

## Conclusion to Chapter 5 of Sermon on the Mount:

### “Be Perfect as your Father is Perfect”

This morning we come to the end of our study of Matthew chapter five. It had been my intention for us to get through the Sermon on the Mount in its entirety this winter and spring. But it has taken us more time than I anticipated to study this fifth chapter.

By way of concluding what we have been looking at here in chapter five I want to look at verse 48. Here our Lord says “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” By inserting the word “therefore” in this final verse Jesus is tying together all that he has said in the previous 47 verses. He has had the goal of this verse in mind from the beginning of chapter 5. We are invited to live out the teaching he gives to us here because of the character of our Father in heaven. He is perfect, that is he is complete in his character and we are to reflect this completeness in our own lives. It is because of who our Father is that:

- True disciples not only avoid murder but are transformed so that they do not strip away the personhood and identity of others through anger or defamation (5:21-23), and they continually produce reconciliation in offended relationships (5:23-26).
- True disciples not only shun physical acts of adultery but are so completely committed to God's purpose for marriage that they have eyes and hands only for a spouse (5:27-28) and discipline every thought and action to be singly focused on the spouse (5:29-30).
- True disciples not only respect the purity of the marital relationship but have God's values for the original design for marriage and are unreservedly committed to its permanence and sanctity (5:31-32).
- True disciples do not need to give oaths in order to confirm their trustworthiness, because their faithful lives repeatedly confirm the reliability of their words (5:33-37).

- True disciples are so secure in their transformed kingdom identity that when they are wronged, they do not merely adhere to legal retribution but use every opportunity to serve others, both good and evil people, so that the reality of God's grace in their lives woos them to the kingdom of heaven (5:38-42).
- True disciples not only love what God loves and hate what God hates, but they have the renewed heart of God that enables them to love the world of sinners for whom Jesus will eventually give his life (5:43-48).

Climactically, true disciples have experienced the powerful life-changing presence of the kingdom of heaven in such a way that their progressive transformation into the image of Jesus, the Son of God, secures their progressive growth into the very perfection of God the Father. Therefore we live this way to reflect who we are as sons and daughters of our Father in heaven.

In understanding this verse it is helpful to know the tense of the verb “be perfect”. It is what is called the future indicative. If it were a present imperative it would mean “keep being perfect” or be continually perfect”. This would be an impossible demand placed on Jesus’ disciples. Instead, because it is written in the future tense it holds out a goal that is to shape the disciples’ entire life. We are to set before us nothing less than the perfection of God, because the Father is not only the divine goal but the divine enabler.

You see Jesus is putting the command in such a way that disciples may look for divine help as they press toward God’s goal for them. In its simplicity this may be one of the purest statements of spiritual formation in all of Scripture. But we may become uneasy before its magnitude.

But the uneasiness may dissipate by considering an important theological distinction—positional and experiential perfection. Although it awaits Paul’s full theological development, positional perfection is the "imputed righteousness" of Christ that is the

basis of the Christian's justification in a legal manner. Because of Jesus' death on the Cross we are now declared righteous or perfect.

This can be illustrated by the use of this white gown. When we commit our lives to Jesus and trust in his grace, mercy and forgiveness the bible says we are now clothed with Christ's character. From the perspective of our Father in heaven he now sees us through Jesus.

Experiential righteousness is the "imparted righteousness" of Christ experienced by the Christian in the process of sanctification through the work of the Spirit. The latter is in view in verse 48. but it assumes and builds on the former. This implies an imperfect process that goes on throughout this life and accepts it as a goal that will be fully realized only in the future.

Instead of being uneasy before Jesus' magnificent summons, we can practice a balance of what we can call "restful dissatisfaction." I rest content with what Christ has done in my life and with the growth that has occurred, yet at the same time I balance that contentment with the desire to move on. At any one point in my life I want to be satisfied with what God has been doing in my life, yet I want to be dissatisfied to the degree that I press on to complete maturity. I accept my imperfection, yet I have the courage to press on to perfection. I rest in the assurance of what God has accomplished in Christ's work of redemption and regeneration. Titus 3:4-7 puts it like this:

“But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.”

I rest in the assurance that transformation is, at this very moment, being accomplished. 2 Corinthians 3:18 says:

18 And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

I rest in the promise that ultimately we will be like him as John 3:2 promises:

“Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

But I am dissatisfied when I see immaturity or impurity in my heart, mind, and life, I am dissatisfied with the state of this world apart from Christ. I am dissatisfied with loving less than the way Jesus loves.

If we focus solely on our positional perfection, we can become complacent about our present growth. If we focus solely on our experiential imperfection, we can become distraught over our present state. We must rest in the positional perfection that Christ has brought through the cross, while being relatively dissatisfied with our experience in this life, pressing on toward greater growth in Christ. It is possible for each of us to live with unrealistic expectations of ourselves and what God wants from us. We can put ourselves on a performance standard where we expect certain behavior before we believe we are loved or accepted. Or we can fall into the trap of unrealistically comparing ourselves with the accomplishments of others in such a way that our uniqueness is lost. "Restful dissatisfaction" means that when we have given our best in our discipleship to Jesus, we are able to find contentment in our growth and accomplishment.

At the same time we must refuse to capitulate to our imperfections and press on toward further growth. Jesus' disciples experience the powerfully life-changing presence of the kingdom of heaven in such a way that becoming more like the Son produces the very

perfection of God the Father. That is what I hear in Jesus' summons to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.

Let me try to illustrate this musically. As some of you know I love playing the piano. I have in my hand the score for a composition by Mozart. Mozart wrote this piece hundreds of years ago and so it is complete. Every note is in position, where they are supposed to be. However to say that this piece is positionally complete does you no good at all if you want to know how it sounds. In order for that to happen it needs to be played which moves us along to experiential righteousness. Now I could say that I am too nervous to play this piece. I will just look at its notes on the page or get a recording and listen to someone else playing it.

But this music is for my enjoyment and so while I will not play it perfectly the more I practice it the better it will get.

As Jesus teaches us what it means to be perfect we know from all that he has said in leading up to this verse that our perfection requires us to focus on our heart attitude, (5:3-10) which will naturally overflow into a witness to the world (5:13-16) and will produce a life of righteousness that fulfills God's will for our lives (5:20 – 48).