

## Perfection

Shepherd's Grace Church

February 23, 2014

<sup>38</sup>“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ <sup>39</sup>But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone **strikes** you on the right cheek, turn the other also; <sup>40</sup>and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; <sup>41</sup>and if anyone **forces** you to go one mile, go also the second mile. <sup>42</sup>Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to **borrow** from you.

<sup>43</sup>“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall **love** your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ <sup>44</sup>But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup>so that you may be **children** of your Father in heaven; for he makes his **sun rise** on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. <sup>46</sup>For if you love those who love you, what **reward** do you have? Do not even the **tax collectors** do the same? <sup>47</sup>And if you greet only your **brothers and sisters**, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? <sup>48</sup>Be perfect, therefore, as your **heavenly** Father is perfect. (Matthew 5: 38-48) (Also Read 1Cor. 3: 10-23)

Today we will temporarily suspend our study of the *Sermon on the Mount* in conjunction with Paul's letter to the Corinthians. We will pick it up after Easter and conclude the sermon but now as we look at Jesus' first sermon, there are some key elements we need to remember as we begin the 6 week journey to the cross, to death, and to new life in Christ. First, we need to pay special attention to who we are as we make this journey. Second, we need to know who it is who has created us this way. Finally, we need to understand the necessity for God's intervention through Jesus Christ on our behalf. The Apostle gives us the answers to all these questions at the end of chapter 3 of his letter. As we examine them, we are left with one additional and burning question, a question Jesus asks this morning and one we believe we are incapable of answering. “What does it mean to achieve *Perfection*?”

When I was 4 years old I went to Oklahoma City to spend a large part of the summer with my grandparents. My mom's mother and father lived there and before I was old enough to play baseball, I spent most of my summers there. This year, I stayed even longer than usual. I didn't really wonder why. I loved the summers there. It never occurred to me that I was there a longer or shorter time than any other summer. I remember talking to my parents on the phone a few times during that period. Back then, long distance phone calls were very expensive. They were made only occasionally. Some of you who are older may remember that!

I am not sure if I really remember or just think I remember now that my parents seemed very excited and eager when I talked to them on the phone. Today, over half a century later, I think my memory is just a part of the creative imagination I have regarding that summer. In my mind, however, that summer was a very special one. Mom and dad came down to get us the weekend before my birthday and we stayed together as a family with my grandparents until after the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. As we were driving home, I seem to remember lots of nervous chatter from my parents in the front seat. The closer we got to home, the more excited they seemed to become!

We drove into town and traveled up the main street. I looked at the familiar sights of my home town through the wide eyes of a 4 year old. At some point, I remembered something was different. Instead of dad turning down the street I knew led to our house he drove on by. He didn't drive much farther, El Dorado was not that big. Finally he turned down another street. The street was right next to the high school and junior high school. It was just down the block from the hospital and the grocery store. Dad only drove one block on the street and then stopped. He and mom turned to my brother and I in the back seat and smiled.

I imagine we asked, "Why are we stopping here?" I imagine mom and dad saying, "This is our new home!" I do not know that the conversation took place in that way, but I remember the first impression of that house being firmly and forever embedded in my mind! I remember the two tall cedar trees that seemed to be the tallest in town. They were straight and the trunks of them were so large that my brother and I could not hold hands and wrap our arms around them! The front porch was huge and there were 6 steps leading up to it. The outside looked bigger than anything I had ever seen! It was a giant 2 story house with a full attic on top so it looked even bigger! I couldn't imagine living there and I couldn't imagine living anywhere else!

We went in the front door that first time. That may have been the last time I ever entered the front door. I really don't remember that, but I do remember that my ins and outs of that house were almost always from the back. For as long as I lived in that house, neither door was ever locked. Anyway, my brother Steve and I ran from room to room. All our furniture was there. Everything we were familiar with was there! We ran up the stairs and found a family room up there and a second bathroom! We couldn't think what we would do with a second bathroom but mom and dad seemed very excited that we had one.

We walked down the hall and the first door we came to was a bedroom. We opened the door and it had all of Steve's stuff in it. His bed was in the center and there was a dresser there with his clothes in it.

He had two windows that looked out to the neighbor's yard and a closet where his clothes were hanging. I remember him moving from piece to piece of the furniture and looking around and I thought he would never get finished looking around. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity to me, probably at least 30 seconds or so, we left his room and headed on down the hall to the next door.

Mom and dad opened the door to my room! I looked in and couldn't believe it! I had 4 windows. Mine was a corner room with two windows that looked out at the trees out front and two that looked out over the side street on the north side of the house. When I was 4 years old, that room seemed larger than any I had ever seen! I thought it was perfect! I thought the whole house was perfect! I couldn't imagine it being any better! Perfection!

It is in this house that I think the Apostle meets us today. In my mind, the house was built by a master builder. It was simply the best house I could ever imagine and it got better because all my stuff was there. It got better because the people I cared about were there. It got better because living there with my family made it better. It got better because the memories I have of it got better. It was the place where my brother Terry was born. It was the place where my sister Cheryl was born. It was the place where I introduced my parents their first grandchildren for the very first time. It just got better!

In my mind, the house was built by a master builder! It was strong and stood against the cold Kansas winds of winter. It was comfortable. It had places we could play and laugh and eat and live. It was a refuge in difficult times like when my grandfather died and it was a place of celebration on joyous occasions like graduations and Christmases. It was a temple for me! It was the place where love lived!

The Apostle Paul tells us today that we are the Temple where in God's Holy Spirit dwells. During the past several weeks I have invited you to understand the difference between description and definition. A description lists characteristics, a definition yields understanding. We can describe things by listing their physical attributes; height, weight, hair color, etc. We define things by attempting to explain their function, their role, their purpose. Christians are often described as prayerful, purposeful, focused on ministry. We are defined however by our willingness to love, to share God's gifts, to encourage the coming of the kingdom of Heaven! Today we are further defined as the place where God dwells. We are the House of God, put on this earth to hold the Spirit of God!

It should come as no surprise that this is our purpose. In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the Spirit of God hovered above the face of the deep. The earth was a formless, shapeless void and then God spoke. (Gen. 1: 1-3 paraphrased) In Hebrew, the original language of the

Old Testament, the word for breath, for wind, and for spirit are the same. The word is Ruach. The wind that hovered above the face of the deep was the wind of God. The breath that came forth in God's word to create was the wind of God and the Spirit that hovered above it all was the Spirit, the breath of God. God the creator was all in all and all that proceeded from Him was creation caused by His will and by His action.

This same creative action proceeds from God in chapter 2 of Genesis when God creates the human. The human is a formless, lifeless lump of clay until God bends down and breathes God's ruach into the human. After that, the human is alive, sustained by the breath, the very Spirit of God! Human life therefore is a combination of the elements of creation sustained by the Spirit of God! Without God we have no life! Without God we have no being!

Later in chapter 2 of Genesis it is said, "What God has joined, let no one put asunder." God has joined God's Holy Spirit to us as humans and it is not intended that we be separated from that Spirit. Today, Paul makes that truth abundantly clear. He says we are the temple wherein God resides. In ancient days, God's Spirit went with God's chosen people in the ark of the covenant. Today, even as it always has, God's spirit resides with us. It is God's breath breathed into us from the very beginning and is never intended to leave us. God in us! Abiding in us! Perfecting us! We are the temple for God. Just as the home is the place where love lives, we are the place where God's love lives!

As we hear the text from Matthew this morning, we hear that we are to be perfect even as our father in heaven is perfect. Those of us who are honest with ourselves realize that we are not perfect. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. (Rom. 3) If we have sinned, how can we be perfect? How can we be the temple of God? How can we possibly live into the challenge given by Jesus today in the *Sermon on the Mount*? I believe the answer lies in the whole word we receive today as well.

Jesus says, "You have heard that it is said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'" He then goes on to say, "But I say to you do not violently resist an evil doer." As we think of our responsibility in responding to those who would do us harm, it is important to hear the fullness of what Jesus is saying. He is not urging us to be beaten and battered by those who have power over us. He is instead inviting us into a creative protest of nonviolent response. He says, "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other cheek and offer it." This is his creative response.

Today, two thousand years after Jesus' message, we think his response is wimpy! We have been trained that we must respond in proportion to the wrong that has been done by us. The problem is our

perception of this proportional response tends to escalate. We respond and the other person believes we have responded with greater violence than they offered and they feel wronged and they respond and the whole situation continues to escalate! If Jesus were standing in our midst today he would tell us that today is no different from yesterday. Proportional response will not, cannot work!

Jesus would say proportional response is *lex talionis*, retributive justice. Retribution, while fine in theory tends to break down as we have illustrated earlier. His creative solution, the creative protest of turning the other cheek serves to accomplish much more. By allowing the person who strikes you in anger to not only strike you once but have the opportunity to strike again offers you, the offended, the opportunity to be in control. You effectively say to the person who claims power over you that they have no power in their strength. You take away their strength by demonstrating that they cannot harm you!

In the same way, when you are brought to trial and someone is trying to take your coat, Jesus says give them your cloak as well. In today's language we should understand that suit for a coat would be like trying to squeeze blood from a turnip. The coat was to be the very last possession a person had. To understand the nature of the suit is to recognize that if someone is suing for your coat, they have already taken your house, your car, your jewelry, your retirement and all the other worldly possessions you have. To take your coat is intended to be the final insult.

Jesus says, do not let that be the final word. When the suing party takes your coat, give them your cloak as an affirmation of the ridiculous nature of their suit! To give your cloak is to stand completely naked before them. To give your cloak is to force them to recognize they have taken something that is of no value to them just to try to embarrass you. To give your cloak forces them to look on at what should be an embarrassing moment for you only to be embarrassed themselves. This form of creative non-violent resistance allows one who has seemingly lost everything to remind the one who wants to take their very last possession that they still have that which can never be taken away. As the plaintiff looks on, the defendant stands naked but still in full possession of their personhood. The person is indeed a child of God who possesses God's Spirit and therefore life that cannot be surrendered! As we think about Jesus' illustration this morning, who do you think will look away first?

To resist non-violently is not submission. It is active and aggressive and calculated as a strategy to remind those who believe they are in control over others that there is only one in control and that is the God who breathed life into us and continues to give us life even in the midst of persecution. If we are forced to walk one mile we should willingly go a second just to remind our oppressor, the one who

forced us, that we cannot be coerced! We cannot be overcome! We cannot be bound by their rules for behavior. We are the temple of God! We are the ones in which God's creative energy resides and we are willing to stand beyond their oppression on the very margins of society as a testament to God's powerful and restorative justice. We will not offer retribution but we will be restored and recognized as children of the kingdom! This creative non-violence was illustrated in Ghandi's fast for justice in India and in Rosa Parks' struggle on a Birmingham bus!

For the same reasons, we give to whoever begs from us, not because we will never be taken advantage of but precisely because we will be taken advantage of! In giving we demonstrate that our world is not a world of finite resources but rather a world of abundance where there is enough for all, even those who might try to cheat or deceive. We trust that in our willingness they will learn a lesson; the lesson of abundance and that in their future they will begin to experience that abundance as we have! We give because we are filled with the same love my home was filled with. We might not have all known that love as we were growing up but we know it now as a loving and caring church family! We know it now as the church which is also the temple of God! We know it now because we are being perfected!

We become more perfect as we listen to Jesus' lesson on love. Love your neighbor. Yes, Jesus says, but not only your neighbor. We look at the Hebrew scripture that tells us to love our neighbor and we see who our neighbor is. In Leviticus 19 our neighbor is the widow, the orphan, the homeless, the handicapped, the out of work, the struggling and yes the resident alien! We recognize in the world we live in today that we have not even decided to love these, our neighbors, much less love our enemies! We continue to look with suspicion at those who are different from us and we believe because of their difference they are somehow "less than." We discuss them as "them" identifying them, describing them by the color of their skin or the type of disability they have! We do not attempt to define them by getting to know them! We are content to describe them and let their differences become judgments!

Jesus said, "Even the tax collectors do this!" There is no reward in loving those who you can only describe. There is no reward in loving those who willingly give to you so you can give to them. The reward comes in loving those whom you can define! The reward is in getting to know people of difference and recognizing that in their differences with us there can be a solidarity, a sense of the same struggle, the fight to overcome hatred and bitterness and to love!

Our challenge in the world today is to get to know the other. Our challenge in the world today is to get to know ourselves so we can even engage others in conversation. We spend so much of our time trying to improve others' descriptions of us that we have very little opportunity to define ourselves. We want

to be described as the ones with the new coat, or the new car, or the new house or the great vacation to some beautiful and exotic place instead of being defined as those who live according to the gifts of the one who breathed life into us!

Our challenge today is to invite others into our house so others can see there what we see there, what we experience there. We sometimes are so concerned about whether we have run the vacuum cleaner or washed the dishes and we worry about what others will think if our kids have left their shoes in the front room on the floor that we never extend the invitation. As a result, others do not get to see what can take place in a house that is special because it is lived in. Others never get to see our traditions our culture because they only see what we want them to see. We are described as clean and neat and able to bake a nice brownie or coffee cake. We are described by characteristics and we are not defined by character!

Jesus urges us! Jesus implores us! Love your neighbor. When they bring a gift with them to your house and it is different from what you are used to, try it! Experience who other people are and get to know them and what they know. Look past the color of the brownies and the fact that they are cookie but you like cake brownies. Look at what effort the individual made to share with you and make the effort to share with them as well. Let them go from room to room in your house! Let them look in the closets and out the windows and let them begin to be able to define you! Open your life to them and allow them to open their life to you! When you do this, then you will begin to love your neighbor, not for what they have but for who they are because you can be who you really are!

When Jesus says, "Be perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect," he is not saying be without flaw! He is saying instead, "be whole!" He is saying be authentic! He is saying be yourself. He is reminding you that you are a child of God! He is reminding you that God looks with favor on you! He is reminding you that you are the temple wherein the Holy Spirit, the very Breath of God lives. God has breathed life into you and God alone has made you whole. God's breath and your body make you whole!

Perfection comes in wholeness! Perfection comes in completeness! Perfection comes in Shalom! Perfection comes as we begin to realize that with God in our lives there is nothing missing and nothing broken! Perfection comes in recognizing that apart from God we cannot be complete. We are not whole when we are not in the fullness of relationship with God that God intends. We are not whole when we are not in the fullness of relationship with neighbor as God intends. God does not just suggest; God commands that we love our neighbor! His is not an idea or a notion! God has given 613 commandments and as Jesus has told us, he did not come to dispel these commandments but to fulfill

them. The one to love our neighbor appears to be right at the top of the list and we can only do that when we are perfected, when we are whole!

In this moment we might be thinking as we were at the beginning of this message that we are sinners. We cannot be perfect and we cannot make ourselves perfect! That would be true of us, of our own effort and our own ability but we must remember the rest of that which defines us. Our wholeness does not come from our body. It does not come from our spirit. It does not come from our knowledge. The apostle says that the knowledge of the wise must become folly. Our wholeness comes from our willingness to understand and accept that we are all sinners...we are all sinners saved by Grace!

Our wholeness comes when we define ourselves as equal with others, not willing to steal their coat in court or slap their cheek in anger but instead eager to accept them and their shortcomings because we know our own! Our wholeness comes as we remember that we are sinners saved by Grace. Our wholeness comes when we allow that we can do nothing on our own but we can do all things with Christ who gives us strength! (Phil. 4 : 13)

To be perfect , to achieve perfection in this world then is to take the whole of who we are, body which was lifeless and formless combined with the breath of God, Ruach, God's Holy Spirit that God breathed into us from the very beginning and allow both to live in harmony. Perfection is to allow God with us! Perfection is Emmanuel,(Matt. 1: 21) the very one who was sent and who resides in us as we become the temple of God! Perfection is the home I experienced so many years ago as I ran eagerly from room to room with my brother and my parents. Perfection is inviting God to come into that home and open the doors and the windows and the rooms and to live there. Perfection is the wholeness we all can experience when we allow God to dwell with us! Be perfect as God is perfect! Be whole in the one who loves you enough to live with all your faults and love you still! Amen!