

“Love Even Those Who Hate You”

Matthew 5:38-48

In recent weeks, for our Gospel lessons, we have been reading through much of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. We have heard the impossible standard of the Law: Being angry is the same as committing murder; looking at someone lustfully is the same as the act of adultery; coveting is a sin and God gave two commandments in regard to it – those sins of thought, word, and deed all get lumped together.

Jesus says that breaking one of the least of these commandments will bring down the fullness of God’s wrath and judgment, you will be called “least in the kingdom of heaven”, and you would be better off having a mill stone tied around your neck and being hurled into the depths of the sea.

Jesus began His sermon telling us that your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees or you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. And Jesus concludes with what would be the most disheartening statement if you were relying upon your works for your salvation, “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

I have spent the last 18 years or so telling my daughters, “You don’t need to be perfect.” (You just need to be quiet. Just kidding).

Perfection is such an unattainable standard.

To attain perfection, to fulfill the Law of God, you would have to give up all the guarantees and protection that the Law provides. Justice under the Law says, “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” This standard was meant as a protection for the people so that vengeance could not escalate into a Hatfield and McCoy style feud.

Jesus does what the Law cannot do; He takes away the impulse for vengeance from man’s heart and tells His disciples, tells us, “Do not resist the one who is evil. . . turn the other cheek . . . Go the extra mile . . . Love your enemy . . . Love those who hate you.”

You want adventure in your life. This is the most dangerous way to live – giving up the security of the Law, centering your whole life on the will of God, and recklessly exposing your love to a loveless, thankless world. You will have disappointment and heartache at times. People will take advantage of your generosity. They will take advantage of your time.

But there is no better way to live than to have a life of work centered on a joyous devotion to God. There is nothing more satisfying in this life than to expose the love God has given you and have it joyfully received by others. Experiencing that even one time makes up for all the times that your love is greeted with thanklessness.

It is a risky proposition to give up the advantages and protections of the Law. It doesn't work well all the time or even most of the time. It is like what Christ did for us. He exposed the fullness of His love even though He knew most people would treat it like it was nothing.

In His Sermon on the Mount, Christ has told us that He did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. He came into this life to do what we could not do. He came and gave up the security of God's protection under the Law. He centered His whole life on doing the will of His Father in heaven. Christ is the one who completely, perfectly, recklessly exposed His love to a loveless world.

You don't have to be perfect to be saved. Christ has been perfect for you. And you should not be quiet about this either. As we heard in our Epistle lesson, there is nothing we can boast about ourselves. But as Paul says elsewhere, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Jesus is only asking us to follow the example that He has already set. There is a cost to discipleship. The cost is your entire "self". When you become a child of God, there are fundamental changes. There is a reason that our relationship within the church to Christ is compared to that of a wife to a husband.

When you get married, there are fundamental changes. There are expectations, and if someone gets married, but still wants to live like, act like, and keep the schedule of a single person, that does not work. A recent poll said that 40% of Americans view marriage as an unnecessary

institution. I believe a good part of this due to the demand that a husband and wife give up independence and individuality. The two become one. The cost is your “self”. And selfish people are unwilling to pay that price.

Christ has expectations for His bride, the church. We heard from the prophet Micah three weeks ago, Micah says, “He has told you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.”

To follow Christ means to expose your love to a loveless world. From a human perspective, it is a reckless and dangerous way to live. But it is God’s desire for us to live this way, and we live under the safety and security of His authority. You will never achieve the mandate, “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” But there is One who did fulfill the Law. It was the reason He came. He recklessly exposed the fullness of His love to the lovelessness, hate, and evil of this world. Even more so, He died because He willingly placed Himself between us and the wrath of God’s judgment. He acted like a faithful husband.

With total disregard for His own safety, Christ our Lord exposed the fullness of His love and endured our punishment. But Christ not only took away the guilt of our faults and failures, but He has removed every limitation from love. “Love your enemy. Pray for those who persecute you, who hate you. . . turn the other cheek . . . go the extra mile.” This is what Christ has already done for you. Amen.