

“PERFECTED”

a sermon on Lev. 19: 1-2, 9-18; I Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23; Matthew 5:38-48
February 19, 2017 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
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Today’s reading from the Sermon on the Mount is really the *crux* of Jesus’ teaching – and it is critically important to our understanding of “the Christian life.” It includes some of the most quoted of all Biblical phrases – referring to the *old* law, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” (which is actually in *several* locations in the Old Testament books of the law), but then also our paraphrases, “turn the other cheek,” “go the extra mile,” and “love your enemies.”

The sayings sound simple enough, but in reality, understanding them takes a little effort. So first of all, let’s take a step back and remember the overall “place” and “purpose” of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew’s Gospel.

Recall that Matthew, more than any other Gospel writer, connects Jesus’ actions to the Old Testament prophecies. Those prophecies themselves “evolved” over time. The earlier ones predicted that God’s punishment of Israel would be swift, and brief, and soon all would be restored – a king, once again on the throne; priests, once again offering sacrifices on the altar in the Temple, and prophets continuing to hear God’s voice and proclaim it to the people. By contrast, the later prophets predicted that the restoration would be something much more *cosmic*, and would happen only in God’s time, when all was ready. And the *very* last prophets essentially predicted that in the time of restoration, God would so “set things right” that there wouldn’t even *be* prophets, priests, and kings anymore – at least as separate and distinct offices held by members of the nation of Israel.

And recall, as well, that the “roles” of each of those three separate and distinct “offices” in the Old Testament dealt with one “aspect” of restored relationship – prophets “bringing” God to the people through proclamation, priests bringing the people to God through sacrifice, and Kings keeping people in relationship with *each other* through the enforcement of justice.

And so Matthew, very early on, demonstrates that Jesus came into the world to fulfill *all three* of the offices – “fulfill,” as in “complete” their requirements, and in a way that is “ultimate” and “eternal,” as the latter prophets had predicted.

Jesus is *clearly* the messianic king in Matthew – a child of the line of David, as the opening verse of the book proclaims, and even openly *declared* as such by the magi.

And then in Chapters three and four – Jesus’ baptism and temptation in the wilderness, Matthew demonstrates that Jesus is first a properly consecrated priest able to offer sacrifices in accordance with the law, and then also an “unblemished lamb,” able to withstand the temptations of the devil himself – therefore “worthy” to become an “eternal sacrifice” on behalf of the people, “perfectly righteous” with respect to the law.

In chapters five through seven, the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew then turns to the third office, the office of “prophet,” and demonstrates that Jesus is not just a hearer and “interpreter” of God’s Word, like the Scribes of his day. Jesus actually *is* God’s Word, laying out a “new law” to replace the old one the requirements of which he will once and for all “fulfill” in his eventual self-sacrifice in Jerusalem.

Jesus is therefore the “consummate prophet.” He doesn’t even have to say “thus saith the Lord,” as the prophets of old did, or go up on a mountain to experience God’s presence, as Moses *himself* did. No Jesus just *proclaims*: “you have heard it said to you . . . but *I* say to you . . .”

And at the conclusion of the sermon, Matthew records, “the crowds were *astounded* at his teaching, for he taught them as one having *authority*, and not as their scribes.”

And so, now, let’s take a look at the content of Jesus’ “new law.” He begins with what was really an “age old” principle – the principle of “just restitution,” or in Latin, *Lex Talionis*. I say age old because it even pre-dates Old Testament. Its first known articulation is in the very ancient “Code of Hammurabi.” Hammurabi was a Babylonian king who ruled in the Eighteenth Century BC.

That’s about the time that Abraham first left “Ur of the Chaldeans” – Babylonia’s chief seaport – for Canaan.

And by the way, there is no evidence that it ever was (or was ever *meant* to be) taken *literally*. I’ll just quote directly from *Wikipedia* on this one. “*Lex Talionis* . . . is the principle that a person who has injured another person is to be penalized to a similar degree, or in softer interpretations, the victim receives the [estimated] value of the injury in compensation.”

William Barclay, the Scottish Biblical Scholar, points out that *Lex Talionis* was not a “bloodthirsty and brutal” law. Quite the opposite. Its primary purpose, in fact, was to *limit* retribution. In the rabbinic law, many “values” of injuries were assessed, and those values were the basis of judgements. If one person injured another, the individual’s “value” was assessed before and after the injury, and the one who caused the injury was responsible for making up the difference.

In a sense, you could argue that the principle remains the basis of the world’s major legal systems to this day. We don’t put a person in jail for the rest of their life for petty theft. Neither do we simply impose a small fine on someone who commits a major crime.

It’s about how we maintain order. And in the civil, legal world, it makes perfect sense. Always has. But Jesus didn’t come to maintain order, and the truth be known, he didn’t come to establish a new civil legal system. He came to *restore our relationships* with God and each other – in a way that *transcends* our national, political, and social orders and boundaries.

And the law of “just retribution” doesn’t do that. It was never *intended* to do that.

Scholars have written volumes about Jesus’ examples of living out this new law, his “new way.” In his words about turning the other cheek and offering your cloak in addition to your coat, the point is essentially that for a variety of “cultural reasons,” in so doing you would be inviting the aggressor to do something embarrassing. You would, essentially, be “disarming” them, in the hope that you could then get past the differences that brought you to blows . . . or to court . . . in the first place.

In the case of the “extra mile” example, the point is that Romans regularly compelled Israelites to carry out menial tasks. They were legally allowed to do so, within certain established limits. And doing so did *nothing what so ever* to “restore relationship.” It was simply a matter of legal rights and obligations. But *voluntarily* going *beyond* the legal limit would surely make the one doing the “compelling” take note. Perhaps, even be *appreciative*. Perhaps, begin to break down the “barrier” between the ones who were “entitled,” and the ones who were “obligated.”

So, too, with “love” and “hate.” This new law, as a matter of fact, is often called the “law of love.” William Barclay, again, notes that there are different words for “love” in Greek, some of them about what we “feel,” which of course would make no sense for Jesus to “command” us. But here, it is word “agape” that is used – the *verb* kind of love, that is about how we *act*, not what we *feel*. And the

same for the word translated *hate*. Love and hate in this passage are the same set of words the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews used when he wrote of the “Son of Man,” that “You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.”

To “love righteousness” means to *act* righteously. And to “hate lawlessness” means to *do away* with lawlessness, to uphold what is “lawful.”

And as proof of this as God’s desire, Jesus notes that God – as Creator and Sustainer of the world – doesn’t treat the righteous any differently than the unrighteousness. The sun shines on both. The rains fall on both. And in this process of bringing *restoration* into the world, we should do the same. *Treat everyone* the same – even our *enemies*.

You will note that I said “process.” Our passage ends with Jesus saying, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Once again, that sounds completely unrealistic. Our theology, in fact, insists that we cannot and will not “attain perfection” in this life.

But the Greek word for “perfect” is the word “telios.” It means, literally, “having attained the *goal*.” In philosophy, “teleology” is the concept that we are *headed* somewhere – that world events are following some “course” that is being guided by a higher power.

That’s the whole point of Jesus’ new law. It creates the possibility of going someplace, making *progress* . . . towards the *goal*. The goal, again, is restoration. It is the world as God created it to be. People in community. All people. And God with us.

That’s far from the world I see around me. But the truth be known, it’s far from the world as it has existed at any time in human history. We could easily give up. We could also “fall back” on the status quo – just be grateful that we live in a land with a system of justice, and focus inward, on ourselves. But as Jesus put it, “Do not even the tax collectors do the same?”

And so faithful Christians always strive to go beyond just what is necessary or acceptable – refusing to give in to fear, even in fearful times. Because we know where it’s all *headed*. God has *declared* that in the end, all will be restored. And Jesus declared that his disciples are to be participants in moving toward that goal.

It’s a messy world out there. We have different ideologies, and politics, maybe even different understandings of what *constitutes* progress toward the goal. But at the core of faith is the understanding that God is in control, and we can trust

in God's promises. May that trust sustain us on this day's journey, and motivate us be God's faithful disciples always – until all is “perfected,” and our work is done.

To God be the glory.