

## "YOU EXPECT ME TO BE PERFECT?"

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California  
February 19, 1984

Matthew 5:20-48

Will all the people who are perfect please stand up. I see I'm the only one standing, and my wife will have a minority report on that! My grandfather used to say of himself, "I'm so perfect I make myself sick!"

Our culture is strong on perfectionism. Do you feel or have you felt in your life a compunction, a pressure on you to be perfect? From mother? Or teacher? Or church? Or yourself? Dr. Rudolf Dreikurs, psychologist, wrote a paper years ago which was quite popular and refreshing, titled, "The Courage to be Imperfect." He wrote:

We can well see that perfectionism is rampant today. A great many people try so hard to do right and to be right...It is my contention that our education today is very largely what I call mistake centered. If you could enumerate the various actions of a teacher in a class and could enumerate for every hour and every day what she is doing with the children, you would be surprised how many of her actions are directly dealing with mistakes which children have made. As if we were obliged to primarily correct or prevent mistakes.

I fear that in the majority of tests given to students the final mark does not depend on how many brilliant things he said and did, but how many mistakes he made. And if he made a mistake he can't get a hundred regardless of how much he has contributed on other parts of the examination. Mistakes determine the value. In this way we unwittingly add to the already tremendous discouragement of our children.

It seems to me that our children are exposed to a sequence of discouraging experiences, both at home and at school. Everybody points out what they did do wrong and what they could do wrong. We deprive the children of the only experience which really can promote growth and development: experience of their own strengths. We impress them with their deficiencies, with their smallness, with their limitations; and at the same time try to drive them on to be much more than they can be. If what we want to institute in children is the need to accomplish something, a faith in themselves, and regard for their own strengths; then we have to minimize the mistakes they are making and emphasize all the good things, not which they could do, but which they do.

Were you taught in that manner? Why is it that some teachers mark a paper at the top of the page with the number wrong rather than the number right? Only the mistakes count! One of our boys had such a teacher and he would bring home papers marked "-0". Imagine! The best she could say about the work was that it didn't have any mistakes. She seemed disappointed, as if she weren't teaching when she couldn't find a mistake. Only the mistakes count!

I wonder if the drive, the pressure to be perfect has not then caused us all to feel more insecure, conscious of our deficiencies, aware of our imperfections, nervous, fearful, and, consequently, afraid to make a mistake, afraid to risk, take a chance. I picked up a book in the bookstore the other day in which the authors stated that one of the reasons American business is having difficulty in the world market today is because management is afraid to risk, to take chances. They are fearful of mistakes because they are expected to be perfect.

We expect perfectionism of one another. We expect the President to be perfect. We expect ministers and bishops to be perfect, and when we find one that isn't, or one that makes a mistake, we revel in the sordid details, gossiping like a bunch of chickens. Our culture today rejoices in anti-heroism. If we can find an imperfection in a hero, then we revel. It's as if we are so pressured to be perfect, and so painfully conscious we are not perfect, that we look for, and rejoice in, the imperfections of others. Again, only the mistakes count. Forgotten are the many accomplishments. Forgotten are the heroic acts. Forgotten are the long, tedious hours of work. Forgotten are the pain and agony the person experiences. What is remembered, what is proclaimed is the mistake, the imperfection. Only the mistakes count. Our culture expects you to be perfect and is cruel when you are not.

What about Jesus? Does not Jesus also expect us to be perfect? Our text today, from the Sermon on the Mount, is Matthew 5:48 where Jesus says, "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." We have had that saying hanging over our heads in the church like a heavy burden. The church expects us to be perfect because Jesus said we must. Jesus did not say, "You should be perfect," nor "You may." No, he said, "You must be perfect." But, this is the man who stopped them from throwing stones at the adulterous woman by commanding, "You without sin cast the first stone." Then, he said to the woman when they all walked away without acting, "I don't condemn you either." This is the man who lovingly gave Peter a second chance after Peter vehemently denied that he ever knew Jesus. This is the man who seemed to understand that humans will make mistakes, that we are not perfect. What did Jesus mean by demanding perfection of his followers?

This section of the Sermon on the Mount begins with verse 20, chapter 5 of Matthew, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven," and closes with our text, vs.48, "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Jesus is announcing that a new age has come, the kingdom of God, the reign of God. Jesus himself inaugurated the new age and now is describing it.

The scribes and pharisees, the religious folk of Jesus' day, were striving to be righteous by a legalistic observance of the laws, the rules. There was a certain arrogance among the religious folk of his day, an attainment of perfection, you might say, by those who:

- vs. 21, did not murder;
- vs. 27, did not commit adultery;
- vs. 31, divorced by certificate; (A Jewish man not a woman, of course, in that day could easily divorce his wife and still keep the law. He would be accounted righteous if, when he tired of his wife, handed her a piece of paper and said, "Well, honey, we're now divorced.")
- vs. 33, did not make false oaths;
- vs. 38, took an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth;
- vs. 43, loved their neighbors and hated their enemies.

This was the level of religious perfection, the righteousness, of Jesus' day. By observing these and other laws, the religious folk felt justified. They used the law and its observance to convince themselves of their own righteousness and goodness. They were so good, so perfect, they made themselves sick! Dr. Dreikurs wrote in his paper, "The Courage to be Imperfect," "I have found many, many people who try so hard to be good. But I have failed yet to see that they have done so for the welfare of others. What I find behind these people who try to be so good is a concern with their own prestige. They are good for the benefit of their own self-elevation."

Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of God which is not based on following rules, or not making mistakes. Jesus inaugurated the new age which is essentially a new relationship with God and with people. What Jesus did was to completely change the focus and arena. Jesus moved the action from a concern with one's own goodness, righteousness, and perfection to a concern for the welfare of one another and the world.

To be perfect, in Jesus' teaching, is a matter of your relationship with God and others. Perhaps "wholeness" is a better word than "perfect." Jesus is talking about wholeness in relationships between people where there is no anger or lust; where marriage is a matter of faithfulness; where people are treated as persons and not things; where the enemy is loved, not hated. Love means action that places the others' best interests above your rights. Love is not a feeling in this instance, but an action. You don't have to like the enemy or feel in love with the enemy, but you do act for his/her best interests. The focus is completely different. The arena is different. This is the righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and pharisees.

Being perfect or righteous, in Jesus' sense, means getting things in the proper perspective, where you see yourself as a child of God, accepted as you are, forgiven, loved, not counting the mistakes, but confessing them. We confess our mistakes and our shortcomings, for we constantly stand before God as sinners. But, this is not the end. We are to be involved in relationships with others for their sakes, for their welfare, for their interests; then our mistakes and our imperfections do not control us, for they are not what counts. Dreikurs states it this way, "Anybody who is really concerned with the welfare of others won't have any time or interest to become concerned with the question of how good he is."

Jesus changes the stance from, "Only mistakes count," to "What you do with and for others is what counts." Quit worrying about your own goodness, or lack of it, and be about God's work. Don't be so critical of others. That is perfection, wholeness. Don't be discouraged by mistakes. Don't try so hard to be good, perfect and right that you make yourself and everybody else, sick! Act loving towards others and for others, lose yourself in social causes. That is perfection.

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