

“Nobody’s Perfect”

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Matthew 5:38-48

Focus: Jesus calls us to be perfect in a God-like perfection.
 Function: To expand in the congregation a desire to trust God simply, like a child, and to practice what Christ says.

I hear two things in this text. There is so much to be heard here, but this morning I want to listen to two things.

I hear Jesus saying, “Be perfect.”

And I hear Jesus saying, “Be children.”

The first thing—be perfect—he says pretty clearly. “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

I expect that none of us are used to hearing this command, “Be perfect.”

You don’t tell your kids, “Have a good day at school, and *be perfect...*”

We find that to be oppressive.

Rather we say, “You don’t have to be perfect.” “Nobody’s perfect.”

Implying, don’t worry about having everything just right, just get the job done.

Or it implies the encouragement, “So you made a mistake, big deal, nobody’s perfect—everyone makes mistakes, and that’s life.”

These aren’t bad bits of advice. But they show us that we think of perfect as “not making mistakes” or “arranging everything just right.” And since we want to be perceived as “Not making mistakes” or “Arranging everything so well”, we take comfort in the fact that “Nobody’s perfect.”

Perhaps if we dug deeper we’d discover it’s not really our perfection that we desire, but rather our acceptance. We are afraid that if we aren’t perfect, we will be rejected, and so we are driven by a desire to fulfill this list of imaginary expectations so that we can be found acceptable.

And if we have that idea of perfection, Jesus’ words are oppressive...

Don’t resist an evildoer

Turn the other cheek

Go the extra mile

Give to whoever asks

Love your enemies

Be perfect...

...so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

If we have this idea of perfect, we hear Jesus saying, “Here’s a list—if you do these things then God will let you be his kids.” ...

Here is where the Greek quizzes that Jim Brownson makes me take come in handy. The word for perfect in the text is “teleioi”, from “telos”, which means “end.” It has the sense of completeness, fullness, maturity, wholeness.

For Jesus, perfect is **not** evaluation. Perfect is fullness.

It’s not a checklist that ensures our acceptance by God...

We are already accepted by God—we are God’s children.

This brings us to the second thing I hear Jesus saying: “Be children.”

“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 Father in heaven.’”

This may sound like Jesus is saying, “If you do this stuff, then you will be God’s children.” But notice that Jesus does not say, “...so that you may be children of the Father in heaven” but he says, “...so that you may be children of *your* Father in heaven.”

We are accepted. We are children. I’m hearing the force of this as:

Since you are children of God, do this stuff, and be children. And be perfect children.

Be not just *part* of who you are, but fully who you are. You are children of your Father in heaven. So be children. Be fully children of God. Embrace your identity, and live into it.

Why is this so hard to do? Probably because it’s hard to just be children.

One of my professors this week said, tongue in cheek, “The problem with Christianity is that adults are asked to return to naivety.”

Let me give you an example from this text that comes up time and again for me:

“Give to everyone who begs from you.”

A year ago January I was down in a border town of Mexico on my cultural immersion trip for 10 days, and a woman approached a group of us who were walking around town. “Excuse me...” Her car ran out of gas and she’s from about an hour away, running an errand for a ministry—her gas gauge is broken—and she just needs some money to buy gas to get home...

And the text comes to me in the back of my head and says, “Andrew, give to everyone who begs from you.”

And I respond (to the text), “Yes, but...” “Who is *everyone*?”

I start to make judgments—“What does she look like?” “Her teeth are bad—she might be a meth addict...” “We’re obvious targets as tourists...”

Plus I’m aware that I have exactly \$40 in my pocket. Two 20’s. There goes the option of giving her a couple bucks and leaving...

So I start to ask her questions... to check out her story,

[ever notice that kids ask questions because they believe and they want to find out more; adults ask questions because they don’t believe, and want to find out more...]

I’m also stalling because I honestly don’t know what to do.

But that simple command won't let me go – “give to everyone who asks...” – so finally I grab a \$20 bill, give it to God, and give it to her.
Did I do the right thing? There have been plenty of other times where I didn't give.

My desire and tendency is to provide caveats for the text –
“well, we don't want to *enable* people...”
“There are times when resistance is necessary...”
“some people need to learn financial responsibility!”

But Jesus seems to be advocating for a letting go of control.
What if we just practiced what Jesus said? What if we let go of all the qualifying voices in our heads? ...

“The problem with Christianity is that adults are asked to return to naivety.”

GK Chesterton said, “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting, it has been found difficult and not tried.”

It's difficult to be so simple.
Could we do it? Could we set aside our adult-ness for even just a week, and say, “This week I am going to give to whoever asks...”
If my friend asks for a conversation, I'll give it. If a child wants my attention, I'll give it. And if someone at the college opposes me in a meeting, I will concede. I will give her even more than what she wants.
And trust God. What if we didn't make excuses? What if we lived as though God was a loving and generous father with more than enough, who would take care of us?

This week I am not going to refuse a person if he wants to borrow.
If my boss adds extra work, I'll do it without complaining and see if he needs any more help...
This week I'm going to love my enemies. The teacher that seems to have it out for me, the gossiping self-righteous family member that has been stirring up trouble... this week I'm going to greet them. I'm going to pray for Sarah Palin and Rush Limbaugh, that they would be strengthened in wisdom and love to do the tasks God has appointed them to do.

It's dangerous. There's no control over what will happen. It's even irresponsible. Who knows what they'll do with what you give them.
Jesus says, “yeah... and God does that too.”
“For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous.” And plenty of people take that abundance and squander it, or use it for destruction...

What have we got to lose? God does it. Christ asks us to try practicing this foolish perfection. So let's try it! Let's live as though God were a generous and loving Father, with more than enough, who will take care of us. For a week out of our lives... and let's see if anything changes.