

Be Perfect

February 16, 2020

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Jessie Brajcki]

All right, I have our Gospel reading this morning. It's Matthew 5:21–37:

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ ²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

³¹ “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³ “Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you

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cannot make one hair white or black.³⁷ Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

Well, as I mentioned, we are so lucky to have Kristen Brown preaching this morning. Kristen was here with us a lot during the summer while Scott was on sabbatical and we all loved having her, and Kristen is also an associate dean at Northeastern Seminary. So, we’re lucky to have her as an Artisan member and as someone who can bring the Word, so thank you, Kristen!

[Voice of Kristen Brown]

Well, thank you. [crowd applauds]

Good morning! It’s good to be back; good to see you all this morning. And before we get into the text this morning, I just have to say, I know, kids, you are really excited about getting back to your classrooms. Very soon you’re going to hang out with your friends on Sunday morning during part of the service. But I personally have benefited a lot from having you in the service with us over the last many many many months, and especially during the children’s moment that we have every week. So, just so you know, kids, we are learning—at least I am learning and listening along with you.

And, in fact, last week during the children’s moment in the second service (so, if you were here last week for this service) we were talking about fasting and sometimes, like, why people fast, and what that means, and Scott said, “Fasting isn’t about scoring points with God.” He was trying to explain, sort of, why we do this, and a very insightful little Artisan asked the obvious question in that moment, “Well, is there a scoreboard?” Is that the game that we’re playing? Just, like, clarify the rules that we’re in.

And that’s actually a really important question, and you might have that question. You might have had that question, or you might just assume that that’s the game that we’re playing. And I would say one of the ways that we learn and grow from our kids is maybe learning to say out loud the questions that we have, which is something that children are actually really good at doing. And Jesus tells us to come to God like little children, and I think asking questions is one of the ways that we do that. That’s just for you this morning to think about.

But that question about the scoreboard actually resonated with me as I read the passage this week. Our passage today seems like it might actually be setting up the scoreboard. The reading from the lectionary that Jessie just read is actually only a partial reading and we’re going to look at a larger passage of Matthew chapter 5 today, so it’s a good day if you want to pull out the red Bible in the chair in front of you—we’re on page 786 in that Bible—and we’re going to look

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at actually Matthew starting in 5 verse 21 all the way through through verse 48. And, here's the deal, we're actually going to skip a lot of it. There were some really great things in there today, right? About, like, gouging out your eyes and, like, being thrown into the hell of fire. So there is plenty of things we could be talking about, but we're only gonna talk about a couple things that I think are interesting. So, when you preach you can talk about the things that you think are interesting. [crowd laughs].

But as we read, if you look down in Matthew 5:48 where this passage ends, we see this challenge from Jesus, it says: "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." So that's what I titled the message today, "Be Perfect." And in a sense I guess you could say, you know, as you read that you might be thinking, *Yes, surely there's a scoreboard, and not only that, it's even harder than we thought it was gonna be.*

There are people who suggest that Jesus' whole goal in saying what he says in this passage is to say, basically, you will never measure up and you need God's grace. Now, I totally agree that we need God's grace, and I do think that Jesus is saying that, but I also am not 100 percent sure about the idea of "measuring up" and what that really means. Is that what the passage is about? Is it about us measuring up?

Well, what Jesus says in Matthew 5 through 7, which is the longer section—and if you have a Bible that has sort of red letters in it, that people attribute these words to Jesus, you'll see, like, 5 through 7 is all just one big red passage. It's called the Sermon on the Mount because it is a *sermon*, a long monologue of Jesus' and he's on a hill or mountain of some kind. And there's a lot of symbolism in that. The name, actually, is—we're supposed to derive some meaning from what's happening.

You see, back in the Old Testament, there's a guy named Moses, and he also was on a mountain, Mount Sinai. And God gave him this set of laws; we generally know them as the Ten Commandments. You might have seen a movie depiction of them; usually around Easter, we see Charlton Heston coming down the mountain with the Ten Commandments. And if you know the Ten Commandments, you actually see some of them in our passage today in Matthew chapter 5 about not murdering, not committing adultery—we're supposed to actually read Matthew 5 with the picture of Moses in mind.

So, and in that story (in the Old Testament story) the laws God gave to Moses for the people were about defining the community's identity. They weren't supposed to be like the world around them; that was the point in giving the law. They were to be set apart as God's people,

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living according to the ways of God; that would be a sign to the world around them that they belong to God.

The Old Testament reading earlier today that Jenna read from Deuteronomy is also a reminder of these laws. So, in Deuteronomy 30, the people are about to enter the Promised Land, and God has led them out of slavery in Egypt and they'd wandered in the wilderness for many years, and now they're about to head into the land that God promises them. And Moses tells them before they head into the land to remember who they are, and he reminds them of God giving them these laws.

And then he says in Deuteronomy 30, verse 20, that we heard today, that the people's obedience was to be an act of love for God. Moses says: choose this way of life—all that we've been talking about, choose to live this way—"that you may love the Lord your God, Listen to his voice and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life...." That's the translation I use, it says "for the Lord is your life." At the heart of the law is the love of God. We are to love God. It isn't a checklist of right and wrong, moral and immoral, by which God keeps score. At the heart of the law, even in the Old Testament, was a relationship with God built on love, not legalism.

Obedying these commands was a way they showed they were God's people. It was supposed to be an overflow of the response of love. You see that, actually, throughout the Old Testament. We heard it this morning in Psalm 119, which is a sort of litany of the love of God through the law. And we shouldn't think about the Old Testament—sometimes we hear the *Old* Testament where people are justified by their ability to keep the rules, where God loves the people because they're good rule followers, and then in the *New* Testament we're gonna meet the gracious God who loves us in spite of our failures. Actually, the whole Bible is the story of in which God so loved the world, and wants nothing more for us than to live as people who are deeply loved by God. It is a story that reminds us that there is transformative power and knowing that we are deeply loved by God.

So, what does it look like to live as people all who know that we are deeply loved by God? I actually think that's the question for us to answer as we read Matthew chapter 5. In this passage, it's not a new law; it's not a series of sort of a more inward checklist of rules to keep. It can be read that way, but I don't think that that's what Jesus is saying to us. But we see it sort of throughout—we saw it on the children's moment slide today—we see this sort of litany throughout, so I want to look at some of these places where it says, "You have heard that it was sad, but I tell you..." and I want us to think about what it means when Jesus says these things. What is he really calling us to as a community? So, like in verse 21, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to

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judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.” So I could read that as trading my checklist of *don’t murder*, which isn’t one that’s really difficult for me to keep [crowd chuckles], for this, sort of, substantially harder *don’t be angry*, which is not something I’m going to possibly be able to do as a human being, because I am human and I have emotions. So there’s a whole list of these throughout the chapter, and if I read it that way, I set myself up for failure every time, and to forget that I am a deeply loved child of God.

So you see in verse 27, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery.” Verse 33: ‘You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.’ But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all. ... Let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no’.” And then verse 38, we keep going, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’” What does retribution look like? He says, “But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies.”

So the question is: Are we supposed to love our enemies, to not retaliate, to keep our promises, to not treat other people simply as objects for our own desire, because that’s how we rack up points on the giant scoreboard? Or is there another reason that Jesus says these things? Well, I think there is another reason.

I think Jesus is doing here exactly what Moses did in the Old Testament. He is inviting us to find life in ways that we didn’t expect or think possible. He’s inviting us out of retaliation, anger, and lustful ways of living, and into a community in which trust and truthfulness and love define our humanity. Jesus is saying: in a world that is dehumanizing, as beloved children of God, you are invited to live in a community characterized by dignity and love. It’s a different way of life. It’s not like the world around you, but it is who you were made to be.

The scoreboard in this passage is not some intense moral order, but the challenge to be the full human beings that God made and loves. And we can look at all the different parts of this, and maybe sometime we’ll go back and do some more, but I just want to look at two today—so if you feel like I’m jumping and skipping some things that you think are super interesting, then I definitely am doing that—but I want to look at two that I think are somewhat misunderstood. So we’re going to look at the prohibition, or the teaching on marriage and divorce, because it’s always fun to talk about what the Bible says about marriage. And then we’re also going to look at the part at the end that talks about non-retaliation and loving our enemies. So, just so you know, I’m going to skip all the other pieces [chuckles].

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So let's look first at verse 31 and 32: "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife makes her the victim of adultery and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery." Now, at first glance, I think we might think that this passage is mostly about marriage, and that's sort of what it says, but really I think if you want to know about marriage in a Christian community, you should read the next passage about oaths, about keeping our promises and being people who treat one another truthfully.

Who in the room has seen the movie *Little Women*, the new one? I'm telling you, you should see it if you haven't seen it. And the men in the room, you need to go see this movie; it's not a women's movie, it's a movie for all people. But if you did not see *Little Women* yet, you should go see it. There is this great scene in the movie that I think sets us up to actually better understand this verse than we can understand, maybe for ourselves. The movie is set sort of in the mid 1800s during the Civil War. And there's this great scene in the movie where Amy, who is the youngest of the little women, is admonished by Laurie, who is trying to sort of marry into the March family. He had a thing for the older sister and now he's after Amy. And he's trying to keep Amy from marrying another man for his money. And Amy is doing that and is not really ashamed of it, so Laurie tries to shame her into saying that no man wants to be married to someone who's only doing it for the money. To which Amy replies that, for women, marriage has always been an economic proposition. A woman's fortunes were tied entirely to her husband. Marriage was often about men and their power, so why shouldn't she marry for money? It's her way of taking the power back.

Matthew is writing to that community in which marriage was the way of maintaining power. This passage is less about marriage and more about patriarchy, honestly. The fact that this verse focuses the consequences to women and is written to men, is telling. In this day, marriage and divorce are both used against women. Women were pawns in the marriage system. The thing about divorce in this time is that it was absolutely a disadvantage to women, and yet they didn't have any options. Men were choosing to divorce their wives (women could not make that choice) and women are paying the social and economic price for that. And Jesus says, not among you. Not among the beloved community. You are to be responsible to and for one another. Stanley Hauerwas actually, reading this passage, pushes it a little further. He says, "What if this isn't about who should get to be married and not. What if it wasn't about who bears the stigma and not?" He says, "This verse suggests this kind of community where marriage isn't about power, but about care. And that those who have been cast off and abandoned through lack of care have a place in the community, have the full dignity of their being." He writes, "The picture of this verse is not about who can and cannot be remarried or whether or not there is a necessity to remarry." He says, "If women who have been abandoned

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do not have to remarry, then surely the church must be a community of friendship that is an alternative to the loneliness of our world.” For us today we might ask, what if we lived in a community in which no one was advantaged or disadvantaged because of who they were or were not married to? What would it look like for a marriage to not be about it they were advantaged or disadvantaged. Jesus says, live that way. That’s the fully human way to live.

We could keep walking down the long road of what marriage in Scripture is and is not, which we won’t do this morning. But in this passage, Jesus places care at the center of our relationships, married or otherwise, and that needs to matter for us in the way that we live our lives in the world. There is another passage that I think also gets somewhat of a misreading, and that’s the end of this section of Matthew chapter 5 down in verses 38 through the end of the end of the chapter. And I want to look at those for a minute as well. So Jesus says this: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’” We’re talking about how you retaliate against people—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. “But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go the second mile.”

Now this is a statement about non-retaliation, but it isn’t about enduring abuse. In fact, if you have heard that that’s what this passage is about, then I’m very sorry. It’s not. The fact is, this passage has fuelled some of the greatest movements as a statement of human dignity. Martin Luther King Jr. points to this passage as his grounding for the Civil Rights movement. He said when the protests in Montgomery began, it was the bus boycotts. He says, “When the protests began, my mind consciously or unconsciously was driven back to the Sermon on the Mount with its sublime teachings on love and to the Gandhian method of nonviolent resistance.” Gandhi, who was not a Christian, also found this passage to be the source of his work in civil rights in India during the era of British colonialism. This statement from Jesus about not resisting evil people is not about passive acceptance of a status quo. It has been rightly interpreted, I think, and used as a source to protest unjust systems and to stand up for human dignity.

Even this picture of striking on the cheek is not one of abuse but of humiliation. You’ve got to know there’s a right-handed bias in Scripture. If you’re a left-handed person, it’s not anything against you [laughter] it was a cultural decision. There’s actually a story of a great left-handed warrior in the Old Testament. If you’re into some guts and gore look, look up Ehud in the Old Testament, the left-handed judge, and you’ll find a great story. But there is an assumed right-handedness. So if you think about that and you’re talking about being struck on the right cheek by the right hand, what you’re talking about is having a backhanded slap, which is less

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about power and more about shaming a person. So we have an idiom — we say a “backhanded compliment,” right? It’s a passive aggressive insult. It’s the same idea. Another way of translating this verse might be, when someone insults you and tries to demean you, when they slap you on the right cheek, turn the other as well. Stand firm in your identity as a member of the community of God’s beloved people. They cannot take that away from you.

The other images of non-retaliation are actually similar. So when someone takes your shirt as a way to shame you, give them all your clothes. You stand there naked and unashamed because you are a beloved child of God. Or the line about walking the mile. This is written to a people who are under Roman occupation and an oppressive government, and there was a law that said that people were required when commanded to carry a soldier’s pack for up to one mile. And it wasn’t because the soldier needed a little help. It was a way of putting people in their place, of saying, “You have to do this. You belong to me.” And Jesus says, when a soldier tries to show you he has control over you by making you carry his pack for one mile, show him that you are not his possession by choosing to walk the second mile.

Jesus says you are not who people tell you you are. You are God’s child, beloved and empowered with the dignity that belongs to being a human being created in a divine image. Is there a scoreboard in this passage? Well if there is, I think it’s this: Be fully human. And treat those around you as the fully human beloved children of God that they are. As he ends this passage, Jesus says in verse 42 to give to those who ask. And he’s basically saying, see the humanity in the one who is in need and comes asking for help. Give generously as you would to a human being of great worth and value to God. And he goes on, do not discriminate in who is deserving of your love. Don’t be so quick to label friend and enemy so that you can determine how you treat people. God has no natural enemies and loves with radical abandon, so go and do likewise. Those are my translations of those passages. Sometimes it’s helpful to put them in our own words. Jesus’ command in this passage is not a new law. It is the picture of a new kind of community, one constituted by people who love God and live lives that demonstrate God’s love in their community and in the wider world.

The passage ends with this seemingly impossible command in verse 48 from which I took the title of the sermon: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” There are people who take that verse of hyperbole, who say that Jesus is exaggerating. He didn’t really mean it, it’s not really possible. Well I guess how we read that kind of depends on our definition of perfect and I’ll tell you this. The word translated here as perfect actually has more of the sense of wholeness or completeness behind it. We might say, be a whole person, be fully human. Or if you’re a Brene Brown fan like I am, you may say, be wholehearted, love generously and without fear because that’s how God loves. God is wholehearted toward us, so

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be like God in that. The ethical demand of Jesus is to be a wholehearted human being. Which doesn't seem so hard until we try it and we realize we live in a very dehumanizing world. And if we play by their rules, we will end up dehumanizing one another. We see it happen all the time. But Jesus has called us to be a different kind of community. Jesus calls us to be the kind of person who loves God and loves others, which as Jessie said earlier, is the summary of the whole law. Later on, we hear that. Jesus says the whole command, all the commands of God, are summed up in this: "Love the Lord your God and your neighbor as yourself." And you might say the whole law is summarized in this; be wholehearted and love.

So what do we do with this that we've heard from Jesus this morning? Well I have two takeaways from this passage. You might have your own takeaway from the passage, but I'll share mine as we end the sermon this morning. Here are my two takeaways from the passage. First, I would say there is a reason that this passage has fueled some of the greatest social movements in human history. It is a profound statement about our dignity as human beings. The first takeaway from this passage for me is, don't let the world take away your humanity. You are one who God loves. You are blessed if you remember and live according to it. Jesus started his sermon a few verses ago at the beginning of Chapter 5 with blessings upon people, and he blessed all the people who had never been blessed at all in their whole lives. This sermon is a blessing.

The second thing I take away from this passage this morning is this passage reminds me that the only scoreboard that matters is love. So what do we do with these verses? Well I think the passage asks us to consider what the love of God calls us to do, and where the love of God calls us to go, and to go there and to do that. To not turn this into a list of dos and don'ts, but instead to take risks on the side of loving others. Sometimes you can be so afraid of making mistakes, of not being perfect in our definition of perfect, that we fail to act in love. We want to be perfect and so we fail to be wholehearted. So this is not a checklist of rules. What is it? Since it's Valentine's week I would say, I think it is a Valentine. It's an invitation. An invitation to create a community marked by the love of God and the love of one another, an overflowing love that we have to share with the world.

We are going to celebrate that actually this morning as we do every week at this table. It's a table that reminds us that death was not too high a price to pay for God to love us. God was willing to go even to death to love us and to invite us into a community of love. It is a reminder that the death of Christ that was the beginning of the end of all death and the restoration of the community of love is available for us. And so we come to this table every week, and we come as a community. And everyone here who desires the love of God is welcome at this table. It is hosted by Christ and you are invited to come and to experience the love of God here this

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morning. If you are new with us just a little FYI, we sort of come up the middle, you take a piece of bread, dip it, and there's wine and juice and gluten free options. So there's room at the table for everyone. And then if you're in need of prayer this morning we actually have a member of our prayer team who is available at the back if you just want somebody to pray with you about anything this morning. But I invite you as you are ready as the band plays, to come and experience the love of God together at this table.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).