**March 27, 2022 Matthew 5:43-48**

***Perfection***

**Scripture:**

*Matthew 5:43-48 NRSV (43)"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' (44)But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, (45)so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. (46)For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? (47)And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? (48)Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

**Notes:**

1. We Must Love Our ***Enemies***
   1. Jesus says it’s not ***enough*** just to love your neighbors.
   2. Loving our ***enemies***, is unexpected and difficult.
   3. Loving ***enemies*** goes above and beyond expectations
2. What is ***Perfect*** Love?
   1. The Sermon on the Mount is all about breaking the ***tradition*** of keeping the law.
   2. ***Perfection*** should only be viewed through the lens of love.
   3. You cannot be ***perfect***, as your heavenly Father is ***perfect***, apart from ***love***.
3. ***Love*** and ***Perfection*** are connected, and can’t be separated.
   1. We can give everything we have to the poor, but if we don’t have ***love,*** it is meaningless.
   2. Since the very being of God is ***love***, then we too ought to have ***love*** as our driving force.
   3. When we truly learn to ***love*** our ***enemies***, we won’t even have ***enemies*** anymore.
4. The call to ***perfection*** isn’t an isolated one; it’s a command to ***love*** our ***enemies***.
   1. Focus less on staying in the lines perfectly, and more on the messy work of ***loving*** others well
   2. We can be a ***perfect*** picture of God’s ***love*** being extended to his creation through us.
   3. Confess and lay down our obsession with ***perfect*** actions, and pick up our call to ***love*** so we may find ***perfection***.

**Script:**

“Perfection”, what comes to mind when we hear this word. For me it reminds me of the struggle that I have had my entire life, trying to be the perfect person in this world. Trying to be the perfect son. So many times, I struggled with the knowledge that I had done things, and if my parents would find out they would have been very disappointed; yet somehow, I think they knew of my faults and failures; yet they loved me anyway. Trying to be the perfect brother. Times when I would tell my parents the wrongs my siblings committed, and then I would wonder how they could still call me brother. Trying to be the perfect friend. Yet there were times when I betrayed these friends, and those who are still my friends, forgave me and reassured me. Trying to be the perfect husband, and those moments in my life when I wonder if I am being the person Janice deserves and needs. So many times I feel as if I fall short, yet she assures me that these things do not matter. Trying to be the perfect father. Striving to teach my sons what is most important when it comes to being an adult, and then in my actions, falling short of the expectations I have shared. And now, trying to be the perfect grandfather. If I could just make a difference in their lives, if I could share with them one piece of advice, something they could carry with them wherever they go, and it would have a lasting positive impact on their life; that would make me feel as if I was a success.

“Perfection” is one of those words that weighs us down. Some of us hear it and our inner voice begins to tell us all the ways we’ve failed. Others feel the weight of legalism and the never-ending list of what we must do to be enough. Or maybe we hear the word and instantly think, *What’s the point?* It’s unattainable, unreachable, and laughable, so we just give up. It’s something that cannot be achieved, so we run the other direction.

Our passage today is not an easy verse to read. So many have wrestled with these words commanding us to “be perfect.” We read this verse and struggle, but maybe our struggle is because we read this verse alone. Maybe it’s not meant to be about legalism or perfectionism or never sinning again. Maybe it’s not about all of that burden we carry at all. Maybe it’s not meant to be read on its own. Maybe it’s only supposed to be read and understood, in conjunction with the verses that come before it, the verses that talk about loving our enemies. If that’s true, then maybe perfection is less about what we are *doing* and more about whom we are *loving*. Join me in the reading of our Gospel passage today from Matthew 5:43-48

*Matthew 5:43-48 NRSV (43)"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' (44)But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, (45)so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. (46)For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? (47)And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? (48)Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

How Should We Live as the People of God? This verse on perfection is taken from the broader Sermon on the Mount. We have looked in depth at what it means to live the Beatitudes the attitudes that the people of God are to exhibit. We are to be poor in spirit, merciful, meek, peacemakers, etc. But Jesus moves on to correct many of the ways people have been interpreting the law incorrectly.

The law says not to murder, but Jesus tells them it isn’t enough just to avoid murder. The people of God are supposed to be merciful and compassionate. The law says not to commit adultery, but Jesus tells them that lust, treating people as objects to be acquired and consumed—is sin. The law permits divorce , as long as the divorcer presents the wife with a certificate of divorce, but Jesus tells them they can’t just go around divorcing their wives for burning their toast. That’s a silly example, but it’s the type of reality women lived at the time. Women couldn’t divorce men only men could initiate divorce, and it left women destitute, without any resources. Jesus says that to treat women that way is unlawful. The law says not to break an oath, but Jesus says they shouldn’t even be swearing oaths because their word should mean something. The people of God should be living in such a way that when they say they are going to do something, people know they are going to do it. The law permits “eye for eye, and tooth for tooth” (Matt. 5:38), but Jesus says we must humanize ourselves and our oppressors. It’s important to note that this is not about allowing people to abuse us; rather, it is a radical expression of revealing oppression through looking the oppressor in the eye. It is a way to humanize both the oppressed and the oppressor.

In these verses before 5:48, Jesus has reworked and reinterpreted traditional Jewish law, showing them that they have been living to the letter of the law in a legalistic way, and therefore missing the point. It wasn’t about following the law to the letter; it is about the heart of the law: caring for the oppressed (often women); being people of integrity; living lives that embody the Beatitudes. Jesus is showing them that perfectly following the letter of the law doesn’t lead to righteousness or holiness if they are focused on keeping boundaries. They must be focused on what kind of people they are called to be.

We Must Love Our Enemies. When Jesus finally gets to the part about loving our enemies, he’s doing the same thing he’s been doing all along reinterpreting the law for the people of God. The law is interpreted as loving one’s neighbor, as in: those who are like you, those who are near you, those whom you understand, and those whom it benefits you to love. In light of that, hating one’s enemy is natural after all, if we loved them, they wouldn’t be our enemies! These are not our neighbors. These are people who are not like you, who don’t live near you, whom you don’t understand, and whom you gain no benefits from loving. They’re just as likely to harm you as to help you, in fact.

But Jesus says it’s not enough just to love your neighbors (i.e., those whom it is easy to love); you must also love your enemies. This is about humanizing people once again. The scope of the Sermon on the Mount has a humanizing pattern illustrating the image of God in people who are often treated as “other.” Often it is women, but we also see places where we are expected to humanize ourselves, or oppressors.

In Matthew 6, we see Jesus calling people to humanize the needy. This pattern of humanizing others extends to this passage about enemies as well. One of the first steps in creating an enemy is to dehumanize them. There are many examples of this, but maybe the easiest to see in our world is by calling people stupid, or idiots. When we dehumanize them, it becomes easier to hate them. If they aren’t entirely human, it becomes easier to allow that hate, to turn into viciousness or violence, or more. Loving enemies becomes this radical notion that enemies are *people* who need to be loved too.

Loving our neighbors is easy, and expected of us. It is expected that we will love people who are like us, who have the same goals, who have a similar faith system, who look like us, etc. Loving our enemies, on the other hand, is unexpected and difficult. There is not necessarily a benefit to loving our enemies. We are expected to hate people who are different than us, who have different goals, different faith systems, who look different than us, etc.

Loving enemies goes above and beyond expectations in a way that ushers in the kingdom of God. God illustrates God’s love for all of humanity by sending rain upon both the righteous and the unrighteous. All are beloved by God. Because we are to live as the children of God in the world, we are to love them too. Even the worst people we can think of criminals, hateful people, all those people we don’t like even they love their family members and close friends. There’s nothing remarkable about doing that. It truly reveals a life guided by the Spirit when a person loves their enemies too.

What is Perfect Love?Only after the His words on loving our enemies does Jesus give the line about being perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect. This placement seems intentional because the Sermon on the Mount is all about breaking the tradition of keeping the law in legalistic ways, and moving to the heart of the issue. In this context, then, perfection isn’t about getting all the i’s dotted and the t’s crossed but about what the purpose of the law is. In this context, perfection should only be viewed through the lens of love.

Theologian Mildred Wynkoop said, “When holiness and love are put together, the analogy of the two sides of a coin would be closer to the truth. Neither side can be both sides at the same time. Sides are not to be equated, but the obverse side is as essential to its existence as the face. Love is the essential inner character of holiness, and holiness does not exist apart from love. That is how close they are, and in a certain sense they can be said to be the same thing. At least Wesley consistently defined holiness, as well as perfection, as love.” In other words, you cannot be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect, apart from love. They are connected, and can’t be separated.

When we learn to love well when we forgo the obsession with trying to follow the law to the letter, and instead focus on whom we are loving, which should include our enemies we don’t just find love, but find the perfection, the holiness, that verse 48 is talking about. This idea isn’t isolated to Matthew.

First Corinthians 13, maybe the most popular scripture on love, has similar words. We can have faith that moves mountains and give everything we have to the poor, but if we don’t have love it is meaningless. This is an idea that is at the heart of the gospel. Love is at the heart of who we are supposed to be as God’s people.

This idea extends to 1 John as well, where we see that we know what love is because of Christ. God is love, we are told in 1 John 4:8. Since the very being of God is love, then if we are part of God, then we too ought to have love as our driving force. Perfect love drives out fear, says 1 John 4:18, which connects well with the command to love our enemies. If love drives out fear, then when we truly learn to love our enemies, we won’t even have enemies anymore.

If we focus on that word “perfection” with all the cultural baggage and context we bring to it today, we can drown in it. We can get caught up in all the ways we already fall short. But the call to perfection isn’t an isolated one. It’s a command in the midst of a call to love our enemies. Maybe that is the truly challenging thing here—to love our enemies. But love is at the heart of this message.

We must learn to focus less on staying in the lines perfectly, and more on the messy work of loving others well because, when we do that, we will find we have created the picture we were always meant to make a perfect picture of what it means to be a child of God in this world. a perfect picture of what loving our neighbor as our self looks like A perfect picture of God’s love being extended to his creation through us.

So in the midst of this Lenten season, may we confess and lay down our obsession with perfect actions, and pick up our call to love so that we may truly find perfection. in the way our heavenly Father is perfect.