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Text: Matthew 5:33-48

Title: Be Perfect!

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File: Matthew 5c

I was reading a true story a couple of weeks ago about a tough platoon sergeant who had at one time lived a life of drinking, cursing, swearing, and sexual immorality. He could be arrogant and rude to his soldiers. However, he had become a Christian and turned his life around. And when asked about what made the difference, he told about a private in his platoon that was courageously Christian in his outlook and behaviour.

You see this private was frequently harassed by others but always remained faithful to Christ. One night the private came into the barracks quite late. It was a very rainy night. Before getting into his bunk, he knelt, as was his custom, to pray. The sergeant in a foul mood picked up one of his own boots, which was heavy with wet mud, threw it across the room and hit the private in the side of the head.

The private said nothing. He wiped the mud from his face and crawled into bed. The next morning, however, when the sergeant woke up, he found his muddy boots cleaned and polished by his bedside. He said: "It broke my heart." And that was the thing that made all the difference.

Over the last couple of weeks we have been reading through the sermon on the mount and listening to Jesus talk about a Christian counterculture. How we Christians need to be different to the people around us. How we need to be salt and light to our dark and decaying culture. How we have to fulfil God's law, not just in outward appearances but from the heart.

But if you thought what Jesus said was hard over the last couple of weeks, it gets harder today. For today Jesus is saying you can't just be like the religious. You know you have heard it said, by the religious people around you, "*love your neighbour and hate your enemy.*" No you can't just be like the religious, you have to be more righteous than them, so Jesus goes on to say you must "*love even your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*".

He also says that you have to be different to the tax collectors. They love those who love them. But you need to show love to everyone, regardless of how they treat you. He then says you need to be different to the pagans, they only greet those who greet them. Instead you need to be friendly to all men and women, regardless of race, sex, age, colour or creed. For you are a child of God. You represent God. In fact you need to reflect God to His world. So Jesus will end this part of the sermon on the mount by stating clearly that we need to be perfect, just as our heavenly Father is perfect.

Wow, did you hear that? We, you and I, need to be perfect, blameless, without sin, just as our heavenly father is perfect, blameless, without sin. So not only should we not hate our

brother, entertain lustful thoughts, divorce our spouse, as we saw last week but we need to be perfect in speech, in revenge and in love. Lets look at what that means in practice.

1. Perfect in speech (verses 33-7)

"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' This was the accepted wisdom of the day and had its backing in the laws of the OT. And it basically meant if you made a promise to God or swore by His name, you had to keep your promise, you had to fulfil your oath.

"But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black." The point being is that there are not two levels of promises, one that you swear by God and one that you swear by something else. No every oath, every promise, every vow is related to God, because he stands behind everything.

Nothing you promise is trivial, nothing you agree to will give you a get out clause. No vow is any less powerful. Therefore you must keep your promises. You must be as good as your word. So if that is the case, there is no need to swear on a stack of Bibles, there is no need to say cross my heart and hope to die. Instead Jesus says, *"Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."*

Just tell the truth. All the time and in every circumstance. Don't fudge your promises. Don't exaggerate the situation. Don't embellish the story to make yourself look better than you are. Be a man or woman of integrity. If you say something make sure you do it.

Be like the elephant Horton in Dr. Seuss', Horton Hatches an Egg. Remember Horton promises to sit on an egg and hatch it for it's mother, lazy Miss Mayzie. But as the days and weeks go by, Horton just keeps sitting there on that nest up in a tree and all his friends encourage him to forget his promise and play with them. But do you remember his response? *"I meant what I said, I said what I meant. An elephant is faithful, 100%."*

That's part of being perfect, isn't it. Keeping our promises to our wife, our husband, to love them until death do us part. And keeping our promises to our kids, to take them to the park, to look after the grandkids, to never put before them anything that would encourage them to turn away from the faith. And keeping our promises to the Church. To be regular in our attendance at Church, to get involved and use my spiritual gifts, to give of my time, my money, my energy to help grow the Kingdom of God. And most of all, keeping my promises to God, ensuring that he is both my Saviour and my Lord.

So how would you go in the test of being perfect in speech? In keeping our promises and our vows. In being a man or woman of integrity? If we are to be a part of the Kingdom of God, of a truly Christian counterculture, then we need to be perfect in speech and

2. Perfect in revenge. (verses 38-42)

For in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus goes on to say "*You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.*"

You see the Pharisees had brought this principle out of the legal courts where it was given, and taken it into the realm of personal morality. Jesus here doesn't dispute the fact that an eye for an eye is good for the courts, but he says, if you are a Christian you will never take an eye for eye into your personal relationships. So if you have been wronged - instead you are to accept the wrong given to you. So personal self-sacrifice replaces personal retaliation.

Now that's really hard for us to do isn't? For when someone hurts us, our natural reaction is to try and hurt them back. If someone slanders our character, it is so easy to have a go at them. If someone has shown hatred to us, then without a thought, our mind is plotting against them. It is so hard not to live out the doctrine of an eye for an eye.

I don't know whether you ever saw the movie "The First Wives Club". It was about a group of three ladies who had been divorced by their husbands for younger and prettier girls. And their slogan was "Don't get mad, get even!" I think that sought of slogan strikes a chord in most of us. "Don't get mad, get even." But Jesus would say, "Don't get mad, let God get even."

And he goes on to give a couple of examples. Firstly if someone strikes you with a sharp backhand slap to the face, a gross insult, then the follower of Jesus is to be prepared to take another slap rather than hit him back. For what is more important - avoiding further hurt or hurting someone else? Now when we raised this issue at youth group a while back, one of the kids said "Steve that doesn't work, people will just lay into you!"

The second example is about someone who is going to sue you for the shirt of your back. Jesus says, "Don't fight him back, don't say nasty things about him in court, even if it is true, let him have your shirt, in fact let him have your coat as well. And if the government rings you up and forces you to do jury duty or to do something you don't want to do, do it and be willing to do more, even if it is inconvenient, even if they have no right to make you do it. For our lives are to be characterised by giving, even if someone doesn't deserve the gift, and by lending even if there is a good chance you wont get it back.

Now I'm sure those people sitting upon the Mountain while Jesus is saying these words are aghast. I'm sure they have their hands up ready to say "But Jesus, what if..... what if the guy keeps hitting me? What if the coat and shirt is all I have to live on? What if I'm being taken for a ride?"

Every couple of weeks some guy comes up to me as the minister of this church and asks for food, or money, or petrol, or accommodation. It is never convenient, I rarely have time to help. I often suspect that I'm being had. So I have the choice. I can say no, I can be hard hearted and say "you got yourself into this position, you get yourself out." It's an

eye for an eye". Or I can choose to be gracious. To help them, knowing they will never help me. Not necessarily giving them what they want, but giving them what they need - a bed for the night, some sandwiches, someone to talk things over with.

You see I can treat people as they deserve, an eye for an eye if you like. Or I can sacrifice my self, my time, my resources? And that's the crux of what Jesus is saying here. If you live this way, it will cost you. If you treat people the way they treat you, then not only are you letting them rule your own actions, but you are being just like everyone else. But we are Christians, we are those who are God's representatives. And so our actions should reflect God's way.

So we need to remember not only what Jesus said but what Jesus did. He was hit by the soldiers just prior to his crucifixion, wasn't he? And he allowed them to hit him again. He was taken to court and they wanted to take not just the shirt of his back, but his life, and he didn't oppose it. He was forced to carry his cross until he fell down exhausted, and when people showed him hate, he responded to them by giving them his life. You see Jesus lived out this teaching. And it cost him. It cost him his life. But didn't his lost life give us eternal life? And didn't he say to his followers, *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."*

I don't think the Christian here is called to be a doormat, limply accepting anything that comes flying his way. But the Christian is to show strength of character, such strength that we will not retaliate, instead we will return good for evil. Now many famous people have tried to live out Jesus instructions here. Tolstoy, Gandhi, Bonhoeffer are just three who come to my mind, but even though he was far from perfect, Martin Luther King for me best describes this principle:

Dr Benjamin Mays said of King at his funeral. *"If any man knew the meaning of suffering, King knew. House bombed; living day to day for thirteen years under constant threats of death, maliciously accused of being a Communist; falsely accused of being insincere.; stabbed by a member of his own race; slugged in a hotel lobby; jailed over twenty times - and yet this man had no bitterness in his heart, no rancour in his soul, no revenge in his mind; and he went up and down the length and breadth of this land preaching non-violence and the redemptive power of love."*

One of Kings most moving sermons, based on this very passage, was entitled loving your enemies, and it was written from a Georgian gaol. Wrestling with the questions why and how Christians are to love, he described how *"Hate multiplies hate... in a descending spiral of violence and is just as injurious to the person who hates, as to the victim"*. But *"Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend for it has creative and redemptive characteristics"*. He was determined that the American Negroes would meet 'hate with love'.

I just wonder what could be done within our Church family, within our family, within our community if we met hate with love. How many situations could we help become reconciled. How powerfully would God speak through ordinary people like you and me.

It won't be easy - it never is. We need to be perfect in speech, in revenge and finally in

3. In Love (verses 43-48)

Jesus says, "*You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour & hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies & pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.* The OT told the Jew they needed to love their neighbour as they loved themselves, which raised a difficult problem - who is my neighbour? And in Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan, he gives the answer, our neighbour is anyone who is in need.

Which means that even if we don't like people, we need to love people. Even if people hurt us, we are told we pray for them. And we do this because that is how God treats his enemies. You see even though there are plenty of people who don't love God, He still gives them life, he sends them rain, he still gives them the beauty of the sunrise. These things which some people have called 'Common Grace' is available to anyone. But God has done even more, for it was while we were his enemies that Christ died for us. While we were far away, he made us his friends.

And that is how he wants us to reach out to people! To not hate our neighbour but to pray for Him. To not think evil thoughts, but to show love. To not curse him but to bless him. You see these instructions mean that we end up pleading to God for our enemy. We end up standing side by side with the person who has done us evil asking God for his mercy.

It reminds me of the time Muhammad Ali was getting ready to defend the heavyweight title against Jean Pierre Coopman of Belgium. It was obvious from the first press conference that Coopman was a big fan of Ali. He kept hugging him & kissing his hand & asking for autographs. And Ali said "How am I supposed to get myself mad enough to fight this guy if he keeps hugging me & kissing me? He's taking all the fight out of me!"

That's exactly what Jesus wants us to do! He wants us to love our enemies so much that it takes the fight out of them! So it is important for me to ask you, as it is important for me to ask myself, Who are your enemies? Who can you not look in the eye? Who will you be tempted to walk past the next time you see them? Who has hurt you in such a way that your mind often goes over the incident, to lick the wounds so to speak. Who have you not forgiven? These are the people that we have to apply this passage to.

So the first part of our passage is a negative "Don't resist evil", don't retaliate and the second part is the positive "Love your enemies and seek their good." As Augustine has put it "Many have learned how to offer the other cheek, but do not know how to love him by whom they were struck". Someone else summed it up well. "To return evil for good is devilish, to return good for good is human, to return good for evil is divine."

For basically Jesus is saying that the way we treat people should be different to the pagans and the tax collectors. For we are to be like Jesus. We are to be perfect! Doesn't that give you a lump in your throat? Doesn't that seem just a touch unreasonable to you?

Doesn't that mean the bar is too high for you to jump? Isn't that impossible?

Yes and no! Corrie Ten Boom shares this true story in her book, *The Hiding Place*, of having to do this, having to do the impossible, but how she ended up doing it anyway. Listen to what she says, "It was a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room door at Ravensbruck Concentration Camp. And suddenly it was all there -- the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie's pain-blanching face.

He came up to me as the Church was emptying, beaming and bowing. "How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein," he said. "To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!" His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often of the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side. Even as the angry thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more?

Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him. I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness. As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me. And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.

Impossible, to live like this? Yes, it is in our own strength. But Jesus did it and if he is our Lord and Saviour and if we put our trust in Him and ask Him for the strength, he is able to make you different. He can change you from the inside out. He can help you to be perfect in word, in revenge and in love. So will you just shake your head and say its impossible, or will you seek to lean upon Him and be perfect, just like your heavenly father is perfect. That's your choice today! And that is our choice everyday!