

Be Perfect As Your Heavenly Father

Matt. 5:43-48

Introduction:

1. Upon first reading we are prone to dismiss the demand of perfection saying, "Well, I can never be perfect."
2. Dismiss it as we might, Jesus still said, "You are to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."
3. Is He issuing some kind of command that it is impossible to perform? Is He trying to crush us with defeat before we begin? Should we just throw up our arms and quit?
4. What is Jesus saying?

Discussion:

- I. The statement to be perfect is set in the context of loving our neighbor AND our enemy.
 - A. It is part of a series of contrasts presented by Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount.
 - B. The contrast is set up for us in 5:20 when He tells His disciples, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees you will not enter the kingdom of heaven."
 - C. The series of contrasts then begin in v. 21.
 1. The contrasts are marked by the formula, "You have heard . . . but I say to you . . ."
 2. Some have seen this as a contrast between the O.T. Law and the new revelation under Christ, but this does not fit with Jesus' preface in 5:17ff. There He specifically says, He did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill them.
 3. The contrast is rather between the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees and the righteousness of God.
 4. Actually what we have is a contrast in understanding or interpretation of the instructions given by God.
 - D. Note how this unfolds.
 1. Verses 21-26.
 - a. "You shall not commit murder." Well the Law did actually say that (Ex. 20:13), but did it mean that only homicide was prohibited? Hardly!
 - b. Because of the precious nature of each person's life any and all kinds of diminishing another was prohibited.
 - c. It is implied in the text then that the statement, "You shall not commit murder" includes the positive action of seeking what is beneficial for others (see 23-26).
 - d. They had narrowed God's instruction in a way that was never intended. Thus their "righteousness" was insufficient.
 2. Verses 27-30.
 - a. "You shall not commit adultery." Again the Law clearly says this (Ex. 20:14). The question is, "What did God want? What did He mean with this statement?"
 - b. Did it mean that it was OK to look with the intent of committing adultery, but that one was not in violation as long as the physical act was not committed? Hardly!
 - c. Jesus said, "But I say to you . . ."
 - d. This is not talking about merely being tempted sexually. It is not merely talking about

feeling attraction. It is talking about intent. Chocolate may be attractive, but it does not mean that you are ready to steal it in order to have it (cf. coveting neighbor's wife in Ex. 20:17).

3. At the risk of redundancy and boring you I want to continue with three more illustrations that Jesus uses, because they all relate to loving your neighbor. Indeed the two previous examples do too. See verses 31-32.
 - a. "It was said, 'Whoever sends his wife away let him give her a certificate of divorce.'" Cf. Deut. 24:1.
 - b. Does this mean it is OK to send one's wife away as long as you give her a certificate of divorce? Hardly!
 - c. Jesus says, "Everyone who divorces his wife, except for unchastity (sexual immorality) makes her commit adultery."
 - d. Divorce was never God's intention. So how could their wholesale approach to it be righteous? How is this demonstrating love to your wife (who is your neighbor in this case)?
4. "You have heard, 'You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.'" See verses 33-37; Deut. 23:21-23.
 - a. Evidently they had a whole series of vows with varying degrees of bindingness. Cf. modern examples: swearing on mother's grave, swearing on a stack of Bibles, swearing with fingers crossed, promises only binding if written down but verbal promises are not.
 - b. Jesus says, "Let your 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no' be 'no.' That is, just tell the truth.
 - c. Lying is designed to gain advantage over your neighbor. How is that loving him?
5. "You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,' but I say, do not resist an evil person . . ." See verses 38-42; Ex. 21:24; Deut. 19:21.
 - a. In this eye for an eye instruction God was trying to establish some equity between a crime and its punishment.
 - b. But it is not appropriate to use it to justify revenge.
 - c. Instead Jesus says, "Turn the other cheek." When you want to hit back, don't! Instead go the extra mile and be kind. That is loving one's neighbor. Taking revenge is not.
 - d. But OH how I want to "Make him pay!" Jesus says, "Love him instead."

II. The demand to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect is within the context of Jesus' 5th illustration.

- A. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'"
 1. The Law said to love your enemy for sure. Cf. Lev. 19:18; Deut. 23:3-6.
 2. Hating your enemy was an addition that was in direct conflict with loving one's neighbor.
- B. Hating any people is a violation of the Law of God. Black, white, Jewish, Japanese, Latin, democrat or republican, any other.
- C. Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."
 1. Many of the Jews of the first century hated the Samaritans and the Gentiles.
 2. The Pharisees hated the tax-collectors and sinners.
 3. I want to hate the Pharisees. After all they are the great pretenders, practicing their righteousness to be seen by men, blowing trumpets before their giving, praying to be

seen, fasting to be noticed (Matt. 6:1ff). Even Jesus said, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me" (Matt. 15:8). And didn't Jesus call them hypocrites (Mt. 15:7; 23:13ff)? Didn't He describe them as whitewashed tombs (Matt. 23:27)? Aren't hypocrites condemned (Matt. 24:51)?

4. I am no fan of hypocrites. But did Jesus denigrate them or have we invested the word "hypocrite" with our hatred and given it to Him? If the word "hypocrite" was translated "pretender," "actor," "impersonator" or "one wearing a mask" would it change what we mean by "hypocrite"? Has the word "hypocrite" taken on a similar significance as the "N" word?
5. It's really hard to love Pharisees and enemies and those who persecute us.

III. But this is the call to perfection in this text.

- A. We are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us so that we may be children of our Father in heaven.
 1. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good.
 2. He sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.
 3. He is the standard of loving one's neighbor and the standard of ethical behavior.
- B. The tax-collectors and the Gentiles (the people of the world) love those that love them. But righteousness in God's kingdom surpasses this.
- C. Therefore you are to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect (teleios). The word "teleios" signifies having reached its end, complete, to reach a goal.
 1. It is not really about being sinlessly perfect.
 2. It is about loving one's neighbor and not withholding grace.
 3. It is about loving one's neighbor—respecting his life, and inherent value (5:21); not taking from him as in adultery (5:27); not taking advantage of a wife as in divorce (5:31); or lying to advance yourself over another (5:33); or taking revenge instead of being kind (5:38).
 4. We need to be complete/mature/developed like our Father.
 5. No, you may not be sinlessly perfect. You may not even love perfectly, but you can be gracious!

Conclusion:

1. Maybe what I need to do is just love others the way God has loved me.
2. He gave His life for His enemies.
3. There is no greater love than that!