

Be Merciful as your Heavenly Father is Merciful

Introduction

- This morning we're going to focus in on two commands given by Jesus in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew...
- Specifically – Luke 6:36 and Matthew 5:48...
- Both of these Gospels deal with Jesus' discourse on love of one's enemies, but what's truly remarkable about these teachings, are the words that Jesus uses to end each one...
- Matthew's version ends with the words: "*So be perfect, just as your Heavenly Father is perfect."*
- Luke's version ends quite differently as we will see...

What Does it Mean to be Perfect?

- We can often misinterpret Mathew's version of this teaching... and this can have a dramatic impact on how we see our faith, and how live our lives...
- St. Luke (6:36) ends this same teaching, with the words: "*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."*
- Jesus gives us many tall orders in the Gospels, but this command to be perfect is perhaps the most difficult of all for us to live up to...
- If we see spiritual perfection as living a "sinless life," or as living a perfectly "holy life..." than we're bound to become frustrated... disheartened... and even be tempted to give up altogether...
- None of us are up to that challenge... Not even on our best days...

What is this Spiritual Perfection (Holiness), that Christ calls us to?

- Our own Father Paul once observed that holiness is not the absence of sin, but rather the presence of God...
- Perhaps the same can be said of perfection...
- Spiritual perfection exists not in the absence of sin, but rather in the presence of God Who is love...
- Therefore in the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus commands us to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect... He's really commanding us to love...
- When we're merciful... When we choose love... We imitate God Who is perfect...

Learning to Embrace Who We Are

- Many of us have misinterpreted Jesus' message in Matthew's Gospel...
- Brennan Manning wrote the following: "The Good News means we can stop lying to ourselves. The sweet sound of Amazing Grace saves us from the necessity of self-deception. It keeps us from denying that the battle with lust, greed, and pride still rages within us. As a sinner who has been redeemed, I can acknowledge that I am often unloving, irritable, angry, and resentful with those closest to me. When I go to church I can leave my white hat at home and admit that I have failed. God not only loves me as I am, but also knows me as I am. Because of this I don't need to apply spiritual cosmetics to make myself presentable to Him. I can accept ownership of my poverty and powerlessness and neediness." (The Ragamuffin Gospel, Pg. 23).
- Isn't that what our Christian walk is all about – To take the promises of Christ at face value and to dare to live each day as forgiven men and women?
- Yet – How many of us instead, prefer to dwell on our imperfections?

Facing and Accepting Our Brokenness

- We all struggle with our humanity... We struggle to hide our brokenness, and so we work hard most of our lives to never allow ourselves to become vulnerable...
- We tend to hide behind walls that we've built around our hearts to protect us from the hurts of the world...
- We often wear masks to hide our true selves in order to "Fit in".....
- Somewhere along the line we were taught that we needed to be perfect – That our self-worth was dependent upon how well we "performed"...
- And this false belief can often be reinforced by misinterpreting Jesus' words in the Gospel of Matthew...
- Bishop Robert Barron wrote: "The Holy life is not primarily about moral excellence or spiritual athleticism or any sort of human achievement; it is about being drawn, by Grace, into a dignity, infinitely beyond our merits or expectations" ... Bridging The Great Divide.
- As St. Paul came to realize through his own trials, it's only in our weakness that we can come to acknowledge the truth that we are totally dependent upon God for everything; and that left to our own devices, we are all prone to sin...
- With this gift of acceptance of who we are, and Whose we are... Comes the wisdom to realize that we are incapable of changing ourselves – That only God can change us... and that God is in charge of our sanctification – He's not asking us to do it ourselves...
- None of this means that we stop working to better ourselves, or do our best to avoid bad habits – This struggle is an integral part of our journey...
- What it means; is that with this struggle, we also learn to accept ourselves wherever we are on the journey... As God accepts us... That we learn to stop beating ourselves up for our failures, and trust in God's mercy and compassion...
- In essence – We're called to slowly learn to show ourselves, and others; the same unconditional love that God shows us...

Perfection is Not the Answer

- From the Gospel of Mark (5:25-34) we hear Jesus tell the woman who had touched His Cloak for healing - "*Daughter, your faith has saved you. Go in peace and be cured of your affliction.*"
 - He didn't say – Daughter, your perfection has saved you...
 - He didn't say – Daughter, your willpower has saved you...
 - He didn't say – Daughter, your strength against temptation has saved you...
- He said – Daughter, your **faith** has saved you...
- Our salvation does not hinge on our ability and strength to resist temptation – It hinges upon our **Faith** – Our unshakeable belief in Christ – Our conviction of God's love for us...
- **As long as we depend upon our accomplishments and upon the love of the world to define our self-worth – We will never be able to find true peace or happiness in this world...**
- God isn't asking for our worship – He's asking for our imitation...
- And the most perfect imitation of God is to love...
- We imitate God by being merciful... not by trying or pretending to be perfect...

What Does Mercy Look Like to Us

- Father Richard Rohr wrote: (Radical Grace; July-Sept 2008): "*You don't know mercy until you've really needed it. As Thomas Merton once said – 'Mercy within mercy, within mercy.' It's as if we collapse into deeper nets of acceptance, deeper nets of being enclosed, and finally find we're in a net we can't fall out of. We are captured by Grace. Only after much mistrust and resting do (finally) we accept that we are accepted.*"
- It's only in our vulnerabilities, in our weaknesses, and in our brokenness that we can appreciate mercy...
- It's only in our need for, and our experience of mercy in our own lives, that we can learn to become merciful...
- God uses the weak and the wounded to heal others...
- Because it's the weak and the wounded, the battered and the broken, the haggard and the weary souls of this world who know best of our need for God's compassion and mercy...
- And we can only know of God's compassion and mercy, if we have hungered for it and experienced it first hand in our own brokenness and weakness...

Humility is the Key to Sanctity

- It's been said that humility is truth...
- It's simply acknowledging who we are, and who Whose we are...
- When we believe that spiritual perfection is the key to sanctity, we fool ourselves into believing that we need to earn God's love...
- Essentially, we buy into the world's wisdom that there's no free lunch... That God's unconditional love isn't really unconditional at all...

- And when we do that... We buy into the lie that God demands sacrifice rather than mercy...

God Asks Only One Thing of Us

- Christianity isn't difficult to understand... But it can be difficult to live...
- We can often complicate and distort Jesus' message, rather than try to live it...
- **It's much easier to worship Christ than it is to follow Him...**
- Jesus says nothing about trying to make ourselves worthy of salvation...
- He says nothing about trying to fix our inherent brokenness...
- He says nothing about trying to earn God's love...
- He asks only that we love God and neighbor...
- Our transformation into the very image of God can only occur by learning to love as Jesus loves... by learning to become merciful as our heavenly Father is merciful...
- Christianity isn't about getting everything right in our lives...
- It's not about working our way into heaven through our good works...
- And... It's not about having all of the answers to all of the hard questions in life...
- Christianity is about living and proclaiming the Good News that we are Redeemed Sons and Daughters of a most merciful and loving Creator...
- It's the Good News of a God Who says to each of us:
 - *I know that you're incapable of getting everything right – But I still love you...*
 - *I know that your willpower and strength are limited and weak at times – But I understand...*
 - *I know that you're incapable of grasping the mystery that is God – But that's not necessary...*
- This is the message of Christianity that we can all too soon forget...
- This is the message of Christianity that can all too easily become distorted...

We Are Enough – Just As We Are

- What is it in us that makes us feel that we must change ourselves... that makes us feel inadequate?
- When we go through life constantly dissatisfied with who we are, we dishonor God, who made us this way with all of our faults and all of our weaknesses...
- We're all called to be the best us that we can be... But we're also called to be accepting of our faults and weaknesses, trusting that God can bring good from weakness, and that God wants us to enjoy and cherish our lives, not ruminate constantly on what we might think is lacking in us...
- None of us will ever walk the perfect walk through this life... and we're not expected to...
- Although sin, and our failings in life are not to be encouraged or glorified... God can and will use our weaknesses to sanctify us...
- Only God can write straight with crooked lines...
- God wastes nothing... **Everything is redemptive...**
- We need to eventually come to the realization that **we are enough just as we are...**

- Brené Brown calls this “Wholehearted Living,” and she wrote the following...
“Wholehearted living is about engaging in our lives from a place of worthiness. It means cultivating the courage, compassion, and connection to wake up in the morning and think, No matter what gets done and how much is left undone, I am enough. It’s going to bed at night thinking, Yes, I am imperfect and vulnerable and sometimes afraid, but that doesn’t change the truth that I am also brave and worthy of love and belonging.” (Daring Greatly, Pg. 10).
- That’s the essence of living the abundant life that Jesus wants for each of us...
- God didn’t send us here to mark time, or to hide in the corner until it was all over...
- God sent us here to live fully, to learn how to become fully human, and to show others how to live wholeheartedly...
- From John 10:10 – “*I came that they might have life and have it more abundantly.*”
- We can’t live wholeheartedly until we can finally come to believe that we are **enough**, **just as we are**... and that we **lack nothing**...
- It’s often the illusion of scarcity perpetuated by this world that tempts us to believe the lie that we are **not enough**...
- That we’re not good enough... that we’re not smart enough... that we’re not attractive enough... that we’re not wealthy enough... We each have our own lists...
- We need to constantly remind ourselves that we are all works in progress... God isn’t finished with any of us...
- God doesn’t expect, nor does God demand spiritual or physical perfection from us...
- God asks only one thing from us throughout the Gospels... That we learn to love unconditionally, as the Father loves unconditionally...
- And in order to do this, we must strive to become merciful in all aspects of our lives...
- Mercy, compassion, kindness, and love are what make us human...
- They are the key distinguishing characteristics that separate us from rest of the animal kingdom...
- The perfection referenced by Jesus in the Gospel of Mathew is not the perfection that the world understands...
- Like the Gospels themselves... It is a contrarian interpretation of perfection which has little to do with being sinless, and everything to do with our ability to give and receive love...
- The whole of Christ’s teachings, the true nature of God, and our vocations as Baptized Christians are all encapsulated in this one line from the Gospel of Luke...
 - “**Be merciful, just as (also) your Father is merciful**...”
- None of this is possible when we declare ourselves unworthy of love...
- None of this is possible when we declare ourselves deficient in some way, shape, or form...

- When you're afraid, when you're unsure of yourself, when you're ready to condemn yourself... when you feel that you have no love to share... Remember these words:
Through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ: I AM ENOUGH...

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