

Be Perfect

Matthew 5:31-48

Key Verse: 5:48

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Today's passage is a continuation of the last lesson. Jesus challenges us to be perfect by living up to God's standard. Jesus teaches us what God's standard of righteousness is; it is very high. But Jesus does not teach us here how to attain it. The book of Galatians taught us that we can be righteous only by faith in Jesus, only by God's grace. This seems contradictory. How can we live by faith alone, and live up to God's high standard? In 5:17, Jesus said that he did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. Christ is the culmination of the law (Ro 10:4). Jesus fulfilled the law by obeying perfectly all of its demands. Jesus offered himself as a perfect sacrifice on the cross, once for all, and said, "It is finished" (Jn 19:30; Heb 10:10,12). We cannot obtain righteousness by our own efforts. We obtain righteousness only by faith in Jesus. Jesus clothes us with his righteousness through our faith (1 Cor 1:30). We are children of God by faith in Jesus. But practically, we still have a sinful nature, just as the Israelites did after coming out of bondage in Egypt. They were rebellious, complaining, dishonest, lustful, selfish, lazy and so on. They needed to grow in God's holy image through training. Likewise, we have to grow in God's holy image. Jesus shows us God's standard so that we may grow inwardly as children of God, and as citizens of his kingdom.

In 5:21-48, the phrase "you have heard that it was said...but I tell you" is repeated six times. The words "you have heard that it was said" refer to the teachings of the religious leaders. Over time, they developed their own interpretation of Scripture: the Talmud. They also passed on oral tradition--the traditions of the elders (Mk 7:3-4). Essentially these were human rules. They seemed to be based on Moses' Law, but in fact, it was a human system of righteousness which lowered God's standard. Jesus, who is Lord and Lawgiver, corrected their human ideas and taught the true meaning of the law. Jesus said, "...but I tell you...." Jesus introduced God's standard as God intended it to be. God's standard went far beyond their human ideas.

In the previous lesson we saw how Jesus corrected the religious leaders' teachings on murder and adultery. In today's passage Jesus continues to correct their teachings on divorce, oaths, retaliation and hating enemies. In doing so, Jesus introduces God's character in faithfulness, truthfulness, yielding and giving, and loving enemies. Let's learn God's standard and character so that we may grow as his children.

First, faithfulness (31-32). Look at verses 31-32. "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery." Jesus declared that divorce is tantamount to the sin of adultery. Jesus wanted to correct a misunderstanding about Moses' law, which said: "Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce." Moses taught this as a concession. In Moses'

time, women's rights were ignored. When a man's lustful desire was aroused, he could simply discard his wife and take a new one. Of course, the discarded woman was devastated, and her social status was unclear. In order to protect women's rights, and to discourage divorce, Moses required the giving of a certificate of divorce.

However, in Jesus' time, men took advantage of this law. When a man's passion was aroused for another woman, he gave his wife a certificate of divorce and sent her away, and then married the other woman. In Jewish law and culture, it was acceptable. It is also acceptable in American culture, with the difference being that women do this to men equally in America. But it was not acceptable to Jesus. Jesus declared that such a divorce was the sin of adultery. Jesus recognized only one reason for divorce: sexual immorality. In such cases, the marriage vow has already been broken by the unfaithful partner. Jesus did not coerce betrayed partners to remain with unfaithful ones. However, Jesus' main point is to encourage faithfulness. God's original intention for marriage was the lifelong union of a man and woman as "one flesh" (Gen 2:24). Jesus said in Matthew 19:6, "Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." Paul also upheld God's original standard for marriage (Eph 5:31). Divorce breaks a union that God has established. It is not just the separation of two human beings, but a breaking of vows made before God. Malachi 2:16 tells us that God hates divorce. Divorce is painful and tragic, especially when children are involved. Jesus' people must not divorce, but be faithful to God and their spouses. We can do this when we reflect God's faithfulness. God is faithful. As Matthew 1:1-17 reveals, even though his people were unfaithful, God kept his promise to them for over 2,000 years and sent the Messiah Jesus to save us from our sins. God's faithfulness is greater than our unfaithfulness. Jesus loves his people faithfully in spite of all our sins and shortcomings. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb 13:8). When Jesus dwells in our hearts, we can be faithful, just as he is faithful.

In America today there are so many divorces and broken families. The root cause is a godless attitude toward marriage. Ignoring God, people marry according to their own feelings and for their own benefit. So if their feelings change or they don't get the expected benefit, they divorce. When the people of Noah's time behaved like this, God destroyed them all with a flood. We must know that marriage is not a human institution; it was established by God. We should marry by faith in God and for God's purpose. Then God blesses the marriage and uses the family. Such families become a source of blessing in their community and in the world. Thank God for young people such as Paul and Elisabeth Chung who married by faith in God. During this summer we will have house church Bible study for younger couples, led by elders and senior staff and their wives. It is our prayer topic to raise 10,000 house churches in the faithfulness of God. Such families can build a healthy community and society. Such families can restore God's faithfulness in North America and make her a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Second, truthfulness (33-37). Look at verse 33. "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.'" The main intention of Moses' law was to limit exaggeration, deception and lying. Because of this, people did not know what the truth was and society was confused. So Moses taught them to make oaths before the Lord in important matters, so they might keep them without fail. In this way, Moses wanted to introduce some standard of truth for mutual trust. However, in Jesus' time

people took advantage of this by swearing in the name of heaven, earth, Jerusalem and their heads. It seemed to invoke God's name to guarantee their trustworthiness. But since they did not actually mention God, they could cleverly claim that their oath was not really binding. This was dishonest and it broke relationships; people could not trust one another. Jesus said in verse 37a, "All you need to say is simply, 'Yes,' or 'No.'" Jesus wants us to be truthful always without resorting to oaths. Jesus wants us to be true to our word. Jesus wants us to speak based on the truth and based on the facts. Verse 37b says, "Anything beyond this comes from the evil one." The evil one, Satan, is a liar and the father of lies; there is no truth in him (Jn 8:44). One who has Satan in their heart is bound to be a liar. We must resist Satan's clever lies. On the other hand, Jesus is the Truth (Jn 14:6). Jesus' words are trustworthy (Jn 17:17; 2 Tim 2:15). When Jesus and his word rule our hearts, we can be truthful and trustworthy. Then we can trust one another and build a healthy community.

Third, yielding and giving (38-42). Look at verse 38. "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'" This law was given by Moses to control the anger and vengeful spirit of a person who had been wronged. For example, if two people were fighting and one person's tooth was broken, he could easily become so angry that he wanted to break every tooth of the other person. But he had to control his anger and break only one tooth. It seems that justice could be applied equitably through this law. Yet in verse 39a Jesus said, "But I tell you, do not resist an evil person." Then in verses 39b-42 Jesus gave several examples: "If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other also...if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well...if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles...Give to the one who asks you...do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you." Wow! How can we do that? It is too difficult to practice. Jesus' disciples would be victims of abuse throughout their lifetimes. But Jesus is not teaching us to become spineless masochists. Jesus is not teaching us to enable others to carry out wicked deeds. Jesus himself, when slapped, rebuked the person who slapped him (Jn 18:23). In that case, a rebuke was the best response for the other person's benefit.

Basically, Jesus is teaching us to overcome anger and a vengeful spirit in responding to evil. When we are mistreated, mocked and imposed upon as Christians, we have a valid sense of injustice. As beings in God's image, we demand justice. However, how we seek justice makes a big difference. If our sense of injustice gives way to vengeance, we are headed down a slippery slope. We begin to seek revenge, taking matters into our own hands. As vengeance grows, it begets more vengeance and we may even pass it on to the next generation. This is the theme of many Chinese martial arts movies. If we resist evil with evil, we become evil. 1 Samuel 24:13 says, "As the old saying goes, 'From evildoers come evil deeds.'"

We should think seriously about how we respond to terrorists. In 1972 the Israeli Olympic team was kidnapped and the members were all killed by a terrorist group called Black September. In response the Israeli government formed a retaliation team to take vengeance. Their key verse was "an eye for an eye." They succeeded in assassinating Black September members one by one in various places throughout Europe. However, as the movie "Munich" depicts, in the end, the agents who did this became very dark with doubt, fear and hatred. They became like the terrorists. This

is why we must entrust vengeance to God. Romans 12:19 says, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay says the Lord." We must entrust justice to God, who alone can bring perfect justice. Romans 12:21 says, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." As we overcome pride with humility, so we can overcome evil with good. When we overcome evil by doing good, we can bring true and lasting change to the world we live in and build healthy communities.

Fourth, loving enemies (43-47). Look at verse 43. "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" Actually, the Old Testament does not say, "hate your enemy." This was a misinterpretation of the religious leaders. Jesus was correcting not the Old Testament, but the misinterpretations of it. It is natural to hate one's enemy. But Jesus' disciples must be different. In verses 44-45a Jesus said, "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven." These verses do not mean that if you love your enemy you will become a child of God. Rather, it means that as a child of God we can love our enemies. It is the characteristic of God's children. Verses 46-47 tell us that if we love those who love us, we are no different than tax collectors and pagans, and we do not deserve any reward from God. Jesus' disciples must love even our enemies, overcoming our selfishness. Only Jesus' disciples can do this; worldly people cannot.

How can we love our enemies who hate us and criticize us and even try to kill us? It is impossible to do with mere human effort. It is only possible when we receive God's love. There is a saying, "To err is human, but to forgive is divine." Loving enemies emanates from God. What is God like? Look at verse 45b. "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." God shows grace and care for all of his creatures. If God caused his sun to rise on the good, but not the evil, many would be in darkness. But God does not do that. God's blessing of sunshine and rain falls on the evil and good, and on the righteous and the unrighteous alike. God is not narrow-minded, exclusive, prejudiced and so on. God is deeply concerned for the happiness of mankind. God is very broadminded and embraces all kinds of people. This is God's common grace. Common grace is freely given to all, both friends and enemies.

However, God's love for enemies is expressed most fully through his Son. While we were God's enemies, he sent his one and only Son Jesus Christ to the cross to die for our sins. On the cross, Jesus prayed for his enemies, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34a). Jesus' prayer and sacrifice brought us from damnation to salvation, from death to life. This is God's love for his enemies. It is God's special grace for believers. When we receive God's love we can love even our enemies. In the book of Acts we see that St. Stephen could love his enemies. Even when he was being stoned by them, he could pray for them, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Ac 7:60).

A few years ago, a disturbed gunman entered a schoolhouse in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania and killed five Amish girls before killing himself. It was a horrible crime that shocked and deeply saddened people throughout the United States. But the Amish community did not respond with anger and hatred toward the gunman's family. Instead, they visited his wife and expressed their forgiveness to her and the family. They tried to comfort her with their love and

prayers. How could they do this? It was only because they had the love of God in their hearts through Jesus' forgiving grace.

As many of us know, Missionaries Jim Elliot and Nate Saint were two of five people who were martyred by Waodani tribesmen in Ecuador in 1956. When Jim's wife, Elizabeth, heard of this, her first thought was that now she must preach the gospel to the Waodani. She visited the people who had killed her husband, lived among them, and gradually shared the gospel with them. They accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior. In the course of time, a Waodani man, Mancayani, who had helped kill the missionaries, confessed his deed to Steve Saint, Nate's son. Mancayani wanted Steve to drive a spear through his body as retaliation. But Steve forgave Mancayani with the love of God. They became friends, and are still so to this day. As vengeance brings more vengeance, so hatred breeds more hatred. That is a vicious cycle. But we can overcome hatred by God's love. God's love is the most powerful weapon that extinguishes hatred and evil. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. We have no reason to hate each other. We have only reason to love one another. However, sometimes we treat our brothers and sisters like enemies. Sometimes we think, "I don't want to see that person's face again. If they were not in my fellowship, I would be happy." How can we overcome this? We must receive God's love in our hearts. Then we can forgive others and love others, even those who hurt us. If we practice this love in our community, we can gradually grow to love even terrorist enemies. Let's come to God, receive his love, and love one another with the love of God.

Jesus concluded with these words, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (48). Now we can understand that "Be perfect" does not mean to strive for perfection by our own effort. Rather it is Jesus' hope for his disciples to grow in the image of God. God is our Father. There is a saying, "Like father, like son." A son tries to imitate his father. Likewise, as God's children, we imitate our Father in heaven. God is perfect. So we should be perfect. God is holy. So we should be holy. God is faithful. So we should be faithful. God is truthful. So we should be truthful. God is sacrificial and giving. So we should be sacrificial and giving. God is love. God's love extends to all kinds of sinners. So we should love others, even our enemies. We should grow until we become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Eph 4:13). We should grow as princes and princesses of God who can warmly embrace all kinds of people from our hearts. When we grow in the image of God we are truly happy and we can live a blessed and fruitful life. Let's thank God for his great love for us, and hope for us, and let this love dwell in our hearts so that we may grow as his precious children.