



Be Perfect: Intimidated Yet?

TEXT
Matthew 5:43–48

February 12, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Be perfect. That's what it says. Of course, perfection is pretty hard. If we attained perfection, we could consider doing away with the prayer of confession each week. It would save Rev. Jenny McDevitt some time as she wouldn't have to write those prayers anymore.

Do you find yourself thinking, you know, "I think I'm perfect. I've been improving for some time now, and I think I have finally arrived. I'm good"? If you do think that, enjoy it while you can, but then call us. We have people who can help you with that.

Oh, there may be some aspects of life in which perfection is achieved. I understand that in bowling, there is such a thing as a perfect game. If you bowl strikes in every frame, you can get a perfect game. It's not possible to improve on that.

Sometimes a baseball pitcher can throw a perfect game. No batter reaches base under any circumstances. It's possible. It doesn't happen often, but it's possible.

But life is not like bowling or baseball. Perfection is illusive. Life is more like golf — if I am going to stay with sports analogies.

I don't play golf anymore. The last time I played was for the fundraiser for the Dominican Republic Medical Partnership five or six years ago. I hit so many trees that the Sierra Club filed a class action lawsuit on their behalf. In golf, you can have a great hole; you can have a fantastic shot, maybe even a perfect shot, that finds the cup from a lengthy approach. You can have a strong game or even win a tournament. But perfection? That's not a word we use to describe golf. There is no perfect game in golf.

Life is like that. We can have good days. We can have important seasons in our lives. But what would it mean to speak of a perfect life? Oh, some other people's lives may seem perfect. Some people seem to have everything together, always know the right thing to say, everything seems to just come easy for them.

Ian Bedlow is a character in Anne Tyler's novel *Saint Maybe*. There is a moment when Ian is walking to church with his children. They are all cleaned and pressed. He imagined how those passing by might see his family, all together walking to church, discussing theology. "They must look perfect, from

outside," he said. Because the truth of it is, they were walking to church, all cleaned, and discussing theology. Because Agatha, the teenager, was explaining how she didn't believe in God and forcing her to go to church was hypocritical, even unconstitutional.¹

Sometimes, from the outside, others may look perfect. But we live life from the inside, and we know better. So seriously, what do we do with these words of Jesus?

Some have read these words and logically assumed that Jesus wasn't really being serious. Some believe that Jesus' teaching — not only in this verse, but throughout the Sermon on the Mount — is simply meant to be aspirational. These words are to inspire us to be our best.

Think about this: In this same Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn," and "Blessed are the pure in heart."

He said, "Do not resist the one who does evil against you, but turn the other cheek."

He said, "Don't worry about tomorrow. ... Consider the lilies of the field. ... God cares for them; God will care for you."

He said, "If anyone has a grievance against you, before

you come to worship, do all that you can to reconcile.”

He said, “Do not simply love your neighbor, but love your enemy.”

Really? Some say Jesus can’t be serious about this ethic because he knows us, and he knows this world. He is just being aspirational here. He wants to inspire us to do our best. That’s all. OK, but I wonder, “What if Jesus was serious?” I think he was.

I am helped in thinking this because of the Greek vocabulary behind our English text. We need some teaching on this.

The Greek word translated “perfect” is *teleios*. English doesn’t have a perfect translation for *teleios*. If we say “perfect,” we tend to think without flaw. *Teleios* doesn’t mean “without flaw.” *Teleios* is better translated “having attained the purpose, achieving the end.” I’ll say it this way: *Teleios* means “to be who you are created to be.”

If I understand the text and the vocabulary, that’s what Jesus is urging his disciples to do: be who God created you to be. And who are we created to be? We are created to be like Jesus. He is what it looks like to be human.

Let me give you one more golf illustration. Here’s the thing about golf. There are beautiful fairways, and there are immaculately kept greens. But there are also hazards. There are water hazards, and there are sand bunkers, and there are woods — lots of woods.

But worst of all, there are white stakes. White stakes mark

out of bounds. If you hit your ball beyond the white stakes, you start over. You can hit your ball anywhere, but if it comes down beyond the white stakes, it’s not golf over there. Everywhere else, you play it where it lies, but not beyond the white stakes. That’s out of bounds; that’s not golf.

Don’t get me wrong, you have the freedom to hit the ball past the white stakes. Let me testify, it’s easy. What you don’t have is the power to make that golf.

Now that’s a silly example, but this is what I am saying: We can live any way we choose; we just can’t make any way we choose the purpose for our lives. To be perfect is to live each day remembering what we are for; to remember that being Christian is something we live every day in every circumstance. It’s what we are for.

This is not just a word to the Christian, but also a word to the church — which means we need to remember that the church, too, is called to be perfect. Not without flaw ... oh no! That church, the church without flaw, doesn’t exist. You stick with the church for very long, and the church will disappoint you.

I am mindful of this today as we begin Village on Antioch. I have been inspired by folks participating in this ministry. I have been encouraged by their faith and faithfulness. For eight months, we have been praying and planning; dreaming and, at times, doubting. But for eight months, we have been working toward this month. For well

over a year, there have been courageous and faithful friends from Stanley who have given themselves to make this dream possible. And last Sunday, there were 107 people who gathered for our first worship service as Village on Antioch.

I am excited about what God is doing among us in this new ministry. And I want us to provide the perfect ministry.

I love Village. I am profoundly grateful to serve Village. But this is one thing I have learned. There is no perfect church. The church will disappoint you. Give it time and the church will let you down.

I took my guitar and sang for the revival services at the Rocky Spring Baptist Church in Laurens, South Carolina. I was the choir director of another Baptist church there in Laurens. It was a part-time job I had in college. They had invited the choir of my church to sing. But instead, I took my guitar and I sang, because the choir of my church didn’t think it was right for a white choir to sing in a black church. That was 1981. They “didn’t think it was right.” Somehow singing with Christians of a different race was not pleasing to Jesus. That’s what they said. I was disappointed.

I suppose I could have given up on the church at that time. It was so clear to me that the gap between Jesus and the church was vast. The gap between Jesus and the church was shameful. I suppose I could have given up on the church. Maybe I thought about it; I don’t remember.

But this call of Jesus to be perfect, if nothing else, calls us to hang on even when getting things right seems impossibly far away. Because to be perfect is not to get everything right; it is to live with integrity the life to which we are called. The one thing we can't do is abandon that purpose, even when it seems hopeless.

So even with her frailty, I have learned that we need the church — not because the church is perfect, oh no, but because it is here that we are reminded what we are for.

This past Thanksgiving, we gathered at the table. The food was plentiful. Our kids were home. So were some who honored us with their presence. We served our traditional vegetarian Thanksgiving meal. It was fantastic. We laughed. Before long, we began telling the stories — almost all we have told before.

And both at the same time, that Thanksgiving meal was unique, but it also reminds us what every meal is for. Because this is true: When we eat together, it is not just about nutrition, but at the table, we remember the stories that shape us. And we remember that we are family; we are friends; we are in relationship.

In a similar way, I think that's what happens in worship. We remember the stories that shape us. We remember the story that tells us who we are. In worship, we remember the stories. We remember the teachings in here that remind us what we are for out there.

And what is that? *Blessed are those who look at this world and know it is broken and let it break their hearts. Blessed are those who mourn.*

He said, *Do not resist the one who does evil against you, but turn the other cheek — not to be a victim, but to resist becoming yourself the evil you see in another.*

He said, *Don't worry about tomorrow. Consider the lilies of the field. God cares for them, God will care for you. Not to live carelessly, but to live with a confidence that, come what may, God will be with us.*

He said, *Do not simply love your neighbor, but love your enemy — because there is no other way for the enemy to possibly become a friend.*

This is what we are for. And to remember this, to choose this, is to be perfect. You will fail. The church will fail. We will disappoint ourselves; we will disappoint each other; we will disappoint God. And then we will come back here and be with God again, and remember our purpose. Having remembered our purpose, we try it one more day. And that is perfect.

¹Anne Tyler, *Saint Maybe* (1991), p. 198

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.