she trying to do? She wants the performance to be perfect -- every note, every expression, every nuance, just as it should be. Like any artist, any artist passionate about their craft, she is not satisfied with anything less.

You know what that's like, I know what that's like, any of us who fancy ourselves artists of one sort or the other. A film editor spends hours on one cut, one transition, refining, experimenting, until the effect is just right. A poet, or even a preacher, works hard, looking for the right word, just the right word, that expresses the thought, the feeling, clearly and beautifully and

powerfully. The painter knows the color is not quite what she wants, and she will not be happy until she finds the right tint, the right shade. She will not be happy until it's perfect. No artist is happy with "not bad," "pretty good," "a good effort." Why do it at all if that is all you expect to achieve?

Your life is a work of art, a work of art in progress. And the artist is? God! And the artist is? You! The artist is you and God working in collaboration to fashion something beautiful and powerful and moving and meaningful and glorious, something that brings honor to the artist, but more than that, something that brings joy to the ones to whom the art is given, which is the true purpose of all art. Will either you or God be satisfied with aiming for "not bad?" "Pretty good?" "All right?"

Is this what Jesus means when he says, you must be perfect?

Shawn Johnson, Iowa's darling daughter, gold medalist on the balance beam at the 2008 summer Olympics, recently announced that she has resumed training and wants to compete as a member of the US Olympic gymnastics team in London in 2012. She will prepare as she has prepared before, slowly building strength and fitness, learning and practicing new and more difficult skills, rehearsing her routines and performing them in competition again and again and again, so that one day in August 2012, she may mount the balance beam and ...?

Be perfect! Every time Shawn gets on the beam, she is aiming for perfection! She doesn't always attain it -- sometimes there is a bobble or a slip -- but she always expects, she always wants, nothing less than to be perfect. She shouldn't be in the game if she wanted anything less, and she certainly would not have won gold.

Your life is like an athletic competition and you, an athlete. You give it your all. You finish the race. You play hard for sixty minutes. You leave it all out on the field. You aim ... for perfection.

Can you imagine Aaron Rodgers hoping for a "pretty good game" in the Super Bowl? Can you imagine him thinking: "Well, I hope I throw at least as many touchdowns as interceptions today?"

Every time you go out on the field, every time you mount the beam, every time you start the race, every time you wake to begin a new day, you expect to do your best, you expect to do more than your best, and you won't be happy with anything less.

Is this what Jesus means when he says, you must be perfect?

Astronaut Mark Kelly, husband to congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, is scheduled to lift off from Cape Canaveral on April 19, commanding the last flight of the space shuttle, Endeavor. The space craft will be meticulously tested and carefully monitored and equipped with backups for every important flight system. The crew will be thoroughly trained and carefully monitored and certified as fit. Every element of the flight plan, every element of the launch, every element of the mission, will be reviewed and practiced and verified again and again and again, because when you set out into space, good enough is not good enough!

Your life is like an adventure, an extraordinary journey into a realm untraveled by any before you. You climb high up an unclimbed peak. You fly deep into unexplored space. You travel far into a land of wonders and challenges and perils that will require all the wisdom and courage and endurance and skill you can muster. You better be ready! You better be well equipped! Somebody -- somebody really, really good -- better have your back!

Is this what Jesus means when he says, you must be perfect?

You must be perfect. The word translated into English as "perfect" is the Greek word τελειος, which means finished, complete, having attained its intended purpose ... perfect. Being perfect means going all the way, finishing the job, completing the task, not bailing out somewhere along the way.

Do not take revenge on someone who wrongs you ...

Anyone can take revenge. Anyone can get even. But you are not to be just anyone. You are to go all the way, finish the job, practice love at its highest level. It takes a strong man, a strong and dedicated woman, not to take revenge, not to demand an eye for an eye, but instead, to return kindness for cruelty, and humility for arrogance. It may not work, it may not change anything about the person who wronged you, but it will be something truly beautiful to behold, something that brings honor to the God who made you and joy to those who watch you .

Love your enemies ...

Let love go all the way, not just part way! Anybody can love those who love them, but you are not just anybody. You are the child of your Father in heaven. Be like him!

That's the motive. Be like your Father in heaven. Be like the God in whose image you were made. That's what we are, bearers of the image of God, so that all who see us may see who and what God is. If we live and act and react just

like everybody else -- protecting ourselves, enriching ourselves, demanding the right of revenge for ourselves, drawing a clear line between friend and enemy -- what will the world know of God?

Do you see, we aim for perfection, we strive for completeness, we live for the sake of a full fulfillment of God's purpose for us, in order to be like God, in order to do what God does? Would you want anything less? Would you settle for anything less?

So love your enemies. Pray for them. Do good to them. Hope the best for them. You must be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

You must be perfect. Shuttle missions sometimes run into trouble. Shawn Johnson doesn't earn a perfect score every time or even most of the time. Miah Han ... Oh, yes, Miah will play perfectly!

We are not perfect. We are not complete. We make mistakes. We often fail our Father in heaven. But you must be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect. And we do become perfect, not by our own strength, but as we are connected to God, as God's ways become our ways, as the Spirit of Jesus fills and enlightens and empowers our spirits.

We are poor in spirit, you and me, but by the power of the presence of Jesus with us and in us, we may become rich in spirit, rich indeed! And perfect!