

## Matthew 5:21-37

Epiphany 6; February 12, 2023

I think we all battle with perfectionism. Right? It may be about different things, but I think we all have a streak of perfectionism in us. It may be working on a project in our homes. You may be that way with your job. It may be wanting to get an assignment perfect before you turn it in. We all have this need to live up to people's expectations, to live up to our expectations. As we pursue perfectionism, we begin to think that the grass will always look greener somewhere else. We get really hard on ourselves and we want to get it right. After all, if we don't get it right, we are afraid of how people may think about us. If we don't meet those expectations and get it right, we feel guilty or ashamed. Yet, even though we might beat ourselves up because it wasn't perfect, what do we do to other people don't get it perfect? We'll show them grace. What do we say? *"Don't worry, no one is perfect."*

Scripture can also be rather intimidating as well. Just a few verses past our text, Jesus speaks these words: **"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."** How in the world are we going to be perfect? Nobody can do that, can they? God has just set the bar too high. I think that is the message that Jesus is trying to teach us in this section of his Sermon on the Mount. There is not a single person here today that can live a perfectly holy life. (Myself included.) Yet, that's exactly what Jesus wants to teach us this morning – you can't.

Look at God's expectations from us. At first, we might say that at least we have not committed murder, adultery or perjured ourselves with an oath. But then Jesus says: *Look closer at my words.* **"I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment."** **"If your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar."** **"Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."** **"But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne."** **"You will be in danger of the fire of hell."**

Those are pretty strong words. I'll be honest this week as I looked at this text, I thought: *Woe... I don't think that I ever preached on this text.* How am I going to focus on each of these sections? You could preach multiple sermons on each of these sections. It's not that these are important issues. The more I thought about it, I wondered if that was really what Jesus wanted to talk about on that side of that mountain. Or did he want the people listening that day, to see that this is completely impossible for anyone to do. If you think that sin is only done with actions or even words, Jesus says that we need to look deeper. Look deep into your heart. There you will see all kinds of ugly things, right? Jesus wants us to see just how quickly we can fall into sin. How much it needs to be removed and replaced.

Last week I had stopped in at Kwik Trip and I saw that they were tearing up brand new concrete that they had poured only a couple of weeks ago as they are expanding their store. So, I asked someone working there why they were doing that. I was told that they had made a mistake when they first poured it. It was poured 8 inches too high. The only way to fix it was to tear it out, dig deeper, and pour it again. These words of Jesus might make us feel uncomfortable because those sinful words, actions and thoughts need to be removed in order to fix it. There is nothing that we can do to accomplish that. We might try, but we can't do it. Jesus has just set the bar too high.

Pursuing perfection is a funny thing, isn't it? We chase it, but we can never attain it. Perfectionism focuses on what I do. It focuses on my effort, or my religious actions. If we do that, we will never accomplish being perfect in the eyes of God. Last week, in the last verse of the text for last week, Jesus said these words: **"For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."** What does Jesus mean? In the eyes of people in Jesus' time, if anyone had a shot of getting into heaven by their actions, it would be the Pharisees. They had even come up with hundreds of laws to follow in addition to the commands of God. They tried, and they wanted everyone to know that they had tried. So, Jesus says that if you want to try to get into heaven by their actions, then you need to be better than the best.

Jesus' point is simple in these words of our text. Either you are perfect in everything that you do, or you fail. There is no middle ground. There is no riding the fence. There is no hope in these words of Jesus, right? Why crush us so

much? What's his point? Where is the Gospel found in these words of Jesus? It's found in the one speaking to them. In the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul writes: **"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly... But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."** (Romans 5: 6,8) We can try all we want to be perfect, but we never can. Never. That's why Jesus came into this world. He came to do what we couldn't. He came so that we might be blessed as we talked about two weeks ago. He came so that we can be light and salt in this world, as we talked about last week.

You see, it's all about Jesus. It's not about us. Jesus wants to look at the big picture. He wants us to see the root of the problem – me. It's about fixing our heart. It is no secret that I love flying. One of those reasons is that when you are at 35,000 feet above the ground, you can see more of the bigger picture. Jesus wants us to see the bigger picture. He wants us to see that it is absolutely impossible to pursue perfectionism when it comes to our salvation. It's going to be like a carrot dangling in front of a rabbit that he can never catch. So, when we ask that question that every person needs to answer: *How do we make things right with God? You don't.* But Jesus did. For it is by the blood that Jesus spilled on the cross, that our sins are washed away. Are we perfect? Yes, perfectly forgiven in Jesus. May God help all of us to hold on to that promise of God. Amen.