

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany – A

“You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

A struggling young writer once worked up enough courage to ask a famous old literary figure to critique a story he had written. Three days passed and the writer heard nothing. He approached the celebrity and asked what he'd thought of the piece. The old man looked up from his desk, tapped the manuscript with his finger and said, “Is this the *best* you can do?”

Disappointed, the young writer took back his manuscript and agonized over every passage. When he had finished rewriting, he again left the work with his critic. Several days later, he approached the famous man and asked for his opinion. And again, he heard the question, “Are you sure this is the very best you can do?”

For a second time, the young man retrieved his manuscript and spent many sleepless nights trying to perfect it. And once again he stepped forward to get the famous man's opinion. “Are you positive that this is the best you can possibly do?” asked the old man. Disheartened but stubborn, the young writer replied, “Yes sir, it is.”

“Okay,” said the famous man. “Now I'll read it.”

Jesus calls us to perfection. That is to be our goal. He doesn't expect us to actually become perfect. He knows that is beyond us. But he knows that we can do better; he knows we need to strive for perfection. The famous writer wanted the young writer to do his very best. Jesus wants us to do our very best because he loves us.

When Pablo Casals reached the age of 95, a young interviewer asked him this question: “Mr. Casals, you are 95-years-old and the greatest cellist who ever lived. Why do you still practice six hours a day?” To which Casals replied, “Because I think I am making progress.” If I ever reach 95, I think I would be more than happy just to not lose ground, at least in a physical sense. But in a spiritual sense, in our relationships with each other and with God, we should always be trying to make progress. This is not something we practice six hours a day but every waking hour.

Three times last Sunday and twice again today we heard Jesus say, “You have heard it was said.” The first time we heard him say that this morning it concerned “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” This is found first in Exodus but is also in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. This is a very misunderstood concept. It had two purposes. First to give the right to compensation to the injured party, and second to limit retaliation to what was appropriate for the crime. The idea is to break the escalating spiral of violence – to bring a just end to the situation. The law was designed to help people live as peacefully with each other as was possible.

Jesus does not criticize this, but rather calls us to a higher standard. The law is a good earthly standard. Jesus calls us to live by kingdom standards, and that is a major step up. Like the rule of an eye for an eye, Jesus' teaching is designed to put an end to the cycle of not just violence but also the hate that causes violence.

More than once I have heard someone say that yes you should turn the other cheek, but if someone strikes that cheek, there is no reason why you shouldn't punch him in the nose. That is clearly the opposite of what Jesus is telling us to do. Jesus specifically says "If anyone strikes you on the RIGHT cheek, turn to him the other also." That is because this would most likely be a backhand slap – unless the person was left handed. Such a slap is a demeaning slap by a superior to an inferior. If you would then turn the other cheek, a backhand slap is not then possible. The aggressor could only strike a blow with his fist which would be to acknowledge that person as an equal. We are not to respond with hate or violence, but we are to challenge the person to do what is right. It demonstrates not weakness, but strength through love.

Going the second mile involves the stipulation in Roman law that a soldier could require someone to carry a load for him for one mile but no more. A biblical example of this is Simon of Cyrene being compelled to carry Jesus' cross. A soldier risked disciplinary action if he made you carry something more than a mile.

Someone had this to say in regard the extra mile: "There has been a great deal written and said about the second mile of Christian discipleship, but I cannot recall ever reading a book or hearing a sermon about the first mile. Surely this is the more demanding stage in life's journey. ... The most difficult thing about the Christian life is always to get started on it – not to exceed the law's demands, not to pass the best non-Christian in the race but simply to catch up with the best non-Christian. Even as Christians we must walk that first long mile of grinding necessity and bitterly humiliating compulsion, and for this we need all the impulses, all the encouragement, all the resources which our religious faith affords.

"Our society would move closer to the Kingdom of God if many Christians forgot the idealism of the second mile and simply fulfilled the hard realities of the first mile." There certainly is something to be said for getting started on the road following Jesus. That is the critical thing. But at the same time, Jesus is clearly calling those who do follow him to do better. And if we do not try and follow more and more as Jesus would have us follow him, then we will at some point stop following him altogether.

Today we start Isabella off on her journey of following the Lord. I am pretty sure that she is a ways off from even going one mile at this stage in her life. She will get there soon enough. But remember that Isabella's journey is also our journey, for not only are we all part of the body of Christ, but in a little while we will promise to support Isabella in her journey of following the Lord.

We should remember that Jesus is saying these things not to give us a strict rule that we must not break, but instead to give us a principle to live by. That principle is to think of the welfare of others. This is stated in the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." This is found two chapters later toward the end of the Sermon on the Mount. Today's readings come from the early section of the Sermon on the Mount. Two weeks ago we heard the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, and we will hear more of it on

two of the next three Sundays. Jesus referred to the Golden Rule as fulfilling the Law and the prophets.

These things are meant to challenge us in our relationships with each other, especially those who we would rather ignore. For modern day followers of Christ, nowhere is this more troublesome than in verse 42 where Jesus says, "Give to those who would beg from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you." For most of us, this is not because we are stingy, but because often times we struggle with knowing what is the most helpful thing to do. Sometimes we are not sure what right thing to do might be.

If you are like me, your mailbox is overflowing with requests for money. How can you possibly give to all these causes? You can't. On a more personal level, we have all seen people begging in parking lots and wonder what their real needs are and what they might do with the money they collect. We have all heard stories how someone attempted to offer food to such a person and was rudely rebuffed. Most of these people are best helped by places like the Rescue Mission. They all know about such places, but often times they will not go there because they are forced to follow rules. Perhaps supporting the Rescue Mission would be the most help to those in such situations. But helping the Rescue Mission by itself does not meet Jesus standards, but giving money to those who might very well use it for the things that are harmful to them is worse than doing nothing. The important thing is to place a priority on the needs of others and then to use your common sense.

Many years ago, Arnold Palmer, the great golfer played some golf matches in Saudi Arabia. His play greatly impressed the King of Saudi Arabia, and before Palmer left the country the king told him he would like to present him with a special gift. "What can I offer you?" the king asked. Palmer expressed his gratitude for the offer but said that he had enjoyed his visit very much and a special gift was not necessary. But the king insisted and Palmer finally said, "Alright right, you can give me a golf club. That would be a really nice remembrance of your hospitality." So Palmer wondered what kind of a club the king might give to him – maybe a putter or perhaps a sand wedge. The next day a messenger appeared at Palmer's hotel with the deed to a three hundred acre golf club. And the moral of the story is, "In the presence of the king, don't ask for small gifts."

But I don't think the King of Saudi Arabia is here with us this morning. Most of us do the best we can with what we have. We need to use our common sense, but at the same time we need to make the needs of others a priority.

The pastor of a church in San Antonio was making his daily rounds ministering to the poor. He stopped in front of a small broken-down house – the home of a poor family in which there were two sons. The younger of the two boys was physically handicapped. As the pastor parked his car in the front of the house he was greeted enthusiastically by the older brother. "Wow! Your shiny new car sure looks great," the boy said. "Where did you get it?" The pastor replied, "You know son, I don't make much money in my work and I couldn't afford to buy a car like this for myself. But I have a brother in Houston who makes a lot of money in the oil business. He gave me this car." The brother

looked up at the pastor and said, wistfully, “I wish I could be a brother like that.” He didn’t say he wished he had a brother like that, but that he could be brother like that. Clearly that young man was in on the secret of life’s true meaning and purpose: caring is everything. And even though he didn’t know it, he really was a brother like that. He just didn’t have the same resources.

In verses 43 and 44 Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” This time it sounds as if Jesus is taking exception to the law. This is not the case. The people of Jesus’ day certainly heard that they should love their neighbors and hate their enemies, but it did NOT come from the law. In Leviticus it does say that we should love our neighbor, but it does NOT say to hate anyone. The idea of hating enemies is a distortion of the law. Proverbs says this. “If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty give him water to drink.”

This is perhaps Jesus’ greatest challenge to us: to love our enemies. Often times, we have enough trouble just loving our family and friends. But Jesus calls us to perfection. One commentary has this to say: “Jesus speaks of the need to be perfect, which [in the Greek] means complete, fully developed, or all that God intends. At no point is this completeness better defined than in the words about love. ... To be perfect as God is perfect is to love as God loves, openhearted to all, full of mercy and blessing.”

A hermit known as Paulinus of Nola had this to say: “We have dared to attempt our work of perfection, relying not on our own deeds and strength but on the power and mercy of God. Since He is almighty, He can complete in us the work of His perfection. When He has deigned to lay the foundation and to being the first scaffolding, He can construct it according to His measurements and complete it by roofing it.”

Today, Isabella joins us in our work of perfection. Like the rest of us, she will need a lot of help. As fellow members of the body of Christ, it will be our task, our privilege, our joy, to assist her and each other. And as Paulinus has said, we can only do this by relying on the Lord to complete his work.

The candidate for Holy Baptism will now be presented.