

“To Set at Liberty Them that are Bruised”

Matthew 5:10-12, 38-48
Sermon on the Mount Series

“When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart’s delight”
Jeremiah 15:16

Dr. Greg Anderson
Reign of Christ
November 26, 2017

Riverdale Baptist Church
Whitehorse, Yukon

Introduction

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This is the 15th sermon on the Sermon on the Mount. If nothing else I am sure we have heard Jesus say: **You have heard that it was said But I tell you . . .**

So, in coming to the end of this first section in the Sermon with the admonition: **Be perfect**

I can only imagine we are hearing what we hear often in life

Here is the test . . . see if you can get a perfect score

Here is the job . . . see if you can do it perfectly

Here is the law . . . see if you can keep it perfectly.

It is a matter of performance; of action; of obedience

And no doubt, when Jesus says to his disciples: **But I tell you . . .**

He is calling us to obedience as we walk in his way.

After all, being a disciple, a servant, a slave, is about obedience.

But here at the end of this first section, Jesus ups the ante.

Not just perform and obey perfectly, but be perfect.

The universal response is that Jesus must be talking about some other place and time.

If we know for certainty, something about ourselves, it is that we are not, and cannot be perfect.

So, what does Jesus mean?

Without watering down for a moment the call to obedience, this word 'perfect' is also understood in the sense of fully mature; fully developed; fully in accord, in completion, with the original design and purpose. (Like the watchmaker with my watch.)

And our original design? **Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness . . . So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.**

The original design and purpose is for us to be an image of God – this beats everything else!

We are not just animals: biology, chemistry, physics, genetics, psychology, sociology and economics; we are designed, purposed, to be children of our Heavenly Father.

Jesus Christ, whom the Bible says: . . . **is the exact imprint of God's very being . . .** is tirelessly at work in every part of his Sermon to restore God's original design and purpose in his disciples.

He will not stop until he has perfected us!

As I have said, the Sermon is not so much a rule book as it is a demonstration of who Jesus is.

He is perfect and he cannot but lead all who follow him to be perfect (complete in purpose).

The framework for how Jesus does this consists of two main structures:

The very life of Jesus made present to us through the powerful indwelling of the Holy Spirit: our impulse to love God, to be attracted to Jesus, to hunger and thirst for his life in our life – all of this is evidence of the Holy Spirit dwelling with us.

Remember the introductory statement about Jesus from the prophet, John the Baptist: **He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.** (Matthew 3:11)

Second main structure – my congregation. By definition my congregation is that group of formally organized Christians to whom Jesus through the Spirit draws me into; a group formed around the purposes of Christ's mission; worship of God; formation of disciples; pastoral care for one another and stewardship to protect it all.

By definition, many people 'unlike' me, so that the way Jesus has for me can be developed as he works through others in close relation to me to bring me to perfection.

Working through people 'like' me never addresses my rough edges, my unformed spaces, the bent out of shape contours of my life; people 'like' me, lack the means for Christ's work of perfection. But in the congregation, with those 'unlike me', the work can begin.

Remember the introductory action by Jesus before his Sermon: he gathers a group of men and women and says: **Come, follow me.** (Luke 8:1-3; Matthew 4:19)

Text

Now, I like to read the Scripture passage before us as spoken to the diverse group of disciples who were the first audience, the first congregation: the insult and strike on the cheek; the territorial wrangling over possessions; the impossible impositions; are never so poignant and troubling as when they come to us through the congregation.

In fact, in the Evangelical world, this is one of the reasons for the thousands of denominational entities, church plants, and parachurch ministries. Somebody got embarrassed, insulted, discouraged, hurt, and damaged in their local church, so they pulled up stakes and went somewhere else. Sometimes that is warranted.

But in a lot of cases what the Bible says was missed: **My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.**

The forming of Christ in us toward perfection, comes through pain. It cannot be otherwise with imperfect people living in an imperfect world.

Now, recently in Jesus' Sermon, we are told of the formation work through these examples:

Formed to neither break nor fail to restore relationships (do not be angry)
Formed to not violate another's marriage partner, either by act or by thought

Formed to not violate the indissoluble marriage bond (these two relate to family)
 Formed to be a truthful person

And now in this morning's passage:

Formed to retaliate with love
 Formed to not exclude enemies from the love shown to friends (Talbert)

In her recent sermon Pastor Michelle summed up where we have been with three descriptive words reflecting the character of Jesus and his work with us:

Life – do not murder, do not be angry, rather always protect and enhance life in relationships

Love – as a chaste person always protect love

Language – oaths proving truthful speech are not necessary when all of speech is to be truthful

Faced with Pastor Michelle's creativity I was challenged to come up with another "L" word!

Thankfully, it came to me: "Liberty!"

Think of the background to our passage:

A smack in the face; a legal enforcement; a personal enforcement; an emotional enforcement; an enemy; a persecutor

All these situations portray oppressive force compelling me to act against my better understandings; they all restrict my freedoms and rights;

In the face of any and all oppressions I want liberation.

My culture is founded on liberty: freedom of religion, freedom of the press, political liberation, sexual liberation, women's liberation, gender liberation . . .

What does Jesus say about liberty, about freedom from oppression?

But I tell you, do not resist (or retaliate against) an evil person . . . But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

What is he saying here? How does this form us in his life? Two background issues:

First, the Old Testament context of 'an eye for an eye' was intended as an official regulation (as opposed to an individual's taking the law into his own hands) to prevent vengefulness blinded with rage. In its time it was a social advance. It ended vendettas, blood feuds, which permitted unlimited retaliation. (Talbert)

The point is, Jesus in his saying, recognizes the difference between public structures like court and government systems and the personal conduct of his disciples.

Our decision to not strike back does not mean the appropriate social structure should not retaliate.

So, for example: Romans 12 tells disciples: **Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord.** Then right away Romans 13 tells us regarding governing authorities (the courts, the government): **They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.**

Second, what Jesus says about personal non-retaliation lives within the greater context of his description of the greatest commandments: **Love the Lord your God . . . Love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.**

So, for example, think of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. In our journeys, we come across a few robbers attacking another man. Jesus saying: **do not resist an evil person** should not be interpreted as hiding out in the bushes until the robbers have had their way and then going to the victim with loving help.

No! **Love your neighbor as yourself** (the second greatest command of all times) means you take up your walking staff, join your neighbor and beat back the robbers.

So, what is Jesus saying here? How does this form us?

Among various interpretations, here is how I understand him:

Who he is. Jesus said to his disciples: . . . **the Son of Man . . . will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him and spit on him; they will flog him and kill him.** (Lk.18)

Who we are. Among the original audience was Peter, he tells all who follow Jesus: **For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps . . . When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.** (1Pt 2)

I believe when Jesus tells us **do not resist an evil person . . . love your enemies**

He is telling us the place of personal offense is the place of formation in his life; the place of his grace; the place of the working of the Holy Spirit to form us in Christ.

We can all think of exceptions. But for the most part, and especially within the Christian congregation, offense without retaliation is the opportunity to love the other; to understand the other; to understand ourselves; to open the door to the presence of Jesus, who always enters the room with healing.

In all likelihood, there will be an opportunity this coming week. Someone is bound to offend us, it is the nature of things.

Commit the word of Jesus to memory. Not in a spirit of passivity, but in a spirit of love and curiosity toward the other and in a desire to walk the walk of Jesus and open some space for his life to come into my life. Only at a secondary level is liberty the advancements of rights, the freedom from oppression. First, liberty is the pathway to the perfection of you and me that was in the mind of God before the foundation of the world. Amen.