

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

O Holy and Perfect God, we call to you and name you as eternal, ever-present, and boundless in love. In our minds and hearts we know you have commanded us to be perfect. But the thought of perfection paralyzes our wills, defeats our purposes, and causes us to scratch for excuses and a way out. Yet there are times, O God when we see clearly the path you have called us to take in our daily lives. Forgive us for our failures to always walk in your ways, the ways of perfection, the ways of peace and love. When shame clenches tightly around our hearts in white-knuckled fear, and we despair, lift our spirits and free us from these strangling thoughts. When doubt invades our hope and degrades our wisdom, help us remember that in Christ Jesus we possess your strength, your wisdom, your perfection. Forgive our imperfections, and make us perfect in peace and love. Amen.

WORDS OF PARDON

Pastor: In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!

People: In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!

Be Perfect!

Matthew 5:38-48

Jesus says, "Be perfect." What a scary demand. How in the world can people like us be perfect? If "Be perfect" was a sentence in an article, the editor would change it to "Be whole." If in a political speech, some nervous, which way is the wind blowing consultant would insist on changing it to "Be true to yourself." Talk about an "ETHICAL" challenge. Surely, Jesus doesn't mean us to take perfection seriously? Well, he went around telling people, "If you want to be perfect, sell everything, cash your stocks and bonds, close your bank account, give it to the poor and come follow me." The demand has troubled Christians for centuries. What can we make of the demand?

At the outset, notice: "Be perfect" is more than a simple teaching. "Be perfect" is a two-word summary of the entire law, prophets, and gospels. After all, Jesus came to fulfill the Law (Torah) not to destroy it. Protestant divisions between Law and grace are overcooked. An American playwright tells of how his Jewish parents scrimped and saved to give him everything. "Everything we got's wrapped up in you, boy!" his mother would say. "Everything we got's wrapped up in you!" Everything Jesus demands is wrapped in this unrelenting language. Not be nice. Not be pretty good. Not be civil. Not be a decent person. Not even be Christian. But be perfect. Everything Jesus expects from us is wrapped up in these two words; "Be perfect!"

Why have we heard so little of what Jesus says matters the most? Looking back, how easy to overlook, diminish, or just ignore the demand. I don't remember ever being told

to be perfect. Be good! Be quiet. But not be perfect. So, we hear the command and in perfect harmony we sing, "Nobody's perfect." The excuses fall from our lips like a driving rain in early April. "We're only human," we exclaim. Perhaps we find the idea of perfection so objectionable because it goes against the grain of our usual human behavior. If honest we will admit that we find it almost impossible to let go of the hurt we experience at the hands of others. We are so prone to lash out, to hurt back, to wreak havoc and get our revenge and serve it cold. Such is the way of the world, but Jesus insists that the way of his people will be the way of perfection.

Remember the October 2006 shooting deaths of 5 Amish girls in a one-room Ohio school? "It was not the violence that shocked us," Joan Chittister wrote. "It was the forgiveness that followed it for which we were not prepared. It was the lack of recrimination, the dearth of vindictiveness, that left us amazed. Baffled. Confounded. . . . It was the Christianity we all profess but which they practiced that left us stunned. Never had we seen such a thing." If honest, we admit that we have more experience with revenge than with the practices of perfection. We will confess that a great gulf often exists between the faith we profess and the faith we practice.

Our objections to perfection are as well used as the keyboard of a laptop where the letters have been beaten away. My granddaughter, Emily, looked at my old laptop and said, "PawPaw where are the letters?" They had been worn away because I bang the keyboard as if I were typing on a 1955 Underwood manual typewriter. Perhaps our images of perfection, hammered out in countless Sunday School classes by well-meaning teachers intent on harnessing what they considered the wickedness of 10 year old sinners is a grotesque picture of impossibility. Images of arms cut off, eyes gouged out, and the flames of hell were always threats for failure to be perfect. When Jesus says, "Be perfect," we cut off the thorny demands, smooth out the rough edges, and eliminate any connection between what Jesus says and how we are actually living.

Look, what if Jesus never intended us to make these legal assumptions about perfection? When Jesus says be perfect he's not talking sinless perfection. But before you get too excited, he's certainly not saying, Sin to your heart's content. The German philosopher who said, "I love to sin; God loves to forgive sin; I think the world's remarkably well-balanced," didn't get that idea from Jesus. The early church really struggled with this idea of sinless perfection and even had a fierce debate over how many sins were allowed after baptism. Their first stab at an answer was ONE! That would have certainly cleared the church of members.

Let's get it through our heads that perfection doesn't involve halos. It doesn't have a complicated scoring system where points are deducted for less than perfect performance. This is not a competition. There's no annual banquet where golden statutes are passed out to the sexily-clad but perfect Christians. Perfection is the people of the church relating to one another, working through anger, conflict, and disagreement and moving forward. Perfection is relational. Much of our imperfection comes from our high and mighty judgmentalism when dealing with fellow Christians when they fail. Perfection means that when one of us fails, our response will not be

lording it over the fallen one with a superior self-righteousness but with the love and peace that is our gift of perfection.

Dimly, can we see that perfection is not individual but corporate? “Y’all be perfect,” Jesus says. And he makes his church holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle so that she may be holy and without blemish (Ephesians 4). Perfection is always mixed with Jesus. Wherever Jesus gathers a people, there is the possibility of perfection and nowhere else. Even that is risky because we all know that gatherings of religious people can be everything but perfect in relationships. And this is not some future tense heavenly version of the church. This is the here and now, flesh and blood, visible church being made perfect in love and peace through the power of Jesus Christ who has promised to train us in perfection.

There’s an old saying, “**Practice makes perfect.**” Coaches believe this is one of the most important maxims of life. I read where the leading 3-point shooter for the Ohio State Buckeyes shoots 1500 baskets a day as part of his practice routine. What if the perfection Jesus demands relates back to the practices he asks us to develop? We might say, “Practices make perfect.” Instead of keeping score, or agonizing over slip-ups, mistakes, failures, or sins, we should engage in the practices of perfection. At church, those practices are preaching, the sacraments of baptism, Holy Communion, confession, repentance, and forgiveness. In our relationships those practices are “love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. Turn the other cheek, give the shirt off your back, give to those who beg from you, and do to others as you would have them do to you.”

In case you didn’t notice, what Jesus demands of us he actually did. He was nailed to a cross by his enemies; cursed, abused, and flogged. They took his coat, and hated him. The gospels record seven last sayings of Jesus He didn’t say, “You will burn in hell for this.” “God’s gonna get you for this.” “You’ll get what’s coming to you some day.” “You’ll be sorry.” “I’ll kill you for this.” “I’ll get even with you if it’s the last thing I ever do.” He said none of these hateful things. He said, “Father forgive them.”

“Perfection names our participation in Christ’s love of his enemies. **To be perfect is to learn to be part of a people who take the time to live without resorting to violence to sustain our existence. To so live requires habits like learning to tell one another the truth, to be faithful in our promises to one another, to seek reconciliation.** Perfection is making the same response to evil that Jesus made.

Now do you see why our confession in church is so crucial to our perfection? Confession reconstitutes us as the perfect people of God. In that moment we are brand new, all our sins have been erased. What we can’t do alone, Jesus offers us as gift. What we can’t do alone, we can do together as church. There is nothing more powerful than, “In the name of Jesus Christ your sins are forgiven.”

Now do you see why the sacrament of Holy Communion matters so much? “Our eating with our Lord is not different from our learning to be his disciples, his holy people. The kind of perfection that marks the church is the perfection of a people who have learned not to fear one another and thus are capable of love. We do not just go ahead with our own meals, or our lives, but have learned to live in the presence of others without fear and envy. We thus become a perfect people through the meal we share with our Lord. We learn that forgiveness of the enemy, even when the enemy is ourselves, is the way God would have his kingdom accomplished” (SH, TPK, 111). Through the sacrament we become a perfect people. We are not taking part in some spiritualized magic show. “As often as we eat this bread and drink the cup, we proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

Well, here we are worshiping God and being made perfect. Luke’s version, instead of “Be perfect,” has “Be merciful just as your Father is merciful.” But that doesn’t reduce the demand. To be merciful is to hear the cries of the needy and act on their behalf. Walk the streets of our poverty-infested neighborhoods and hear the cries of the oppressed. Visit the prisons and hear the cries of the millions of people we have locked away in state prisons for minor drug offenses because we would rather incarcerate than educate. Go to the job centers where the unemployed gather in hopelessness and cry out not for a handout but a job. A February 10 Pew Center poll shows that a majority of evangelicals think the national debt is our biggest moral problem. They want to cut food programs to the hungry across the world, aid to the unemployed, reduce environmental protection but increase spending for defense, security, and energy. Name that what you will, but don’t call it mercy. Label it fear.

In the Leviticus reading, God says, “Be holy.” Then God says that being holy means remembering the poor. Be holy, be merciful, and be perfect – our calling as God’s people and it all has to do with how we treat people.

Listen, when it comes to fellow human beings, there’s no such thing as too much mercy, too much compassion, or too much forgiveness. Be merciful to the same extent that God is merciful. And how merciful is God? “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even where we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.”

Are we still a little nervous about perfection? Well, hear the good news. Perfection names the practices of the body of Christ. We are learning together to respond to evil as Jesus did. Do good to your enemies, bless them, pray for them, offer the other cheek, give to them, let them take from you, and do not ask for restitution. Have mercy as God has mercy on us. Forgive as we have been forgiven. Practices make perfect. In Jesus Christ we are being made perfect. Amen.