

“Nobody’s Perfect! Right?”  
Matthew 5:38-48

I have a great fondness for the short expression, “Nobody’s perfect.” I use it more often than I want to admit. If you find a typographical error in today’s worship bulletin or hear me make a mistake in the announcements or get tongue-tied during the sermon and call one of these problems to my attention, I am apt to say, “Nobody’s perfect.” If I look at a half-eaten candy bar in my hand and remember that I’m still trying to lose those pesky ten pounds, I might shrug and think, “Well, nobody’s perfect,” and eat the remainder. If the light changes from yellow to red while I’m driving under it, I look in all directions for the blue light and I have my argument ready: “Nobody’s perfect.”

And I will do my best to give you the same break. If you forget something or make a mistake, I will come to your defense with the same statement. “Nobody’s perfect” is a convenient explanation for minor mistakes. With this brief comment we try to get ourselves off the hook when we know we have erred, and by nodding in agreement when others use it we give them a break. “Nobody’s perfect” can be one of those little niceties that help smooth out our social interaction.

It does wear a bit thin when the nature of the offense deepens. When a sports figure is caught using a performance-enhancing drug, this rationale does not seem quite adequate. When a politician tells a lie or cheapens the

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whole system with his conduct, it's hard to slough it off when he says, "Everybody does it. Nobody's perfect."

In most situations, though, this comment is a good reminder of our humanity and our imperfections. Indeed, no one is without flaw. Any person who thinks that he can be flawless in attitude or conduct is dangerously self-deceived. Any person who actually tries to live each day in some pattern of legalistic perfection is in for a huge disappointment.

Perhaps I speak for you when I give this testimony. I begin every day with the intention of doing outstanding work, saying just the right things to all the people I contact (things that will bless and help them), responding to every need, finding some kind of enrichment for my spirit, and spending time in communion with God. Yet I must confess that I end almost every day reflecting on the weaknesses of what I have done, the wrong word spoken or the right word unspoken, the inability to get around to every need, and hurried moments of worship and reflection. Instead of taking pride in a perfect day, I usually express thanks for God's grace that covers my shortcomings and gives me the opportunity to face another day. Is that the way you feel as well? "Nobody's perfect!" We all can say "Amen" to that!

But even that observation, as fitting as it is, seems to be an incomplete statement about human nature. It says something about us, but it doesn't say

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everything about us. It is a half-truth, and a half-truth can be deadly. Jesus had a higher opinion of human nature than that. Oh, he knew the weakness we all have. He put up with hot headed and self-centered disciples; he interacted with the proud and legalistic Pharisees, with madmen, with those rejected persons such as lepers and prostitutes and tax-collectors; and he endured opponents every bit as fiery as those persons we have seen on the news in town hall meetings over the past few days. Yet Jesus rarely spoke negatively about conduct. He kept calling persons to something high and noble deep within them.

In a set of teachings that we call the Sermon on the Mount Jesus was trying to get his listeners to go beyond the old “eye for eye and tooth for tooth” mentality. He encouraged them to go the second mile when Roman soldiers forced them to carry backpacks, to give their cloak as well as their shirt when a creditor demanded payment, to get away from the practice of designating persons and groups as friends and enemies. As if to give the whole lesson a single point, he said, “You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Over my years of Bible study I have had a good/bad feeling toward this statement. At times I have thought it the most discouraging thing Jesus ever said. On the surface it arouses fear, because it seems to imply a goal that is unattainable. It can also cause confusion, because it sets up an impossible

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standard for discipleship. Back when theologians and philosophers discussed ethics seriously, this statement was placed in a category called “Counsels of Perfection” which meant that only a few deeply pietistic Christians were to be concerned with this call, that the mass of persons could not measure up. Jesus never took that approach to teaching. What he said was and is for everyone. And you can’t pick and choose among the sayings of Jesus. “You must be perfect” is spoken to every disciple. That’s hard to accept.

But when you walk around to the other side and look at this call from another perspective, you can’t help but be drawn to a great hope. Perfect? Does Jesus really think we can approach that? At this point in my pilgrimage I’m on the positive side. I don’t think Jesus would plant within us a hope beyond realization. He issues the invitation, and he offers leadership and companionship along the way to wholeness. Yes, you and I can be perfect!

Interpreters and preachers have done a lot of damage to this statement. We have tried to make it palatable, and sometimes we have made it meaningless. Some people think perfection means sinless or flawless. So we define the “good” person as the one who avoids wrong. One man looked at the guidelines for Christian living that were given in a Sunday School lesson and said, “This list simply tells what a Christian *should not* do.

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According to that my dog could be a good Christian! What are the things a Christian *should* do?”

And that's the point! The word “perfect” that gives us so much trouble comes from the term “teleios.” That word can be translated purposeful, full-grown, goal-oriented or perfect. Some interpreters today like the word “compassion,” because it seems to bring all these concepts together and to describe the nature of God. In this location in the Sermon “perfect” seems to be the right word. You would think that modern translations of the Bible would use one of the other possible meanings. I checked ten translations done after 1970; nine of them retain the word “perfect.”

Therefore, let us take Jesus at his word: “You must be perfect.” And let's get away from the idea of sinlessness and avoiding things that are wrong. No one who takes seriously a call to discipleship is going to intentionally live a corrupt life. The aim is to show “perfection” in acts of love. Jesus gives the statement in the context of everyday activity. People of his day could show perfection by going the second mile, by giving the inner garment as well as the outer, and by loving enemies.

When Jesus gave the parable of the Great Judgment, the king did not ask whether those before him avoided sin. The question had to do with feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, taking in the stranger, clothing

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the naked, and visiting the imprisoned. That is the real meaning of ethical living. We have made it too simple and easy by thinking of perfection as sinlessness.

The other day I read the story of Father Damien, the Belgian priest who was sent by the Catholic Church to Hawaii in 1863. Father Damien arrived in Hawaii during an epidemic of leprosy. Lepers were being taken to exile on the island of Molokai where they received no medical care and only the barest essentials for life. Usually, people with leprosy died quickly. Father Damien opposed the situation. He secured permission to establish a colony for lepers on the island of Lalapapa. He built a hospital, homes, and a school. He brought in doctors and nurses. Father Damien never avoided contact with his flock. In 1883 he found that he also had contracted leprosy. Since leprosy was associated with sexual immorality, Damien was accused of the most horrible sins. But he continued his work of making a place of compassion and comfort for persons with the disease. In 1889 he died from the illness. In 1959, when Hawaii became a state, two statues of state heroes were set up in the Capitol. One was of Father Damien.

I have seen plaques and statues to heroes in countless places for a huge variety of humanitarian and political contributions. I have never seen a statue or a memorial to someone who has lived a morally perfect life. The point here is compassion and service. I have always heard that Jesus lived a

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sinless life. I don't know whether he did or not. I find that that really is not important to me. What is important is that Jesus loves you and me so much that he has given himself for us and has become a lasting part of our lives.

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16 August 2009