

Pastor Geoffrey R. Boyle
7th Sunday after Epiphany
20 February 2011
Grace Lutheran Church, Wichita
Matthew 5:38-48

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

Every day great things are demanded from us.

The police demand that we drive the speed limit—
they enforce it by placing cop cars on on-ramps and behind signs, and so forth.
They're out to catch you, so don't mess up.

CEO's and other heads of companies demand high profit and low wages—
if you're not efficient and worth your pay, watch out!
You'll probably be fired.

Our families also demand much from us—
the kids need food regularly,
the wife needs attention and affection,
the husband needs space to work on the car and recognition for his work,
and on top of it all,
taxes need to be paid,
groceries bought,
clothes washed,
and the kids need to get to practice.

And if that wasn't enough of a demand,
the common message in American Christianity is that you must be the best
Christian you can be—
full of purpose, direction, joy, and success.
You must be winsome and outgoing, evangelistic and pious.
And if you're doing all you can do—do more.

With all these demands, surrounding us on a daily basis, wherever we go whatever we do,
when we hear the words of Christ,
“You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48),
we rightly want to cry out:
“I CAN'T!”

And that's when you know the Law has done it's work.

You can't.

It's too much.

Between school, family, job, country, church, and neighbor,
there's just too much.

When we fail on a daily basis—
 sometimes it's getting pulled over,
 sometimes it's being yelled at or fired by our boss,
 sometimes it's letting our family down,
 or a friend, or a neighbor,
 or our pastor—
 the last thing we want to hear is another demand at perfection.

And while we all know that perfection is out of the question,
 we comfort ourselves by *trying*.
 “*Well I know I'm not perfect, but I try my best.*”

Trying our best lets us wiggle out of the Law's judgment—
 it lets us justify ourselves,
 measure ourselves up against our own scale of good and bad,
 compare ourselves with others and find comfort in not being as bad as someone else.
 It lets us weigh the good and bad we've done and decide whether we should make the cut or not.

As long as you're trying you're on your way—
 and Jesus can't actually expect perfection, can He?

And who does He think He is by re-writing what Moses first laid down in the Law?—
 “**But I say to you...**” (5:39, 44)

Our first instinct while listening to this *Sermon on the Mount* is to assume Jesus speaks of us.
 That's generally our mistake when we read Scripture.
 We think it first and foremost speaks to and about us.
 But it doesn't.

The Holy Scriptures have only 1 story to tell—
 in all those pages, in all those books,
 written by many people over many years,
 in many different contexts,
 there's just one story.

And that story is the story of God coming to man in the person of Jesus Christ because man
 couldn't come to God.
 It's a story about the Holy God coming to sinful man,
 about the perfect God coming to a broken and horribly corrupt man,
 simply because God loves man.

If that's the one story of Scripture,
 the one message “spoken in many and various ways” (Heb 1:1),
 then why keep trying to read it as if it's a story about how you work your way to God?
 Why do you think it's a book of directions or instructions for what *you* should do?

Listen to what Jesus says,

“But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” (Mt 5:44-45)

Notice the reasoning Jesus gives for loving your enemies—

with sun and rain the Lord Himself loves and blesses both friend and enemy alike.

This is explained further—

those who simply love those who love them are no different than the *others*,
that is, than the pagan gods and demons.

Those other gods only love those who love them;
they only bless those who bless them;
they only help those who help them—

these gods and demons *need* man’s help.

Sacrifices become works of the people in order for their gods to
bless them.

With the pagan gods, the way of demons,

and the way we would have it if left to ourselves,

is all this for that,

equal shares,

“eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth” (Mt 5:38)!

But not with the Lord our God—

not with Christ—

with this Jesus it’s always from Him to us and always unequal shares!

He always goes first,

His gifts always precede our thanks,

and even if we tried, we could never go eye for eye with Christ.

We could never give enough thanks for what He’s done,

our sacrifices will never repay or equal His;

with Christ it’s just not fair, not equal, not eye for an eye.

He always gives more and first and better.

And that’s how you know that this *Sermon on the Mount* isn’t an instruction manual for how you can begin to repay God.

This is all about Christ:

He alone doesn’t resist the one who is evil (5:39),

but says, **“Friend, do what you came to do”** (26:50);

He alone turns the other cheek (5:39),

and goes silently before His accusers (26:63);

He alone gives His cloak as well (5:40),

which the soldiers divided amongst themselves (27:35);

He alone goes the extra mile (5:41),
 carrying His cross;
 He alone gives to the one who begs and doesn't refuse one from borrowing (5:42),
 but gladly gives and satisfies more than we could imagine—even His life.

Jesus is the one who truly loves His enemies, and prays for those who persecute Him (5:44),
“Father forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34).

Now, if this is all about Christ—
 all about what *He* does,
 how *He* perfectly loves and forgives both friend and foe alike—
 then what seemed at first an impossible demand,
“You therefore must be perfect” (5:48),
 is now simply a description of who Jesus is.

Jesus is perfect.

And that simply means He fulfills what Moses wrote in Leviticus, our Old Testament reading,
“You shall be holy, for I, Yahweh your God am holy” (Lev 19:2).

Holy and Perfect are the same thing—
 that's who God is;
 and, therefore,
 that's who *Jesus* is.

And if that's who Jesus is,
then that's who you are too.

For whatever God says of His Son,
 He says of you.

Whatever is true about His Son,
 is true about you.

For you, who are baptized, are all sons of God (Gal 3:26),
 you've all been baptized into *His* name,
 you've all been given *His* life—
 His body and His blood,
 His gifts and His benefits—
 what goes for Jesus goes for you.

And that means you therefore *are perfect!*
 You are holy,
because the Lord your God is holy and perfect and gives Himself to you.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit