

Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah
Pastor John Guthrie

“Ah, Perfection!”
Leviticus 19.1-2, 9-18; Matthew 5.38-48

While enjoying an early morning breakfast in a northern Arizona cafe, four elderly ranchers were discussing everything from cattle, horses, and weather, to how things used to be in the "good old days." Eventually the conversation moved on to their spouses. One gentleman turned to the fellow on his right and asked, "Roy, aren't you and your bride celebrating your fiftieth wedding anniversary soon?" "Yup, we sure are," Roy replied. "Well, are you gonna do anything special to celebrate?" another man asked. The old gentleman pondered this for a moment, then replied, "For our twenty-fifth anniversary, I took Bea to Tucson. Maybe for our fiftieth, I'll run down there and bring her back home."

Unfortunately there is no such thing as a perfect marriage. We can make perfect scores on tests. Gymnasts often score perfectly on their routines. We can bowl perfect games...well, some of us can. But perfect marriages simply don't exist.

Jesus says to the crowd, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." The LORD says to the Israelites, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." If you were with us last week, you may be having a sense of déjà vu. Last Sunday we took a quick look at the first four of the famous antitheses in the Sermon on the Mount. Those deal with anger, adultery, divorce, and promises. In all four cases, Jesus reminds the crowd of what the Law of Moses has to say about these issues, then what the new Law of the Kingdom has to say about them.

Recall that the identifying mark of the antitheses is the statement, "You have heard that it was said," followed by what it is that is written in the law, and then, "but I say to you." "You have heard that it was said...but I say to you." And in every case, what Jesus says raises the expectation of us enormously.

Let's look briefly at the fifth and sixth ones from today's reading. Number 5: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer." And number 6: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.'" The last two antitheses deal with retaliation and enemies.

And once again we are immediately overwhelmed with the enormity of what we are asked to do. When someone strikes us on one cheek, we are to turn the other. If someone takes our coat, we are to give him our sweater as well. If someone forces us to go a mile out of our way with him, we are to go a second mile. And what is this about loving our enemies and praying for them?

The theses that are associated with these two antitheses are actually fundamentally different from the ones we considered last week, because we can actually do what the law requires for lessons number five and six. We are only too happy to exact equal retribution when someone wrongs us. And we actually can and do love our neighbors

and hate our enemies. Piece of cake! If only obeying the statutes of the law was always so easy. Recall from last week that the first four antitheses offer paired theses that are already impossible. Then Jesus offers a new teaching that is enormously more impossible.

Before we engage in too much despair, let me remind you that the actions discussed in the fifth lesson, turning a cheek, giving away a cloak, and walking a mile, are all associated with the mistreatment sometimes inflicted on the Jews by the Roman soldiers who occupied their historical land. A soldier could strike anyone, man or woman; to retaliate would probably just increase the ire of the soldier, but certainly any normal person would withdraw so that a second blow would be more difficult to deliver. If a soldier was cold, he could demand the heavy outer robe of any Jew; to refuse would be unwise, but the person wronged could certainly be incensed and infuriated. And a soldier could, at any time, order a Jew to carry his pack or any other gear he might have, for as long as the soldier wanted that gear carried. Once again, to refuse would be unwise, but I'll bet you can imagine the resentment generated in the one forced to carry the gear.

All of these responses to mistreatment are natural, but Jesus tells us that we are to turn the other cheek, give away our sweater, and walk another mile carrying the gear. We are not to resist one who mistreats us. And we are to love and pray for our enemies.

If you were with us last week, you know that the resolution to the impossible demands placed on us consists in part on the perspective from which Jesus is speaking. Jesus is describing for the assembled crowd, and for us, what the kingdom of heaven is like. Residents of the complete and perfected kingdom of heaven, which we understand will be made real with the return of Christ, will indeed be able to submit to abusers, but there will be no abusers, of course. In the complete and perfected kingdom, we will be able to love our enemies and pray for them, but of course there will be no enemies in that kingdom.

So in the incomplete and imperfect kingdom which is already present on the earth, we are commanded to live as if that kingdom were fully complete and present. And yes, we all know that our ability to submit, love, and pray is limited, perhaps even very limited. As we saw last week, God is more aware of these limitations than we are, and that's why we are given the gift of grace, forgiveness, and restoration. A gift that comes through the death and resurrection of Jesus himself.



Obviously Calvin has a ways to go before he will be turning the other cheek.

Let's put it plainly: we are commanded to submit to mistreatment, to love through action, and to pray for those who mistreat us. Jesus doesn't expect us to spontaneously develop feelings of love for our abusers, but he does expect us to show love by what we do. The Greek word used is, of course, agape, self-giving, self-sacrificing love which must be expressed by doing something.

There are many of you who have suffered abusive relationships of one kind or another. It is critical for you to understand that Jesus is not endorsing that any one of us should undergo repeated and persistent cruelty. The response to those kinds of relationships differs depending on the relationship. So please be sure that you hear this message: God does not call us to endure unrelenting and continual abuse at the hand of another. Those kinds of relationships require treatment and healing, but not submission.

On the other hand, we are not allowed to take the easy way out of the commandments we are given in lessons five and six of the six antitheses in Matthew chapter 5. We are not allowed to tell ourselves, "God's grace covers all. God will forgive me if I fail to show love for and pray for the church member who stomped all over my feelings, or the friend who neglected to invite me to lunch with others, or the cousin who made plans for a family gathering without consulting me." Paul has words to say about that kind of thinking in his letter to the Romans. We cannot count on God's abundant grace to excuse us from the requirements set forth in these antitheses.

What kind of sense would that conclusion make, anyway, if we were to carry it to its logical conclusion? Jesus sets down a set of requirements for our behavior, but we get to ignore them because when we do so we are forgiven?! Such an approach would allow us to completely ignore all the ethical teachings we find in scripture. We don't get to do that.

Another loophole we might attempt to employ is the fact that Jesus does indeed speak from a kingdom of heaven perspective, describing affairs between disciples as they should be and will be one day. But we don't get to tell ourselves, either, that Jesus is giving us instructions for a kingdom that is not yet fully present, and that therefore they do not apply to us today. Sorry. We don't get to use that faulty analysis, either. We are to make the kingdom real to the world, we are to be salt and light to the world, whenever and wherever we can. And that means submitting to others when they mistreat us, loving them in action, and praying for them.

Jesus reminds us that anyone can love only those who show them kindness. Even the tax collectors can do that. (Those poor tax collectors; they seem to receive a lot of scorn in Matthew's gospel.) If we submit to, demonstrate love for, and pray for only those who treat us well, we are not being light and salt. We are simply being like everyone else.

So I will tell you where the rubber hits the road. The active demonstration of obedience to these last two of six lessons happens within the walls of this building, and whenever

we are gathered as sisters and brothers in Christ. It is right here where our values and passions run up against those of others, and it is right here where we get to see if the instructions we are given by the only true head of the church will be our guide or not. If you have been associated with this church, or any church, for any length of time at all, you have found yourself at odds with another over something, and you have suffered some kind of slight or insult, intended or not, from another follower of Christ.

The submission principle is not easily applied, in the church or elsewhere, because we can and must work out differences in strongly-held opinions. But the demonstration of love, and prayers for those with whom we have differences, these commandments are non-negotiable. We will reach in Matthew soon enough the related issue of forgiving others, but for now we enough to deal with from these last two of the six lessons.

Be perfect, Jesus says, as your heavenly Father is perfect. We know that's not possible. Jesus knows that's not possible. His Father and ours knows that's not possible. The Holy Spirit that Jesus left with us knows that's not possible. Jesus speaks from a kingdom of heaven perspective. Yet these last two commandments, and the other four, are not optional. They are instructions by which we are to order our lives, so that we may indeed be salt and light to the earth. So that our righteousness might indeed exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. So that we may be children of our Father in heaven.

Be perfect. Be holy. Be salt and light to the world. And embrace the forgiving grace of Christ, which frees us to attempt the impossible.