

“Being Perfect vs. Perfectionism”

Matthew 5:48

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany : February 20, 2011

A sermon by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden

MUMC, Thomasville, NC

Copyright: 2011, I. Peden

=====

In preparation for this sermon it dawned on me that the idea of perfection could be regarded as a *negative* idea in that it defines something in negative terms. “Perfect” commonly means that something does *not* have a fault. It does *not* have a defect or a blemish. What this common notion of perfection describes is what is *not* there. It says little about what *is* there.

I then decided to search the Internet for the meaning of “perfectionism.” Guess what? I discovered that it is by-and-large based on this negative view of perfection. Nothing is ever right. What is more I learned that perfectionism can be a neurotic condition that will do us harm. Scholars in the field describe perfectionists as people who derive real pleasure from painstaking work ...people who are unable to find any satisfaction because, in their own eyes, nothing they do is ever good enough.

I suppose, like me, you have experienced perfectionists who don’t delegate well because no one can achieve their high expectations, not even themselves. They also have a hard time saying “no” and get over-committed, losing any sense of balance in their lives. Sometimes they don’t like letting go of something because they are afraid of failure on the part of the person to whom they have delegated the job. Perfectionists have a hard time allowing someone else to do the job and then accepting the job when it is finished. Sometimes the person performing the job simply cannot do the job as well as the perfectionist would like. So we are left with a person who either cannot delegate, or having delegated cannot let go. A person who can’t say “no,” because, “If I don’t do it, who will?” or “Nobody can do it the way I think it ought to be done.”

I also found plenty of humor around this subject of perfectionism. Here are a couple of examples: You might be a perfectionist if you spend ten minutes getting the last drop of shampoo out of the bottle while you waste ten minutes of hot shower water. Or, you might be a perfectionist if all you can focus on while you are talking to your friend is the crooked picture on the wall and you can’t wait until they go out of the room so you can straighten it!

Perfectionists demand things of other people that they themselves cannot measure up to.

Not only that, their standards and God's standards may not be the same. God's standards – and we can always count on this – are administered with grace. A perfectionist's standards, unfortunately, are too often not. This hardly seems to be what Jesus was advocating in our Gospel lesson today.

In what has become known as the “Sermon on the Mount” – a block of Jesus' teaching in Matthew chapters 5-7 – Jesus says: “Be perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect.” Initially, this call for perfection may seem to be asking the impossible of us. How on earth can we ever achieve perfection? One explanation is that perfection is the goal, and we will reach it only in the resurrection. But this is not an adequate explanation. So we settle for the idea that we are to strive for perfection in this life, but there is no way we can achieve it. I hope we will understand this text more clearly by the time we end this service today.

Matthew 5 is not the only place in the Bible where we are told to be perfect. We first see it in the Old Testament. It is in Deuteronomy 18:13. “You shall be perfect before the Lord your God.” When we couple this with Jesus' words in Matthew 5, “Be perfect even as your Father in Heaven is perfect,” it almost seems like we are not just being asked to be perfect, but *commanded* to be perfect. That's pressure!

The first thing we have to do is look at the time when this was written. What did the words mean then? What do they mean now? How has the meaning of the words changed? The Hebrew word, used in Deuteronomy, is *tamim*, which means “wholeness” in the sense of not being partial. To “be perfect” is to serve God with the whole heart, not a partial heart, to be single minded in devotion to the one God. It is not splitting our focus. It is not having more than one God. It is being in love with God; completely and totally devoted to God.

When we get to the New Testament, the Greek word for “perfect” in Matthew 5:48 is *teleios*, a word which doesn't imply a no mistakes kind of perfection, but instead means full development and growth into full spiritual maturity. The definition of *teleios* in the lexicon is “complete.” You can do a word study through the New Testament to see how the word is used, and you will find that “complete” works in every instance. Jesus said, “Be you therefore complete.” And in English there is a world of difference between “complete” and “perfect.” The word “perfect” is defined as “being entirely without fault or defect.” I am sure that is an accurate description of God. I am equally sure that it is *not* an accurate description of any living

human being.

The focus of the verse falls more along the lines of meaning a “committed and close relationship with God.” This verse is also found in the context of Jesus speaking about our love for one another. The challenge is to love as God loves, not only loving those who love us, but loving even our enemies and those who persecute us.

To summarize: the Deuteronomy verse is telling us to love God with our whole heart, our whole self; the Matthew verse is telling us to love our neighbors. When we put these two together it sounds very similar to what Jesus said later in Matthew 22:37, that is, that we are commanded to love God with all our heart, soul and mind and to love our neighbor as ourselves. This is called the “Great Commandment.” Suddenly, “Perfect” looks a lot different and less scary now, doesn’t it?

I hope you are grasping the biblical meaning of “perfect” now. Perfection is not to be understood in the Greek sense of living with absolute perfection, which we know is impossible for us to do. We are not being asked by Jesus never to make mistakes. We are not being told that we are expected to live a life that never fails. We are not being asked to make perfect and right decisions every minute of every day. We *are* asked to give our whole heart to God. That is the “perfect” God wants from us.

This may help to clear up what the Bible means by perfection, but it doesn’t clear up the desire some of us have for perfection. Some of us will still want to put the perfectionist pressure on ourselves because of these verses. “I’ve got to be perfect because the Word of God tells me to be perfect in Matthew and in Deuteronomy.” Furthermore, our own John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was fond of saying we are moving towards Christian perfection. Wesley wrote an entire book called *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. Now we have Jesus *and* Wesley telling us to be perfect. So we better be perfect! I can only hope that is not how most of us here are thinking!

There are bound to be some people listening to this message today who experience a perfectionist pressure coming from any number of other places: our culture, our families, our co-workers. Unfortunately, some of us put the perfectionist label on ourselves. It might have started in one of those other places but I think we are the ones who turn up the volume on our desire, our drive, our need to be perfect. There is only one who is perfect, and that is God.

When we want to be perfect, we want to be God. When perfectionism kicks in, we find ourselves, on some level, wanting to be like God.

So what can we do about it and how do we know if we are a perfectionist? As God's people we can find healing from this serious neurotic mental state by changing our perfectionist self-image and our mistaken notions about God's nature and relationship with us.

Perfectionism is about self image. It is about how we see ourselves and how we think the world sees us. Neither of these are the right source from which to get our information. We need to constantly remind ourselves that our worth comes from God and God's love for us. We need to correct faulty notions of how we think of God and being perfect, such as:

- God only accepts and loves me when God can approve of everything that I am, think, feel, say, and do.
- God saves by God's grace, but only maintains this relationship with me if I read, pray, witness, serve, and do enough for God.

We need to reaffirm that God's love in Christ is shared with *all* people ...that it is totally free, undeserved, unconditional, and unmerited. This is a God who loves Mother Teresa and drug dealers equally, a God who recognizes all people as created in the image of God, a God who through Jesus Christ has identified with and died to save humankind, a God whose love is not determined by income, age, skin color, education, nationality, position, or status. That's God's love and we're being asked to love the same way.

I hope you hear this Good News again today: Our identity comes from what our God thinks of us and our God loves us regardless of how we perform, the titles we have, the grades we get, or how "perfect" our last assignment turned out. Nothing can stop God's perfect love...and that's all the "perfect" we need in our lives.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.