

**“Perfect is as Perfect Does”**

+ 7 Epiphany A +

Leviticus 19:1-2,9-18; 1 Corinthians 3:10-11,16-23;Matthew 5:38-48

February 23, 2014

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! The texts for this message are the lessons for this day.

Today’s Gospel is a small part of what is commonly known as “The Sermon on the Mount,” a sermon, I might point out that is longer than any I have ever written, so that by the time Jesus had finished talking, it says that “the crowds were astonished at His teaching because He taught them as one having authority and not as their scribes.” Nowhere is it written than anyone said, “Thank Heavens Jesus has finally finished preaching I have lunch plans and company coming over later to get ready for.”

Beginning as it does with those lovely “Beatitudes” this sermon goes on to make even the most pious believer feeling rather uneasy because for all the nice behavior it commands, what it is asking of us is impossible. Oh, we may get things right once in a while, maybe even more than once in a while, but we’re never going to master all that Jesus commands – especially when you jump to the end of the Gospel to the very last sentence, “Be perfect, therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect.” No wiggle room there as it leaves us with the conclusion, “Perfect Is As Perfect Does.” It is just that simple and just that impossible.

Why is it, then, that people like the Sermon on the Mount? The Mountain part sounds pretty – like Julie Andrews singing at the beginning of *The Sound of Music* in an Alpine valley (she didn’t climb – she was taken up to that meadow in a helicopter). I like the idea that preacher/teachers sat to speak in those days (especially these past few months). But once you wipe that image away what you are left with, apparently, is a long list of stuff you will never be able to accomplish, attitudes you cannot firmly lock into your soul and the final crushing blow: “Be Perfect; Be as perfect as God is perfect.”

If that’s all there is, well, the Sermon on the Mount and particularly this part of it hardly qualifies as “Gospel”, as “Good News.” It may be a decent set of rules for living; might be helpful that way, but for weary sinners as we most certainly are, it is a “to do” list that will never become a “have done” list.

So let’s dig into this text a bit. Jesus begins by saying, “You have heard it said,” and He is speaking to the scribes of Israel who took the laws of Moses and interpreted them and applied them to settle disputes and provide guidance. And as always happens, when a person or a people live by laws, those laws always increase over time to try and fix or accommodate new situations but they cannot cover every situation, leading to even more laws - laws upon laws and different shades and interpretations of the laws that are on the books.

Sometimes that's good, as for example, when Jesus cited the Old Testament Law "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," but human beings being what they are tend to distort and twist something into something it is not. Technically, this is called in Latin, the Lex Talionis or the Law of Retribution and its intent was to put limits upon punishments so that the punishment fit the crime and did not **exceed** it – no multi-million dollar settlement for spilling a cup of hot McDonald's coffee on yourself because there was no warning on the cup of coffee. Really – it was to set a simple limit but you know as well as I do, how that law is used as Biblical permission to get even – viciously even – "pound of flesh" even. This is why war gets uglier and uglier and violence escalates upon violence as it has throughout history even, and sometimes especially, as nations move toward peace. One last shot – one final act of retribution - 6,000 more people have died in Syria since the "peace talks" have begun with each side believing they are just taking "an eye for an eye."

What is even more difficult for us to understand in our society is that when Jesus walked this earth, slapping someone was shaming them and considered an appropriate way to treat a servant – give them a whack upside the head to remind them who is in control. It was typically a "back-handed cuff" but Jesus is saying, "then turn your other cheek" – take a full-force slap. I had a student show up to school one day with those bruises on his face. You could see the outline of the fingers of the hand – no child – no individual deserves that – to be humiliated and bruised.

There is more to this law of retribution - if someone sued you, you could take their coat - that was justice, but Jesus said, "go beyond justice and give him your outer cloak, too." Now a Jewish man would always have another garment beneath for modesty but it gets cold in Israel at night so the scribes insisted that you return at least one garment by nightfall. Jesus was speaking to people who lived in a brutal world – certainly more brutal than ours in many respects: any Roman soldier who was tired of carrying his soldier stuff was permitted to snag any "Izzy the Israelite" off the street and make him carry it a mile and when that mile was done, find another one to go another mile, and so on and so on. That, by the way is the reason Simon of Cyrene carried Jesus' cross when He stumbled and fell. He didn't offer; he had no choice when a Roman centurion said, "Hey you, pick up that cross and haul it to Calvary."

Do you see where all this is going? Never pass a beggar by. Law upon law perfectly plotted out to keep or to fudge on – even "Love your neighbor." Oh the scribes had that all worked out parsing out who was your neighbor and who wasn't. Hatred toward another was perfectly acceptable if they weren't your "neighbor." Law after law after law that they couldn't keep (if they were honest) and neither can we (if we're honest – and what's more we don't want to do them very well. We don't want to do them at all.

So, where is the Gospel in all of this? The answer was right in front of them and us: embodied in the One and Only One whose face was struck, whose coat and cloak and everything else were stolen from Him as He was crucified, who was compelled to carry His own cross, who never passed a beggar by, who believed that everyone was His neighbor and who loved even those who engineered His murder.

The Gospel for the morning is just like the Gospel for Life—not in words or laws or rules, but in Jesus—the second mile man, the give up everything, even for His enemies man. The Son so perfect before His Father in Heaven that He has perfection to spare, enough for you, enough for me, so that sinners though we are, God looks at us and smiles because He sees the righteousness of our brother Jesus who is by our side, holding us up, lifting us up and loving us all along our journey through this life and into eternity.

You see “Perfect Is As Perfect Does,” and when the Perfect One has done Perfectly, all who follow Him share in His perfection. We call that grace - undeserved, unlimited and though often underestimated, nothing less than the power of God turned loose for us, in us and through us. Amen.

Now may our holy and compassionate God continue to lead us in His way of forgiveness and peace, through His Perfect Son, our brother, Jesus.