

“Being Perfect”

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Readings: 1 Corinthians 3.10-11, 16-23

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.

Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.

Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written,

‘He catches the wise in their craftiness’, and again,
‘The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.’

So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

Matthew 5.38-48

‘You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 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. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.

Be perfect, therefore, as your Father in heaven is perfect. Not a lot of wiggle room there. Not, do your best. Not, if you can't say something nice don't say anything at all. Not, I like you just the way you are. No. Jesus says, be perfect.

Of course, Jesus isn't the only one who tells us to be perfect. We live in a world of false perfection, surrounded by airbrushed images and virtual realities. If you have seen the movie *Black Swan*, you'll have given some thought to the kind of perfection demanded of artists, and to the question of how, ultimately, it is achieved. The reality TV phenomenon is only the latest bizarre twist in false perfection. You create a whole new industry in order to pretend that something not quite real is real, because if it were really real it wouldn't be interesting, but if it didn't seem real it wouldn't be perfect for what you are doing.

Let me go on a bit. Living in a completely commercialized culture, we are bombarded with relentless advertising urging us to improve. It just isn't good enough if your kitchen is fairly clean (you've heard that commercial), or if your teeth are pretty well straight, or the paint colours in your house more or less coordinated. They have to be perfectly clean, perfectly straight, perfectly coordinated.

And then, because of changes in technology, there is a kind of perfection that we come to expect in things – you wouldn't expect to hear a little goof on a commercial

music recording now, because it would have been digitally patched. I remember doing background research on something when I worked at CIDA – and found cabinet documents from the 60s with typos in them! (I don't mean handwritten '*not*'s, that's another sermon, but typos – the documents went to the *Cabinet* with spelling mistakes in them.)

In *The Economist* this week the cover story is about 3 dimensional printing, a technology – probably genuinely revolutionary – that will allow perfect copies of objects to be made. 'Print me a Stradivarius', it is called.

The bar just goes higher and higher. So we are already carrying quite a burden of imperfection when we hear this passage.

Through the centuries, the church has added to this burden with a call for moral perfection, often using the very words we have read. Be better than others, otherwise, what is the point? Taking the words from Corinthians that Verlyn read, *You are the temple of God and God dwells within you*, Christians have often pressed each other to be conformed to a new standard of holiness. As Jesus himself says, even the tax-collectors love the ones who love them. So love more – be even nicer, even kinder, even more helpful than those around you. But it isn't always a pretty sight. Sometimes in the church community it seems that the objective is to become 'Holier than thou', with a kind of pinched prissiness that only the terminally smug can muster.

Worse yet, these passages have been used against the very people Jesus always sought out and encouraged. They've been used to argue that the oppressed should submit to violence, or that victims should consent to abuse, or that those who are already vulnerable will be more perfect if they tolerate what is intolerable. Jesus' words, *Do not resist an evil-doer*, have sometimes been twisted to mean become a doormat, become a victim. Give in, give up – give your coat, lend your money, let them hit you again, let them force you to serve. Be perfectly docile. Perfectly passive. As we see and hear the stories that are retold in Black History Month, we recognize that this pernicious interpretation of perfection is part of what must be remembered and repudiated.

The problem with all these ‘perfections’ is that they are destructive nonsense. Jesus isn’t talking about the superficial perfection of a sparkling kitchen counter, nor the self-righteous perfection of the smug goody-goody, nor the misguided perfection of acquiescence to evil. Not perfect like the photocopied Stradivarius, says Jesus, be perfect like God.

Well, so now we are down to the hard part, for whatever might it be to be perfect like God? How would we say that God is perfect? What are the aspects of God’s perfection? The passage gives one hint. God’s love rains on the poor and the rich, the good and the evil, the righteous and the unrighteous.

God’s goodness seeks out the possibility for goodness in every person and in every situation, no matter how dreadful. The word of care in the prison camp. The consoling touch that brings peace even in sorrow. The courage to take a stand when everything around is oppression and tyranny. There is nothing that God won’t work with, no set of circumstances in which God will abandon hope. The kind of perfection Jesus has in mind for us is that absolute openness to the possibility that something or someone will be transformed. So in this sense God’s perfection is not static but constantly moving and changing, constantly looking for its opportunity.

(I don’t know if any of you have driven with a GPS gizmo in your car. When they work well they are amazing. You set the address for where you want to go, and the machine shows you a map of how to get there. Then as you drive, a very human-sounding voice accompanies you. You can set it for different accents, or male or female voice. From time to time it tells you where you are and how far away your destination is. It prompts you when a turn or new road is coming. Get ready to turn in 500 yards it says, 200, 50. Obeying the voice will take you to your destination. But what if you miss one of those turns? The voice gets a bit anxious just at the moment you should make your move, but if you go wrong, what happens? A little silence, and then, possibly with a tone of slight exasperation, it says, ‘recalculating’. And then it starts to prompt you again. It really won’t let you go wrong.

That is the kind of perfection Jesus recommends – keep on recalculating. If someone strikes you, do not accept their definition of the situation by responding in

anger. Change the paradigm. Challenge the interminable cycle of enemy-making by refusing to take action within the given framework – change the game. If someone forces you to go a mile, do not accept the terms of that order. In going the second mile you will have transformed the first mile too. Do this because that is what God does. Maya Angelou says that we can't change the past but we can change our attitude to it. In that sense you can't change history but you can rewrite it. We have to rewrite it, actually. You can raise up the unsung heroes, you can question the version that excludes or diminishes. You can learn to detect the errors of your own past. In Angelou's words, you can plant forgiveness, you can seed humility, you can exchange love for hate.

The Greek word translated as perfection implies completeness – integrity and wholeness rather than faultlessness. God's perfection is the drive to integrity and wholeness. It is not static but active, not brittle but robust and persistent. Jesus invites us to share God's radical openness to the goodness that is to be discovered, the goodness within us, the goodness among us and the goodness around us.

Be perfect, says Jesus. Thanks be to God. Amen.