

# PLAYING TO PERFECTION

Sermon, February 20, 2022

Texts: Leviticus 19:1-2; I Corinthians 3:10-17; Matthew 5:38-48

I've always liked the story of a third grade Sunday School teacher who had decided her class would play church, complete with individual students acting as the pastor, the ushers, a choir, an organist and all the remaining students as the congregation. After a short while they tired of playing church; after all, there was no real organ and no pews, and it was all a bit hard to figure out. So one boy suggested, *"I know, let's stop playing church. Let's play Jesus!"*

Well, that sounded like a great idea to the teacher, so the teacher asked the boy to explain how the game should be played. The boy suggested one person would play the role of Jesus, and the others would be mean to him, call him names, push him around, then take him outside and tie him to a tree and pretend to crucify him. Well, that took a bit of the glow off the honor of playing Jesus; nobody was quick to volunteer for the starring role. So, the boy who initiated the idea volunteered. Apparently, the classmates liked the idea, but apparently became a little too zealous in the play acting. After a few minutes of loud name calling, jeering, and one shove too many, they were about to take "Jesus" outside to tie him to a tree when the boy cried out. *"Stop, stop, I've had enough!"* Then he said something pretty profound.

**"Let's not play Jesus anymore, it's too hard. Let's go back to playing church."**

Playing Jesus is a little harder than playing church, isn't it? There is a difference! It's a relatively easy matter to go through the motions and say the lines and follow the liturgy while in worship, but it's tough to follow through with our faith convictions and leave this sanctuary and actually go out there to play Jesus! We know we are called to be Jesus to our world; we are called to represent Him, act like Him, wherever we live and work, but when we genuinely do that, it can get pretty rough. But I think we all know in our heart of hearts that if we aren't "playing Jesus" in the everyday routines of our life beyond these walls, then "playing church" is really meaningless and becomes a rather dull game, a charade. How do we move from playing church to actually playing Jesus? Where do we begin? Our Scripture texts suggest we begin by reminding ourselves of two main things (1) Who we are called to be, and (2) Where we are headed. In other words, what are we doing here, and what is our end purpose?

(1) Who are we called to be? In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes: *"Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?"* We are not just a social gathering, although we are that. Nor are we just a cross-generational family support group, a "family of families," although we are that, as well. Nor are we a political action group, although at times we may have to engage in that activity. We, collectively, are a holy temple, the temple of the living God. God's Spirit dwells within us. When Paul writes his letter to the Corinthians, he is writing to a church being torn apart by dissension. Two years ago I mentioned this wasn't the "United Church of Corinth;" it was the "Untied Church of Corinth" because so many in that congregation did not put their "I" in the proper place. United and Untied ... both words use the exact same letters, but it matters where one places the "i" in relation to the "t", as the meaning and significance of the word completely changes. When the "I" is not in the right place, "united" becomes "untied." That's true in spelling, and that's true in theology. If you want unity, integrity, stability in your life and in your community, place *your* "i," before the "T." Place your "I" .... your self, your ego ... before the "T," before the cross. Apparently "unity" was a problem in this congregation; there was continual infighting, quarreling and bickering as many apparently had difficulty putting their "I's" in the right place. *"My interpretation, my spiritual needs, my desires, my satisfaction ... I, I, I, Me, me, me. It has to be the way I want it to be, it has to be my way or no way. I, I, I."* To which Paul probably responded, *"Ei, yi, yi! Your 'I' is misplaced!"*

I'm reminded of the story of a shoe salesman who had shown a customer more than twenty-five pairs of shoes, only to have her settle for the very first pair she had tried on. As she paid for her new shoes and was leaving the store, he said to her, *"Thank you for coming. I wish I had a dozen customers like you!"* One of the other clerks overheard him, and when the fussy customer was gone, said, *"You told her you wished you had a dozen customers like her. How can you say that to such a picky, hard-to-please person?"* Replied the salesman. *"Because it's true. Actually, I have a hundred customers just like her, and I wish I only had a dozen!"*

To Paul, that's the church in Corinth! At least a hundred hard to please, disgruntled, picky, overbearing constituents who apparently were playing church; they were dividing into factions and were just coming untied, undone, as a congregation. And Paul wants them to start playing Jesus instead of playing church! So he writes: *"Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?"* In other words, *"You are a holy temple, a place where God's Spirit dwells, so act like it!"* And then he writes this warning: *"If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple."* We are God's temple, His dwelling place on earth ... we are one body, the body of Jesus Christ. If we are going to play Jesus, as opposed to playing church, we must constantly remind ourselves who we are called to be, and act accordingly by working together, praying together, striving together in unity and common purpose to a common goal and purpose.

(2) Well, what is that common goal? I'm glad you asked. Jesus says in our text from Matthew 5 (verse 48), *"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."* And there in our Old Testament reading the Lord speaks to Moses and says: *"Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, 'You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.'" So God says in the Old Testament, "Be holy." And Jesus says in the New Testament, "Be perfect," Biblically, perfection and holiness are synonyms. Perfection and holiness ... that's our common goal.*

Well, that's a pretty high goal. 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 during coffee hour in Fellowship Hall, no one would want to talk to you. While we find great comfort in worshiping a God who is holy and perfect, we tend to find people who think of themselves as perfect and holy as somewhat ... well, odd at best, scary at worst. Why would God and Jesus command perfection, holiness? After all, who can possibly attain it?

Notice in Leviticus, two words: *"You shall be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy."* The Matthew passage can be translated in the same manner. Instead of "Be perfect", Matthew 5:48 can be read to say, *"You shall be perfect."* Now, there are two ways we can look at this word "shall." One way is to see it as an imperative, a command synonymous with "must ... "You shall, you **must**, do this," **Another** way to understand "shall" is to see it as a statement of promise or fact in the future tense, synonymous with "will" ... as in, *"the sun shall go down tonight."* I really don't think Jesus is saying, *"You must be as perfect as God, or else you've failed!"* thus setting impossibly high boundaries that defeat and deflate 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!* If we translate this, *"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."* That's a promise, not an admonition!

Don't get me wrong, 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 keep me from crashing into other people and/or things along the way to the office. (*I could avoid crashing into others by simply parking the car and going nowhere and isolating myself at home, but what good is that? But that's another sermon.*) The main purpose of those boundaries is to *keep me moving* along to a good destination, to get me somewhere, to keep me moving *forward*, to help me get to my destination safe and sound and quickly without being a hazard to myself or to others! In the same manner, God has given us boundaries in His good law. They are there to keep us moving in this world, moving forward in the Way, to keep us from running into things or running over other people and hurting them or hurting ourselves, to keep us from getting stuck in the mud and the dirt and the gutters of life, to keep us moving onward and upward to the high and lofty destination He is promising we will one day reach! Again, if we translate this, *"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."*

The promise is that one day we shall be perfect ... whole, complete, holy, perfect ... because we are the redeemed children of a perfect heavenly Father, Who promises in Leviticus, *"You shall be, you will be, holy, because I am holy."* A perfect heavenly Father, Whose ways are good and Whose word can be trusted. Also note this: A few chapters later, in Leviticus 20:8, God says, "I am the Lord, **Who makes you holy.**" God is holy, and we are in the process of being made to be like Him through the power of His Spirit by the grace of Jesus Christ. Holiness is our common goal. Perfection is our common destination. *"You shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect,"* says Jesus ... *"You shall be holy, as I am holy,"* says God. Do you see? Those are promises!

How do we move from playing church to playing Jesus? We start off knowing what the end result of our salvation 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 highest frontiers of perfection, holiness, wholeness, goodness. The context of Jesus' teaching in this chapter is that the true standard of perfection is not to be found in the standards set by Pharisees. In fact, perfection cannot be found in any subjective human measure or standard; God is THE standard of perfection. 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!

Perfection is found in the Heavenly Father. He is the measure, the true standard, of perfection. And as we grow in relation to our perfect Father, then we will more and more be able to perceive and understand and discover and practice and aim toward perfection, and the more we do that, the better our lives will be for us and all those about us whose lives we touch. We may never achieve perfection this side of heaven, but that is certainly no excuse not to aim for it and try! 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.

And *that's* playing Jesus. That's playing to perfection.