

February 20, 2011
Matthew 5:38-48

Epiphany 7A
"You shall be Perfect"

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Have you ever had a teacher, a parent, a coach say something to you like this: "Practice makes perfect." You spend countless hours in the gym, countless hours in the band room or trying to hit the right pitch. You spend hours shooting free throws, you spend time running wind sprints, or maybe it's spending time in the weight room trying to lift the most, it's all about practice and if you practice more, you will become perfect at what you do.

Many of us have hopes and dreams of having the perfect life, living our perfect dreams, having the perfect kids, the perfect spouse, the perfect health, the perfect job, the perfect income, the perfect government, the perfect school, the perfect education, the perfect church, the perfect pastor. I can tell you that I want to be that perfect pastor; I want to fulfill those goals for myself. I want this and I want that.

In our Gospel lesson today, Christ talks about perfection. Christ says, "You shall be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect." These words really wrap up everything Jesus Christ is saying to us in this first chapter of the Sermon on the Mount. And really the unite of 21-48 as he talks about murder, adultery, lust, divorce, taking oaths, swearing falsely, lying, now today about retaliation and loving our enemies. To conclude all that he says, "Oh yeah, you shall be perfect." The English translations, every single one of them translates the verb as an imperative, but it's really not, it's a future indicative verb, although it does have an imperatival sense to the word. And we just don't get a demand of perfection. We hear something else and that is in our Old Testament lesson: "You shall be holy, because I the Lord Your God am Holy." Moses is commanded God to speak to Israel and tell them to be holy. Now in our text from Matthew 5, Christ is calling us to a state of perfection.

Just think for a moment...perfect is much more than hitting 10/10 from the free throw line, batting 1.000 in baseball, or running a five minute mile. Perfect is much more than living comfortably; it's much more than getting straight A's on the report card.

Perfection as Christ calls us to be as we look at it in this text brings us to the fact that we need to Love our Enemies, pray for those who persecute us, and when it comes to retaliation, we let it be. We are called to love our enemies...sometimes it's virtually impossible to love those that are closest to us, our family and friends. Love for our enemies' flows right out of the sermon the mount. Christ is teaching us how to love our enemies. Christ loves his enemies, for he desires all men to be saved. For the rain falls on the just and the unjust. God provides all with his love. And he asks us to do the same. Martin Luther in his Large Catechism speaks about this love for ones enemies and the retaliation: "Therefore it is God's real intention that we should allow no one to suffer harm but show every kindness and love. And this kindness, as I said, is directed especially toward our enemies." Luther also writes: "But the occasion and

need for this commandment is that, as God well knows, the world is evil and life is full of misery. Therefore he has erected this and the other commandments to separate good and evil.

Christ has put up a wall a barrier to prevent us from evil. The barrier he placed are these Ten Commandments of God, and most namely the fifth commandment, "You shall not murder." As was said last week, murder comes from the heart, and sometimes murder is retaliation. There are things that are okay to do, such as peaceful protest on one's own time. Peaceful protest that doesn't lead to violence or name calling or so much more. We've seen where civil unrest has jumped from place to place around the world; some has turned violent, such as Egypt, Tunisia, now Bahrain and Yemen. Retaliation, love for ones enemies, and others is summarized as You shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect. The Law requires you to do this...to be perfect...

...but Christ and the Gospel says that it's already been done. Does this allow to keep on sinning, because the sacrifice has been made, absolutely not, but we are sinners and we will continue to do such things and it causes us to come before our Lord in prayer: "Heavenly Father, though I often fall short of Your perfection, forgive my sins for Jesus' sake and strengthen me for greater service. Amen."

It's done because of Christ, our sins are forgiven because of Jesus' sake. For Jesus Christ went to the cross for us. Jesus Christ went to the cross for his enemies. Imagine this...Jesus died for those that put him on the cross, not just Herod, Pilate, the guards, the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes...but for you and I. We were first his enemies. For we were separated from God. Jesus Christ loves his enemies, you and I, he loves us so much he calls us his own. Jesus Christ not only loves his enemies, he didn't retaliate, when he was being whipped and bloodied, when insults were thrown at him, when many were taking away what he had. He didn't retaliate, but willingly went to the cross for us. He is God, he very well could have come down off the cross and eliminated everyone that was trying to impede his path, but he didn't, because he loves us. It was the only way to bring peace between God and his enemies, the sinners of the world.

He not only died for you and I. But he lived perfection, he lived holiness. Perfection that we can't attain on our own and holiness that Israel could not attain on their own. But not only that, for Christ came out of the tomb on that first Easter morning and lives for you and me. Christ's body was raised in glory. And we get a foretaste of that glory when we come and gather as God's family and hear His Word, his whole word, both his law, but also the sweet sounds of the gospel message. We hear the word, "You shall be perfect," but also the word, "Almighty God in His mercy, has given his Son to die for you, and for his sakes forgives you all your sins, therefore, as a called and ordained servant of Christ, and by his authority, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." We get a foretaste of this promised perfection that will be ours someday when we receive his gifts...his body and blood, given and shed for you. Because of this our lives can be changed. A thief's life was changed when he hung next to Jesus and he received that gift of perfection, that gift of holiness since he will one day live again with all the Saints of God.

But even for us today, our lives can be changed when our sins are forgiven...that prayer that I shared with you earlier is a prayer that we should pray each morning as we wake up and seek to be greater servants in our daily lives. And in our daily lives, we know that we will never have that perfect....you fill in the blank. For does living out our Christian faith make us perfect. Does practicing our Christian walk make us perfect. Absolutely not. But it is something Christ calls us to do. Practice does not make perfect when it comes to our Christian Walk, let alone our other parts of life. But Christ does make us perfect by his blood and his resurrection and we will experience that when we rise to life eternal and live in perfection for all eternity.

So no matter where life takes you, take a look...no man has ever batted 1.000 in a 162 game season, no man has ever put up the perfect 158.3 passer rating over the course of a season. Man can't even beat a computer in jeopardy as I heard on the news this week. Man is not perfect, but Christ is. Christ bridged the gap between us and God. We love God, because he first loved us. We can love our enemies, because He first loved us. So I tell you, with all of God's grace and Christ's death and resurrection behind it, "You shall be perfect, as your Father in Heaven is perfect." Amen.

Now may the peace of Christ which passes all understanding guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen.