

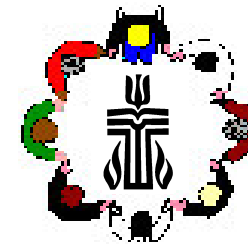
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“Be Therefore Perfect”

Sermon by
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Fourth Sunday in Lent
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Matthew 5:38-48

“Reaching Up to God ...
Reaching Out to Others.”

Matthew 5:38-48

“Be therefore perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.”

If only it were that easy. I don’t know about you, but I am all too aware of just how *imperfect* I am. And if by chance I should ever happen to forget this, even for just a moment—that I am an imperfect human being—I have living with me in my house two teenage daughters who are always *more* than happy at any given time to remind me of just how imperfect I really am.

So, I know I’m not perfect ... but I also know this puts me in good company, because *none* of us are perfect, not even really holy people like the apostle Paul, who openly admitted his imperfection in the letter he wrote to the Romans. Paul writes, “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Romans 7:19).

*I do not do the good I want; instead, the evil I do **not** want is what I do.*

I find this to be a very humbling verse, because it reminds me that it doesn’t really matter how much we *want* to be good—how much we *strive* to be good—because the end result is always the same—we *do not do the good we want*. Because we’re imperfect human beings, we are not, *by definition*, perfect. None of us are.

So why do you suppose, then, in today’s passage, that Jesus would tell us to *be perfect*? How *can* we be perfect if we *can’t* be perfect to begin with? Why would Jesus tell us to go be something that we can’t?

According to German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the answer is simple—Jesus tells us to be perfect because we actually *can*, in fact, be perfect. The catch, though, is that *we can’t do it on our own*. We can only be perfect with the help

of Jesus. Because it’s only in Jesus that perfection is found.

The Greek word that the NRSV translates as “perfect” is *telios*, which actually means, “whole,” or “complete.” To be “perfect,” then, implies “wholeness.” It implies “completeness,” or “fulfillment.”

What Jesus is telling us, then, is that in order to be perfect—in order to be whole—we need to be *in Christ*. Because *in Christ* is where perfection is found.

“Be therefore perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.”

So ... what does that look like, do you suppose? What does it mean for us to be *in Christ*? In other words, how, *exactly*, do we get to perfection?

Here again, according to Bonhoeffer, the answer is simple—we *can’t*. There is nothing that we, ourselves, can do to become one in Christ. There’s nothing that we, ourselves, can do to become whole. There’s nothing that we, ourselves, can do to be perfect, because perfection is a gift from God. God and God alone initiates this gift of grace—God and God alone reaches out to us and draws us into the circle of completion that is Christ.

So ... we know that perfection is found in Christ. We know that perfection is a manifestation of God’s gift of grace. We know that perfection brings wholeness, completeness, and fulfillment.

So, according to Bonhoeffer, we now know what perfection is—namely, *love*.

“Be therefore perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.”

If we are called to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect, then we are called to love, because *God is love*—love, in fact, is the defining characteristic of who God is.

So when Jesus calls us to perfection, what Jesus is really doing is calling us to

love—to enact the love that is God, the love that God personified and made perfect in Jesus Christ.

Bonhoeffer points out, though, that this love of which Jesus speaks—this love that’s perfection, this *perfect* love—this love isn’t just the kind of warm, cozy love we have for our families and friends. Because, according to Bonhoeffer (and, of course, Jesus), it’s *easy* to love our families and friends. Anyone can love someone it’s *easy* to love.

To follow Christ, though—to be *obedient* to Christ—we have to go beyond the easy love and also love our *enemies*. And, not only do we have to *love* our enemies, we have to *pray for them*, as well.

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer acknowledges how very difficult it can be to love in this way. “To the natural man,” he writes, “the very notion of loving his enemies is an intolerable offence, and quite beyond his capacity; it cuts right across his ideas of good and evil.”

But by the same token, he notes, the will of God is very clear—“we should defeat our enemies by loving them.” Because love is the *only* force powerful enough to defeat evil forever.

Bonhoeffer observes that Jesus doesn’t promise that when we bless our enemies and do good to them that they will respond in kind. On the contrary, he says, we should expect them to harm us and persecute us as they did before.

But that can’t hurt us, he says. *They* can’t hurt us. Our enemies *cannot* hurt or overcome us—*evil* can’t hurt or overcome us—as long as we pray for our enemies, because in praying for them we take upon ourselves their distress, and their poverty, and their pain, and their suffering.

And when we do this—when we pray for others—we help not only *them*, but also *ourselves*, because when we do this we allow

God’s perfection—God’s love—to come into us and through us and make us whole.

This is a radical kind of love, this perfect love of which Jesus speaks. It’s unconditional—it doesn’t expect a response. It’s selfless—in that it gives without expectation of return. It is love just for the sake of love—and it defines, more than anything else, what it means to be a Christian.

It defines, more than anything else, what it means to follow Christ.

“Be therefore perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.”

Take a moment now and think of someone in your life who is making you absolutely crazy—someone whose mission on earth, it seems, is to make you miserable.

Now ... think about all the awful things this person has done to you.

Think about how that made you feel—how helpless, and worthless, and angry, and insignificant it made you feel.

Now ... pray for this person. Ask God to love them. Ask God to let you love them. Ask God to help them love themselves, in the name of Jesus Christ, who demands that we be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect, who orders us to obey his commandment to love

“Be therefore perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.”

Amen.

My **Grace**
is sufficient for thee:
for my **strength**
is made perfect
in **w e a k n e s s**.