

Wholeness, Not Perfection

Matthew 5:48

Third Sunday in Lent

When I was a boy I believed that God expected me to be perfect. I'm not sure how I came to think this way, but it emerged early in my life. I've spent a lot of time and money over the years in psychotherapy and analysis trying to get at the source of this idea, to understand it. A child's image of God is often shaped by parental relationships. My parents weren't authoritarian or unusually demanding. I have no memory of them ever saying to me, "Kenny, you have to be perfect." I never felt I had to measure up to high, unrealistic expectations. But this feeling, this thought was there. God wants me to be perfect, perfectly good. Errors, faults, mistakes were unacceptable. God will judge me every time I miss the mark. That's what sin is, as I learned in church school; to sin is to miss the mark. It's an old archery term for missing the bullseye, for missing the "gold" at the center of a target. To miss the target is to sin. I had a very legalistic view of God and the world, and a moralistic view of Christianity. A Christian must follow the rules, never mess up. I remember boasting to a friend, I was around 11 years old, that I had kept all Ten Commandments, that I never broke one. That's what I thought it meant to be a Christian. Following the rules. Being a good boy. Pleasing people, pleasing God by never making a mistake.

Such a fool. How naïve. Sad, really, to be burdened with this kind of expectation. And then I read in my Bible, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." There it is: *I must be perfect—the Bible tells me so*. To a child, there's nothing ambiguous about the word "perfect." I knew it meant never making mistakes, being morally upright, pure, sinless, beyond reproach. The hearing of this verse distorted a lot of things. It hindered my ability to hear anything about God's love. I had no understanding of grace. Looking back now, I see that my psyche coopted this text and then used it to reinforce, justify, even "sanctified" my skewed perspective of things.

Looking back now at age 55, I wish I knew then what I know now, that there is nothing holy about living this way. Today, I can't go back and change anything, and, contra Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), there are limits to how much we can discern about the origins of our personalities. Sometimes it doesn't help to know the cause or try to issue blame. I agree with Carl Jung (1875-1961), who questioned Freud's approach; today I know that that kind of thinking doesn't always serve me. Instead, I've come to see that my wrestling with these issues is part of my life-task, it's the summons of my soul, it's the call of the Spirit. This struggle has shaped my personal and theological development and growth as a pastor—especially when people expect pastors to be perfect.

I have come to see that the desire to be perfect, as well as expecting others to be perfect, and perfectionism itself, are often masks for a deeper anxiety. I have come to believe that there's nothing holy or sacred or even "Christian" about being perfect—it might be anti-Christian, even anti-Christ. A lot of damage has been done by imposing this expectation on God's people. I agree with writer and fellow-Presbyterian, Anne Lamott. "Perfectionism," she said, "is the voice

of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life,”[\[1\]](#)

So what do we do with this verse? Do we cut it out from the Sermon of the Mount, like Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), who took a scissor to the passages in the Gospels that he didn’t like? It’s known as [The Jefferson Bible](#) (1820). He cut out all the miracle stories, the birth stories, the resurrection accounts. Should we just ignore this verse? Did Jesus get this wrong? Are you going to tell him he got it wrong? Should we really expect Jesus to be a psychologist?

Maybe.

In fact, what if Jesus was, psychologically-speaking, very astute? And what if this verse has nothing to do with perfection? And what if the word “perfect” is a terrible translation of what is, in fact, there in the Greek?

I can’t tell you how liberating it was for me to learn, when I in seminary and read this text in Greek, that “perfect” is a poor rendering of what’s in this verse! The word “perfect” doesn’t fully reflect the richness of the Greek word in the text. And that word—that beautiful word—is *teleios*. *Teleios* is an adjective derived from the Greek word *telos*, meaning “end” or “purpose” or “goal” or “fulfilment” or “realization” or “fully grown” or “complete”—and only in this sense does it mean perfect, as in lacking nothing.

Teleios, the adjectival form of *telos*, doesn’t mean moral perfection, but describes completeness, or living an undivided life. Or, better, *teleios* means—and this is what matters most—*wholeness*. Jesus is not saying, “be perfect,” he’s calling his disciples and the crowd, he’s summoning us to follow in his way, the way of wholeness and wholeheartedness, a life of greater integrity.

When Jesus said, “Be *teleios*, therefore, even as your heavenly Father is *teleios*,” the crowd would have heard echoes of what God said in the Hebrew scriptures, “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” (Lev. 19:2; 20:26). The call to *teleios*-ity found throughout the Sermon on the Mount is essentially the same call to be holy, and holiness does not mean moral perfection, but wholehearted orientation toward God.[\[2\]](#)

As we have seen the past two weeks, the Sermon on the Mount is a call to human flourishing. Our text, Matthew 5:48, is a summation of everything that comes before it. Jesus wants for us what God wants for us, and what God wants for us is to be whole, with hearts that are in the right place. The heart is more than an organ that pumps blood through our bodies. In first century Judaism, the heart symbolized the totality of one’s being, the total self, all that we are: thought, feeling, and action. Jesus is concerned about the health of our hearts.

To be whole means that our inner life is aligned with our outer life. Jesus summons us to be whole and complete, just as God is whole and complete—for how can God not be whole? God’s heart is not divided, but whole in its desire to love and to save. Jesus invites us to live out our end or purpose, just as God fully lives out God’s end or purpose. Just as God is undivided in God’s intention to love, so Jesus summons us to live undivided in our intention to love. The call

to wholeness is essentially a call to integrity. Jesus doesn't want us to be at odds or at war with different parts of ourselves. He knows the dangers of living with a divided heart.

When Jesus judges the practices of the Pharisees in Matthew's Gospel he's not judging or rejecting Judaism—Jesus remained a Jew throughout his life and he certainly wasn't Christian. However, Jesus was troubled by the way many were practicing their faith, living out the requirements of the Jewish Law in an obsession with external obedience, purity, and ritual cleanliness. It was too one-sided; they were preoccupied with outward behavior, outward religious piety and practice. What about the inner life? What about the heart? That's why Jesus calls the Pharisees white-washed tombs. On the outside, they look pure and holy, but on the inside, they're rotting away (Mt. 23:27).

It's in love that Jesus said this to the Pharisees, it's love that Jesus speaks to the crowd listening to the Sermon, because he knows what happens when we live divided lives. Having a disordered, divided heart is extremely dangerous, it's destructive—for oneself and for the wider society. And it makes one neurotic. Neurosis is essentially a split in the soul where we are at odds with ourselves, when our inner and outer lives are not aligned, or when we are at odds with different parts of ourselves. Living a divided life makes us sick—as I painfully know in my own life.

Living a divided life is costly. We might be righteous (or appear to be so) on the outside, but inside we're seething with hate and jealousy. We might act in ways that appear kind, loving, and just and nice in the church or community, but inside we're full of rage, judgment, and self-loathing toward our neighbor or toward ourselves. We might appear "holy" or "religious" or "devout" or "Christian," but inside we're an anxious sea of conflict and confusion. The result is a split in our personality, a split in the heart, a lack of integrity. We Christians say we value grace and compassion, but do we extend the same grace and compassion toward ourselves? And if we don't—there's the split, there's the division.

What about "in here," in us? What about the heart? Jesus wants us to view our lives holistically. This, for me, is the Christian life, and it's the work of a lifetime. Jesus wants us to live whole lives, where our inner life is in harmony with our outer life. And when the inner and outer parts of our lives are whole, when we have moments, glimpses of that happening in us, when we sense that our hearts are aligned with the heart of God—do you know what happens then? The doors of the kingdom fling open wide before our eyes, and we discover we're in a new and wondrous place; we are standing on holy ground! That's *teleios*! That's when we discover what a flourishing life looks like and feels like. But woe to us when our hearts are divided, when our hearts are not behind our actions, when we lack intention, when our hearts are not aligned with God's vision for us, when our actions do not flow from the heart. "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Mt. 6:21).

The only other place in Matthew's Gospel where we find the word "perfect" or *teleios* is in Matthew 19. It's the story of the young man who went to Jesus asking, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" (Mt. 19:16). Jesus tells him to keep the commandments. The young man says, "I have all kept all these; what do I still lack?" Then Jesus goes straight to the heart of the matter. "If you wish to be perfect," Jesus said, "go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Mt. 19:21).

Note that the young man never asked to be perfect, but Jesus knew what his problem was. Jesus knew what was missing in his life. Jesus said, “If you want to be *teleios*”—if you want to be whole—“go sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor....”

Given the way things turned out for the man, we might think this is a warning against materialism, against accumulating things and having wealth. It’s not. Yes, there is a danger when an obsession with things and wealth takes over our lives. This might have been the case for the man, we don’t know. Jesus does go on to say, “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven...it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Mt. 19:23-24). Jesus says this, not because being rich or having wealth is necessarily bad or evil. The issue, as Jesus knew, is that many rich and wealthy people have a heart problem. The problem for the young man was not that his heart was, like the Grinch, “two sizes too small.” It wasn’t a question of size. There’s a deeper issue. He had a divided heart. It was split.

Jesus was a great psychologist—a true physician of the soul. He knew what our souls long for, he knew what calls us to life, and he knew what we crave: we were born to be whole. It was psychologist Carl Jung, who stood in the shadow cast by the brilliance of Christ, who said, “Wholeness is not achieved by cutting off a portion of one’s being, but by integration of the contraries.”^[3]

We could also say Jesus was a great cardiologist because he came to heal our divided, broken hearts, to lead us toward wholeness, toward a life that is flourishing in the Kingdom. “Flourishing are the pure in heart because they will see God” (Mt. 5:8).

Jesus doesn’t expect us to be perfect, but whole, one, complete. I’m not called to be perfect—which is gospel, good news for my soul. Jesus wants me to be whole; he has shown me and given me a still more excellent way.

God wants us to be whole, and shows us the way to live wholeheartedly. And then can live the way we really want to live, giving all of ourselves, not part of ourselves, all of ourselves to the faithful living out of our lives—with *joy*, with integrity, with single-hearted devotion, and a passion for God’s kingdom!

So, may this, then, be our prayer as we follow Christ:

Give me a whole heart, O God, an undivided heart.

Make me whole.

Image: Kinsugi "golden joinery" pottery, a Japanese art form in which breaks and repairs are treated as part of the object's history.

^[1] Ann Lamott, *Bird By Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (Anchor, 1995), 28

[2] Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 78. I am grateful to Pennington's excellent exposition on *teleios*, and the centrality of wholeness as a theme running through the Sermon on the Mount, 69ff.

[3] Parker J. Palmer, who was influenced by Jung, makes a similar claim: "Wholeness does not mean perfection; it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life." Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (Jossey-Bass, 2004)