

“Perfection and Generosity”

(Matthew 5.38-48)

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Introduction

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect.”

But *perfection* is a dangerous business! To expect life to be perfect – the perfect holiday, house, church – is inevitably to be disappointed. To expect the people around you to be perfect – the perfect partner, children, friends, parishioners – leads to anger, frustration and even bitterness... in fact it’s a relationship killer! To expect *yourself* to be perfect... is to commit to constant and fruitless striving... it is to know continual unhappiness, denial and even ‘madness’.

Expecting perfection is to submit to bondage and tyranny. And yet many of us remember a childhood in the church, where it felt that’s *exactly* what we were told to be. To be perfect meant being constantly good... never doing anything wrong... never being angry or unkind or ‘out of line’ in any way... to be...*perfect*! Perfection was expected of us by parents, teachers, priests... and ultimately God Himself. Many of us in our generations grew up thinking that being perfect was necessary if we were ever to be accepted or loved... by other people... and by God. For those of us who got a big dose of this training, it meant a life of constant striving to be good... harsh self-criticism and personal despair in private... and public denial and pretence... because to be our real selves was never going to be good enough.

Such a life is life under tyranny... Indeed it’s religious abuse... and it’s the complete opposite of the good news of Christ Jesus. So what are we to do with this gospel... *“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect”* ???

God’s Perfection

We need to ask... *‘Where does God’s perfection lie? In what qualities do we see and experience the perfection of God?’* Because when Scripture talks about divine perfection, it’s

not talking about 'always getting everything right'. That may indeed be a true quality of God, but it's not what Christ Jesus is talking about today.

We get an easy clue by looking at how *Luke* expresses exactly the same saying of Jesus. Instead of 'be perfect' as *Matthew* has it, *Luke* translates it as "*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*" (NRSV) Or in the REB, "*Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate.*" Or again in Eugene Peterson's translation, "*Our Father is kind; you be kind!*" (MSG) God's perfection is seen in mercy, compassion and kindness.

Going back to *Matthew*... we are to understand the perfection of God according to what Jesus has said about God's nature in the verses immediately prior. "*...be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.*" (NRSV) Or as Eugene Peterson puts it, "*That is what God does. He gives his best – the sun to warm and the rain to nourish – to everyone regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty.*" God's perfection is seen and experienced in his/her bottomless mercy, God's kindness and compassion for us... regardless of our response... We know God's perfection in his profound and profligate generosity to us! And so Peterson translates "*be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect*" as "*Live out of your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.*"

Our Calling

We're called to respond to God's bountiful generosity to us, by being outrageously generous ourselves. This is the spirit we heard three weeks ago in The Beatitudes... and this is the teaching of today's gospel text. It's a wild, free spirit...

- Don't hit back... don't take revenge... accept it all with a shrug of the shoulders and a smile.
- Don't get angry and defensive. Open yourself to others even when you know they'll sometimes take you for a ride.
- Be generous in love... even when others don't deserve it. Love them all the same!

Now *this is* good news... this is freedom! This way smells of abundant life... whereas the expectation of perfection is miserable, uptight, abusive and deathly. And Peterson picks up something critical. He translates the opening of verse 48 as *"Live out of your God-created identity."* There's a reason why we feel so good, so free, when we live in a generous spirit. It's because this is the way God created us to be. Generous living reveals our true identity. *"Be perfect"* is actually calling us to live as we truly are... *not* out of some impossible standard of perfection.

Vestry

This is a great text for us to get on the day of our Annual Vestry!

I *used to* dream of the perfect parish... including me as the perfect priest. So not only was the parish successful, vibrant, responsive and 'perfect in every way', I never ever made a mistake either... *I* got everything right all the time. Well, at 61 and after 37 years at it, I can tell you... that's *not* real! And if you give-in to it, that way leads to despair.

If we look at the parish according to an illusory expectation of perfection, we'll be beaten-up... tortured even... by our failure and imperfection. But if instead, we look at our church through the quality of God's dealings with us – (you can see the radically changed locus of perspective) – a very different picture is revealed. Instead of failure we see *gift and blessing!*

St. Theodore's is a place where God's generosity is writ large... where God's generosity is obvious for all to see... in the gift and blessing of our life. This isn't our achievement... it's not even something we deserve... it is a life that God has given us in His/Her perfectly amazing goodness!

Conclusion

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect." And God's perfection is seen and experienced in generosity. God is outrageously generous... to us! We can respond to God's

gift and blessing, by being generous in how we live our lives. We'll never be perfect at it, but we can make it our intention and we can certainly try.

And the open secret is... when we open ourselves to the reality of God's generosity, when we open our eyes and celebrate in gratitude, the gift and blessing that flows all around us, that same spirit of generosity grows in us. For *this* is *our* true identity... this is where our perfection will one day be revealed.