

HOW TO "DIVINE" PERFECTION

Sermon, February 19, 2017

Texts: Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18, 20:8; Matthew 5:38-39

Jesus says in our text from Matthew 5 (verse 48), *"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."* In our Old Testament reading the Lord speaks to Moses and says: *"Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them, 'Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.'" So God says to His people in the Old Testament, "Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy." And Jesus says to His people in the New Testament, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."* When Jesus says this, it is quite likely He is referring to what would be to that crowd the well known words of our Leviticus reading. For all intents and purposes, perfection and holiness are synonyms; as are the words completeness and wholeness. So, God says, *"Be holy and perfect like Me,"* and Jesus says, *"Be holy and perfect, like God."*

So ... how are you all doing with that? If I asked you for a show of hands of how many of you consider yourselves to have attained perfection and holiness, I doubt we would see many hands in the air! And if you did raise your hand, the chances are great that after worship during coffee hour in Fellowship Hall, no one would want to talk to you. While we may find great comfort in worshipping a God who is holy and perfect, we tend to find people who think of themselves as holy and perfect as somewhat ... well, odd at best, and irritating at worst ... if not totally suffering from delusions of grandeur. There is a sect within Christendom which believes mature and disciplined Christians can attain perfect holiness in this life, that we can reach such a level of sanctification through the Holy Spirit that we will not even be tempted by sin in this lifetime. I believe the theological term for that belief is pronounced "bah-LOH-nee." (*I know I'm oversimplifying a perennial debate between followers of Martin Luther and followers of John Wesley; suffice it to say for now, Luther was emphatic we will never attain perfection this side of heaven*). So, if perfection is unattainable in this lifetime, why would Jesus, or God for that matter, command it? After all, who could possibly obey that imperative?

From the context, however, I really don't think Jesus is saying, *"You better be as perfect as God, or else!"*... thus setting impossibly high boundaries for holy behavior. Nor do I think God is setting similarly impossible high standards to achieve in Leviticus. Interestingly, other translations have in the Leviticus passage, *"You shall be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy."* "You shall" proceeds what seems to be the imperative "Be;" and that's missing from our pew Bible translations. The Matthew passage can be translated from the original language in the same manner. Instead of "Be perfect", Matthew 5:48 can be read to say, *"You shall be perfect."*

Some read this "Be perfect!" and they're tempted to say, *"Forget it! Nobody's perfect!"* However, if translated to read, *"You shall be perfect ..."* Not shall as in *must*, but shall as in *will* ... then we have Jesus saying, *"You will be perfect, just as your Father and My Father in heaven is perfect."* In other words, this is not "shall" as synonymous with "must" (*an imperative*), this is "shall" as synonymous with "will" (*future tense*). And it is not "Be" as an imperative; it is "Be" as a descriptive. Again, I really don't think Jesus is saying, *"You better be as perfect as God, or you can just forget it!"* thus setting impossibly high boundaries that defeat and deflate and discourage and overwhelm us even before we get started. No, I think He is more about making a lofty and inspiring *promise* than He is about setting an impossibly high and intimidating *standard!*

That understanding transforms what has been often interpreted as restrictive "boundary" language into inspiring aspiration language! It gives us a vision, an aspiration, a goal that makes us *want* to heed the boundaries as we strive to the greater heights of our ultimate Destination. "You shall be perfect, you will be perfect, for you belong to your perfect Father!" (*I would say this to my kids all the time while they were growing up ... not. But I did and I do try to encourage them by word and admittedly imperfect example to act in imitation of their perfect Heavenly Father.*) In other words, the One Who is in the business of sanctifying you is going to complete His work in you one day, so live in that very real hope!

Now, boundaries are good; rules and standards do have their place. Every day I drive along well-defined boundaries on my way to the church, boundaries measured by yellow and white lines on the road and little red, yellow and green lights suspended in the air that I (usually) heed. Those

boundaries are good; they are designed to keep me from crashing into other people along the way to the office, they keep me from doing harm to others, and they keep me from getting mired in the dirt or stuck in the snow drifts. The main purpose of those boundaries is to keep me moving along, to keep me moving forward, to help me get to my Destination safe and sound and well and happy, and without endangering myself or others! In the same manner, God has given us boundaries in His good law; to be clear, they are there as a means to an end, not as an end in themselves. They are designed to keep us moving, moving forward in the Way, moving us onward and upward to our ultimate Destination! First He sets our boundaries; then He inspires us with aspirations of what we will be ... high and lofty destinations ... which make us want to stay in the boundaries so we can get to where we are going safely AND enjoy some tastes and glimpses of our Destination while we are on the way!

Do you see? "*You shall be perfect ...*" "*You shall be holy ...*" are not so much *imperatives* as they are *promises*. The promise is that one day we *shall* be perfect ... one day all *will* be whole, complete, holy, perfect, including ourselves ... because we belong to a perfect heavenly Father Who is in the business of redeeming and restoring a fallen world through the work of His only begotten Son by the agency of His Holy Spirit. As mentioned, the Leviticus reading can also be translated, "*You shall be, you will be, holy, because I am holy.*" That's why I chose to read one more verse from Leviticus; Leviticus 20:8 says, "*I am the Lord, Who makes you holy.*" We are in the process of being made like Him. That is our common goal. That is our destination.

In other words, we are inspired to do good because we know what the end result will be. We start off knowing we will grow up to be like our Father one day. We start off by knowing and trusting that His good boundaries lead to the high and lofty frontier of perfection, holiness, wholeness, goodness. So, let's do all we can individually and as a church to head in that direction, mindful of the boundaries He has set along the way, and bring along as many as we can with us! Perfection is found in the Heavenly Father. He is the measure, the true standard, of perfection. He is how we define perfection; or, if you'll bear with the pun, He is how we "divine" perfection.

The background here is there are six statements in the Sermon on the Mount that have Jesus saying, "*You have heard that it was said ... but I tell you.*" Verse 20, which leads into these six units says, "*For I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*" Then come these six statements showing how the Pharisees and teachers of the Law applied some Old Testament teaching, and then, over against that, what God was really calling for in these statements — something different, something much deeper and far more encompassing. We only have a few moments, so I will just give a few quick paraphrased examples: "*You have heard that it was said, 'Do not murder.' But I tell you, don't even let yourselves get angry! Stewing in anger is where murder begins!*" Or, "*You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you, don't even lust; that's the origin of all destructive unfaithfulness.*" Or "*You have heard that it was said, 'Don't break your oath.' But I tell you, you shouldn't have to make an oath in the first place ... your word should be your bond, your word be worthy of being trusted without having to shore it up with oaths, your 'yes' should mean 'yes' and your 'no,' 'no.'* When your word is trusted, you are showing you are a child of God, your Heavenly Father, Whose word is always sure. If you are God's child, then you will be more and more inclined to do what He does."

In short, the context of Jesus' teaching is that the true standard of perfection is not to be found in the standards set by the Pharisees and the teacher of the law. In fact, perfection cannot be found in any subjective human measure or standard; God Alone is the One Who is the ultimate standard of perfection. And as we grow in relation to our perfect heavenly Father, then we will more and more be able to perceive and understand and "divine" (*as in intuition*) and put into practice and aim toward what is good and right and wholesome and, yes, perfect; and the more we do that, the better our lives will be, the better the lives of those we love and care for will be, the more our lives will be salt and light to the world about us, and the more we grow up into the glorious and good image of our perfect heavenly Father.

No, we will never achieve perfection this side of heaven, but that is certainly no excuse not to try and attain it! Let us in all things aim to be like our heavenly Father, and let us do so with the confidence that one day we actually will grow up to be like Him. Nothing would please Him more. "*You shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect,*" says Jesus. "*You shall be holy, as I am holy,*" says God. Those are promises! In the meantime, let us respond, let us aspire to live, accordingly.