

## Perfect

*Matthew 4:38-48 ~ October 23, 2016 ~ Heritage Lutheran Church*

***You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.***

When I was in third grade my teacher had us ask our mothers for an old shoe. This seems like an odd request for a third grader to make even today. But that was part of the fun. We were supposed to keep it mysterious. My mom, a teacher herself, played along without comment. So I showed up in class with an old, obviously worn out, woman's shoe.

Our teacher invited us to sit down at a table equipped with bottles of Elmer's glue and plastic containers filled with a variety of shapes of dry macaroni. Our mission was to completely cover the outside of our shoe by gluing on a pattern using the dried macaroni. I was very into patterns. So I took a moment to conceive the perfect pattern to apply to the outside of mom's old shoe. I was very excited about this process when I learned that this was the first step in making my mother's day gift. But no matter how I sweated over the precision of placing the macaroni just so... there was an inevitable slip of the glue here or a slight chip in the macaroni there. I was aiming for perfection, but the final result was somewhat less than ideal.

I was greatly heartened when our teacher took each of our creations outside and sprayed them carefully with gold paint inside and out. The result was a very classy looking golden slipper. We were then allowed to further decorate by gluing on glass beads and sequins. Here at last I thought is my chance to bring perfection to this creation. I can cover all the problems in the macaroni with beads and sequins. Well I liked the result, but still it fell short of perfection.

The final touch was to choose from the teachers stock of plastic flowers to slip inside the shoe which completed my masterpiece. Again I very much liked the effect of the overall creation, but it lacked the perfection that I had intended.

The present was wrapped and finally delivered to my mom on Mother's day. As she unwrapped it, I watched closely hoping that the result of my labors would give her some pleasure in spite of its shortfalls. As she finished working her way through the abundance of tape I had used to make it secure, her eyes glistened as she set it down on

a nearby table to admire it. And then she said, “Oh Tom, it is perfect, just perfect!” And as I looked again I saw that she was right, it was perfect.

***You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.***

We are now coming to the end of the first part of Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. In the beginning of this section Jesus started by saying, ***“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*** And at first that sort of floored us. The leaders of Israel made a big deal about their righteousness. They had divided the law into 613 minute details about what one should and should not do. They spent their whole lifetimes scrupulously doing each of their 613 laws with great care. Who could be more righteous than them?

Well on further examination we have discovered that the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees was not everything we thought it was. In fact by the time Jesus examines the seven pointed subjects he does in Matthew 5:21 – 47 the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees starts to look pretty shabby. Their arrogance about never killing is defeated by a flash of anger with a brother. Their pride in remaining chaste is undone by a single lustful glance. Jesus unveils their hypocrisy about divorce and oaths. In today’s text he shows how their pious attitude is undone by their vindictive behavior. Jesus shows how their blatant distortion of God’s word actually leads them to hate the very people God’s righteousness demands that they love. In truth Jesus shows that being more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees actually takes little or no effort at all. Their so called righteousness is really a hypocritical scam. What then does it take to be more righteous than the scribes and the Pharisees? Why it takes nothing. It takes nothing at all except to stop listening to their legalistic lies.

So it seems like there is not all that much effort to exceeding the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. Their legalism led them into hypocrisy and futile arrogance. But when we come to today’s text and our legalism gets a chance to kick in. The legalistic posturing of Christians can be just as hypocritical and arrogant as that of the scribes and Pharisees. Here is how that happens. First we read in today’s text:

***“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 the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him***

***have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.***

We love it when Jesus contradicts the scribes and the Pharisees. Their vindictive “eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth” stuff needs to go. Turning the other cheek, walking the extra mile, generosity and self-sacrifice are all part of our understanding of the Christian life style. This stuff all seems pretty doable to us. So we get all excited about living up to Jesus standards and being good Christians. Now, however, is when the warning bells should be going off. We are starting to get ourselves into real trouble with this kind of thinking. The reason that this is so dangerous is that this is exactly the same line of reasoning that the scribes and Pharisees used to get themselves into so much trouble. They interpreted their relationship with God on the basis of how they did the law. They were all revved up about developing their own righteousness through doing the law.

This only gets worse when we hear Jesus say:

***You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,***

Loving our enemies seems like a perfectly fine idea as long as it stays on the drawing board. But when you get in the heat of battle, loving one’s enemy and praying for them is a very confusing and frustrating path. The trouble with enemies is that some of them are loveable but many of them are just plain evil. Some of them we can pray for, but most of them we need to pray against. We can work with the idea of loving a neighbor as our self; especially if the neighbor is fairly neighborly. But to love an enemy starts to get very complicated. How do we love them if God’s word clearly calls for us to resist them? We know that Jesus is right in his teaching, but it starts to sound like it is more than we can actually do.

Then we get to the end of this section and we run into something Jesus says that seems to put us completely out of the running for eternal life. He says:

***You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.***

Do you all get that? The requirement for true righteousness is to be perfect. Be perfect in the way God the Father is perfect. What do you think of that? Doesn’t that just lift

you out of your seat and get you started down the path of righteousness. Be perfect, that should be pretty doable, don't you think? Not! Absolutely not!

In fact this whole line of reasoning just takes us back to the garden with Adam and Eve. Satan says to Eve as she considers eating the forbidden fruit:

***You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.***

Do we understand Jesus to be laying down a requirement for righteousness here? ***“Be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect,”*** If we understand Jesus words legalistically, then they become a distant echo of Satan's lies in the Garden. If we think we can be righteous under our own steam, then the command to be perfect brings us face to face with the reality that we are nibbling at the forbidden fruit again. We are trying to attain our own righteousness. We are taking Jesus words to be a command that we must be perfect in the way God is perfect. And then we know the true source of that understanding. It is the same as in the garden. The temptation is to take a swipe at Godhood all on our own; to become God under our own power. And so we pretend that the law is our friend. We throw our arms around our old buddy, the law, and pretend that it is going to enable us to become like God. And Satan laughs with glee. He laughs as he laughed at the foolishness of Adam and Eve. He laughs as he has laughed at every single human being that he has convinced of the lie that righteousness comes from doing the law. You can be like God. You can be perfect. And in this way the Law grinds us into a bloody pulp. But Jesus did say:

***You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.***

To understand this you must think about the little boy gluing macaroni to his mother's old shoe. He desired it to be perfect. He worked for perfection. He endured the shame of his own imperfection. But in the end, it was only a foolish desire with no actual purpose in reality. When his mother saw the little boy's creation she declared it perfect and it became perfect just as it was. Perfection did not lie in the little boy's effort. Perfection lay in his mother's love for him.

***You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.***

These words are not a command. They are not a requirement. They make no sense if we try to understand them that way. Worse yet, they take on the dark underpinnings of

the serpent's lies in the garden. The fruit of perfection is not ours to eat. We cannot gain perfection through our own efforts with the law. It will mean nothing but death for us.

Jesus is not commanding you to make yourself perfect when he says, "***You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.***" Instead, he is making a promise to you. You will be perfect. That is Christ's goal for you. You will be perfect because Jesus has taken it into his hands to fulfill the law himself. And like the day when my mom took that macaroni creation into her hands and said, it's perfect; God the father will take your life into his loving arms and he will say, "It's perfect, just perfect." And in the depth of his everlasting love, you will know that it's true. You will be perfect.

The cross is full. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and leading us out to go, make, baptize and teach disciples. Let's take up our cross and follow him. Amen