

July 5, 2009

Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 5:43-48

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

There's an old story that tells of an aspiring musician who finally had an opportunity to perform at Carnegie Hall. Arriving in New York City, he inquired of a local, "How do I get to Carnegie Hall?" The answer was, "Practice, young man, practice."

I have spent a great deal of time in my life practicing a piece of music by Bach, or Handel, or Mozart, or Beethoven for hours until I could play it as perfectly as it was possible for me to play it. But I was rarely pleased.

I know very few musicians who are ever truly satisfied with their performances. There are always things that could have been done better. Perfection is a cruel goal, an unforgiving taskmaster, and one nearly impossible to achieve.

So why on earth did Jesus say that we must be "perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." That little verse, Matthew 5:48, haunted me for years. How could I possibly be perfect? Tithe 20% instead of 10%? Work 80 hours a week at church instead of 55 or 60? Preach so well that church membership doubled every 6 months? Play every piece of music without ever making a mistake?

It will never happen. I am a sinner; I will never be perfect. That is simply unattainable, so why even try? Jesus was asking too much. Then, because I had to take Greek in seminary, somewhere in the distant past I came across a study that concentrated on the word Jesus used that we have translated as "perfect."

This little Greek word is *teleios* such a small word to cause such big problems for people. I suppose we could say, "Well, it's all Greek to me," and be done with it. But I think just a little digging can make a huge difference in how we understand what Jesus was saying.

The Sermon on the Mount is the heart of the Christian Gospel, and this section, Matthew 5:43-48 has been called the central section of the Sermon. These few chapters at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel tell us what it is like in the kingdom of God. And here is the heart of the matter.

Jesus tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us because that is what God does, and we who have been created in the image of God, we who through Baptism are children of God, will be acting as God acts when we love with that kind of love.

As you know, there are four Greek words for “love.” “*Storge*” refers to family love: the love of a parent for a child and a child for a parent. “*Eros*” is the word used to describe the passion of human love and it never occurs in the New Testament.

“*Philia*” from which the word “Philadelphia” originates, describes the warm affection we have for our closest and dearest friends. It is the kind of affection that “Anne of Green Gables” said was felt between people who were “kindred spirits.”

Finally, there is “*agape*” which we translate as God’s love. William Barclay writes: “The real meaning of *agape* is *unconquerable benevolence, invincible goodwill*. If we regard a person with *agape*, it means that no matter what that person does to us, no matter how (that person) treats us, no matter if (that person) insults us or injures us or grieves us, we will never allow any bitterness against (that person) to invade our hearts, but we will regard (that person) with that unconquerable benevolence and goodwill which will seek nothing but (that person’s) highest good.”

When we can love someone with that kind of love, then we are participating in the kingdom of God here on earth. *Agape* is not just something we feel, it is something we must will to do – something we must choose to do.

And we cannot love our enemies without the presence of the Spirit of Jesus Christ within us, enabling us to turn off our natural reactions of anger and bitterness toward those who have hurt or offended us. Only the grace of Jesus can give us *agape*.

It is when Jesus lives inside us that bitterness, anger, and the desire for revenge will be overcome. Then we will be on the road toward that little Greek word – *teleios*.

By the way, *teleios* has nothing to do with the idea of never making a mistake, of playing a Beethoven Sonata with every note correct, or batting 1.000 for an entire baseball season. *Teleios* actually means “complete” or “mature.” It is a functional meaning.

Something is *teleios* if it realizes the purpose for which it was planned. We are *teleios* if we realize the purpose for which we have been created and sent into the world. [Barclay]

We have been created by God, in God’s image, to love one another as God loves us, to seek the highest good of every human being, to extend to others the same grace God has extended to us, to forgive as God forgives.

That is not easy, but it is the reason we have been created, it is the reason for our calling as Christians, it is the only way to demonstrate the kingdom of God in this world.

In his book “A Grace Disguised” Jerry Sittser talks about how all of us face difficulty, challenges and sorrows. We can’t prevent many of the bad things that happen to us, but we can choose how we respond to those situations.

He writes, “Choice is therefore the key....We can nurse wounds of having been cheated in life, or we can be grateful and joyful, even though there seems to be little reason for it. We can return evil for evil, or we can overcome evil with good.

“It is this power to choose that adds dignity to our humanity and gives us the ability to transcend our circumstances, thus releasing us from living as mere victims. These choices are *never easy*.” (P. 46) But the more we practice what Jesus tells us to do, the closer we will come to *teleios*.

It’s all about grace. As we mature as Christians, God’s grace toward us as we know it in Jesus Christ transforms us and we are able to extend God’s grace to others. As we become more and more grace filled, we transform the world – in big and small ways.

Presbyterian minister and preaching professor, Thomas Long, tells a story about “baseball umpire Chuck Meriweather, a man who is gifted at his work, a gentle person, and a faithful member of a Baptist church in Nashville.

“Meriweather was calling balls and strikes one day when Joe Simpson, an outfielder for the Seattle Mariners and now an announcer for the Atlanta Braves, came to the plate. At the time, Simpson was mired in a deep hitting slump, a troubling and frustrating experience for a professional ballplayer, a time when one doubts one’s abilities and fears for one’s future.

“Beyond desperate for a base hit, Simpson dug in and readied himself for the first pitch. It came, and, in Simpson’s eyes, it was way out of the strike zone. ‘Strike one!’ Meriweather called.

Simpson couldn’t believe it. His weeks of failure at the plate spilled over into fury, and he lost it. Simpson screamed a string of noxious obscenities, spittle spewing toward Meriweather. As Simpson said later, ‘I am mortified by what I did that day. I called Meriweather names I had never said to any other human being.’

“Meriweather ripped off his mask and glared at Simpson. Simpson shrank back, expecting to be thrown out of the game or worse. ‘Joe,’ said Meriweather gently, ‘I’ll try to take a better look at it next time.’ Simpson remembers this as one of the most gracious moments of his life.

“Meriweather had the raw power to punish and humiliate, and he had every reason to use it against Simpson. Instead, he saw past the rage and saw Simpson’s fear and frustration, and with a gentle word, he transformed the moment into one of mercy and reconciliation.” [Thomas G. Long in thepresbyterianleader.com]

Chuck Meriweather was reaching toward *teleios*, working at being the person he was created to be. When we do not seek revenge, as we extend grace toward one another, we will discover that practice does indeed make “perfect” – in the correct meaning of that little Greek word.

Let us pray. Merciful God, help us to be merciful to others as You have been merciful to us. Loving God, help us to love others as You have loved us. Forgiving God, help us to forgive others as You have forgiven us. God of grace, fill us with Your Spirit so that we may extend Your grace to others and demonstrate the kingdom of heaven right here in the Shenango Valley.

May we truly become the people You have created us to be. We ask this in Jesus' name, who told us that we must be complete, mature, perfect, even as You are. Amen.

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