

Title: Be Perfect

Date: February 18 & 19, 2017

Preaching: Senior Minister Randy Spleth

Scripture: [Romans 12:9-21](#)

Text: [Matthew 5:38-48](#)

E-mail: [Randy Spleth](#)



Do you know who I hate? Okay, hate is a strong word. Let me start over. Do you know who I have a real problem not hating? People who hurt or mistreat my children. That unfair teacher that just didn't get it. The coach that that didn't treat my kid right. Or when their friends took advantage of them, stabbed them in

the back, said mean things to them. It's silly, getting worked up about a 12-year-old bullying your kid, but I'm being honest here. Any other parents here feel that way? Don't mess with my kids.

And I hate...okay, I'm mean I have a problem not hating someone that does something bad to my wife Ann. Ann once had a boss that was so unfair, so mean, so unprofessional that I had a tough time feeling anything but a desire to heap burning coals on his head. Don't mess with my wife. Maybe you don't want me to be this transparent but when it comes to my children, my wife, my family, I've got this circle. I'm clear about this and have a long memory. There's really no point in trying to make peace with me. There no point in trying make nice to me if you done something bad to my kids, my wife, my family. You buy me gifts, give me money, and sing me songs, even praise my holy name, but it can't make up for abusing or mistreating my children, my family.

Of course, the opposite is true. The best thing you can do for me, the most honoring thing you can do, is to do something for my kids, to take care of my children, my family. I guess this is just a father sort of thing. But do something good, something caring, something loving to my children and there is just this incredible bond, a sense of love between us that money or gifts or praise doesn't even come close to creating. ¹

Awkward, I know that was awkward for you. I'm just being honest. After all, I'm not perfect. But I am going to tell you how you can be perfect. Jesus expects you to be perfect otherwise, he wouldn't have said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:48)

This challenge is the last in a month of challenges about following Jesus. We've been in a series, even if we didn't call it a series. If you had perfect attendance and a few of you've had, we've looked at the three ethical challenges. We started a month ago, with the classic statement about what's required to be faithful. The prophet Micah says God requires us "...to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8) This mandate was presented to people with flaws, people like you and me who are sinful and broken. The good news is, God takes us "as is." Recognizing our "as is" status, God sends Jesus to rescue us and restores us, to perfect us with his love.

To a group of "as is" people like you and me, Jesus begins his restoration project with the Sermon on the Mount. He says, "I know who you are. "You are the salt of the earth... you are the light of the world." (Matthew 5:13a, 14 a) So, preserve my way and truth and shine a path to God. Be salt, be light and love one another. That was last week's challenge. It was a perfect passage...there's the word again, for a few days before Valentine's Day. Jesus said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." (John 15:12) We looked at this challenge in light of Paul's love chapter found in 1 Corinthians 13. It is read at lots of weddings. You know it. "Love is patient and kind; not envious, not boastful, not arrogant, or rude. It doesn't insist on its own way; it's not irritable or resentful; it rejoices in truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Love never ends." (1 Corinthians 13:4-8a) Real love is an active decision that outlasts everything. It's eternal.

We looked at that love list based upon the relationships that we have with our children, our spouses, our family and friends, that perfect circle that we draw around the people whom we love. But when the circle is narrowly drawn, perfection breaks down. That's not my observation; it's Jesus' and within it, we find the fourth and final challenge. "Be perfect."

Toward the middle of that Sermon on the Mount, the one where Jesus says we are salt and light, he fleshes out what this means with six antithetical statements, big, exaggerated declarations that depict extreme of behavior, six "You have heard it said ... but I say to you." The final one calls us to perfection. It begins, "You have heard it said to love your neighbors and hate your enemies." (Matthew 5:44)

Maybe you have heard this; maybe not. Jesus was using a common expression of the day. The first part of the phrase is from scripture. Leviticus 19:18 says, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." You know that; you've heard that. But nowhere in the entire Old Testament is there a command to hate your enemies. There are some hints of it in passage

outside of scripture over the 300 years between the end of the Old Testament and the coming of Jesus. Those hints are very understandable, the human tendency to draw boundaries and circles around who are your neighbors and who aren't.

Love my neighbor? Well, who is my neighbor? Surely not the pagans who worship false gods? Surely not our distant cousins the Samaritans who worship on the wrong mountain and accept only part of the Bible? Surely not the Romans who have conquered us and occupy our territory? Surely not them, surely not those, surely not...fill in the blank with whatever prejudices come to mind. Before you know it, everyone thought the "Love your neighbors and hate your enemies" was in the Bible. Everybody. ²

You see what they've done and you can understand why they did it. They started drawing circles around who they liked and felt okay about loving and the circles got smaller, and smaller and more and more exclusive. A small circle is more manageable and less demanding and somehow, they believed they were living by God's Word. They rationalized their prejudicial behavior. You can see how that kind of stuff happens, can't you?

Love is demanding and it is a lot easier, a great deal more manageable if we make the circle smaller. Family over non-family, us over them, our kind over their kind, people I know over people I don't know, gays over straights, Christians over Muslims, Democrats over Republicans, the attractive over the less attractive, skinny over chubby, and on and on. You can see how easy it was for them because of how easy it is for us. But Jesus will have none of that. He's into very large circles, as big as the world, as big as all the types of folk we avoid. ³

So, Jesus blows the phrase up. "You've heard it said.... 'But I say to you, 'Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you....'" (Matthew 5:44) And then he adds, "Do this because this is the way God is wired. Do this because you will be acting like God's children when you do this. Do this and you will show the world how God acts. Do this. 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." (Matthew 5:45) A sign of being a follower of Jesus is to show the world that God doesn't discriminate, that everyone one, even the ones so unlike you that you have trouble not hating them, are in God's circle.

To love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you is a challenge that you can only do with Christ's help because let's face it, we are all into drawing small circles. We can come up with lots of people who in an act of

honesty, we label as enemies. Instead of asking the question, 'who is my neighbor', the question Jesus is posing is 'who do you think is your enemy?' Who do you think should be outside your circle of concern, unlovable and beyond your prayer life?

Years ago, well before terrorist cells and extremists, decades before battles over gender, orientation, immigrants, but with the memory of the holocaust fresh and at the same time, in the midst nasty, world threatening cold war, the Trappist Monk Thomas Merton wrote this helpful words in answering the question about enemies.

"Do not be too quick," Merton wrote, "to assume that your enemy is a savage just because he is your enemy. Perhaps he is your enemy because he thinks you are a savage. Or perhaps he is afraid of you because he feels you are afraid of him. And perhaps if he believed you were capable of loving him he would no longer be your enemy."

"Do not be too quick to assume that your enemy is an enemy of God just because he is your enemy. Perhaps he is your enemy precisely because he can find nothing in you that gives glory to God. Perhaps he fears you because he can find nothing in you of God's love and God's kindness and God's patience and mercy and understanding of the weakness of men."⁴

Here's another take on it, from Anne Lamont, the quirky Christian novelist, "You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do."⁵ In other words, who I label as enemy may say more about me than about them.

Jesus says, "If you are going to be my followers, you are going to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). You aren't going to just love those people who look like you or think like you or share your prejudice. Everybody can do that. Tax collectors can do that. The Gentiles do the same. You are going to go the second mile and love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you and when do, you will be perfect. "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:48)

Following Jesus isn't about you. Following Jesus is about the you beside you.⁶ It is about the you over there, about the you don't trust, the you that needs to be loved, the you that's conservative, the you that's liberal, the you that is least like you and the you that you can't in your wildest imagination ever label in other way other than enemy. Following Jesus isn't about loving you; it is about you sharing the love for the you, to the you beside you, beneath you, behind you, before you, and way, way out there beyond you.

Your devotion to God is demonstrated by loving your enemies and praying for those who persecute you. When you do this, Jesus says, "You will love like God and that's perfect." Be perfect. "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:48)

You know Jesus never really stops preaching this challenge to be perfect. He talks about it all the time and it is at the heart of his last story. You know the one about the sick, imprisoned, thirsty, hungry people who have received love and care, about all sorts of people who aren't really in our circles. The punch line of that story sounds a lot like the challenge. "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matthew 25: 40)

Did I mention that if you mistreat one of my kids that all the singing, giving, generosity, buttering up won't make up for it? Did I mention that the best way of honoring me really has nothing to do with me? Did I tell you that best way of showing love to me is to do something for my children, for my family? It's a father thing.

Be perfect. "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48) Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. It might change them, and we know it will change you. It will make you perfect.

¹ Brand: New, What Love Requires, Andy Stanley, Feb 22, 2015

² Talbert, Charles. Reading the Sermon on the Mount (Columbia, SC: USC Press, 2004), 93ff.

³ Phil Thrailkill Duncan Memorial UMC, June 18, 2006

⁴ <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/13881>

⁵ Anne Lamont, Traveling Mercies; on page 22

⁶ Stanley.