

**The Seventh Sunday after Epiphany**  
**February 19-20, 2011**  
**Matthew 5:38-48**

*“Follow Me: Perfection”*

What is an oxymoron? Sounds like a setup for “Are You Smarter Than a Fifth Grader?”, and much to the embarrassment of adult participants on that TV game show, the answer often is no – adults are not smarter than fifth graders. Whether we’re smarter than a fifth grader or not, an oxymoron is a figure of speech in the English language where two contradictory terms are joined together to reveal a paradox. The term comes from two Greek words: “oxy” meaning “sharp” and “moros” meaning “dull.” We use oxymorons all the time, and here are a few examples: **A fine mess** (with thanks to Laurel & Hardy), **a little pregnant** (hope our expectant moms get a chuckle out of that one), **harmless sin** (is that possible?). Jesus’ statement at the end of Matthew 5 in our Gospel lesson for today presents us with a **perfect problem**. We have a problem with human perfection, let alone attaining to divine perfection. It’s a perfect problem. Jesus’ statement here would be **seriously funny** (!) if it weren’t completely true. So what do we do with this demand? Maybe it would be better to ask, what does Jesus do with it? Let’s explore this perfect problem of Jesus’ call for us to **“be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”** (Matt. 5:48). Our preaching series on Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount continues today under the theme, “Follow Me: Perfection.” May our Lord’s rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus’ sake.

In his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 (from which our Gospel lessons have been taken for about the past month), Jesus elaborates on what the life of the Christian is to look like. All of this is rooted in God’s revelation to his chosen covenant people of old in the *Torah*, the instruction God provided for his people through his servant Moses in those first five books of the Old Testament – what we often refer to as the Law. Jesus did not come to abolish or throw out God’s Law, as we heard in last Sunday’s Gospel lesson: **“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished”** (Matt. 5:17-18). Jesus came to fulfill God’s Law. Jesus doesn’t throw out God’s Law, but expands it – enlarging it and reinterpreting it for life, as he said repeatedly in last Sunday’s Gospel: **“You have heard that it was said... but I say to you...”** (Matt. 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39). And in reinterpreting God’s Law, Jesus makes known that he is the One to fulfill God’s Law.

We have a portion of God’s *Torah*, his teaching, his Law, in today’s Old Testament lesson (Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18). In the opening verses there is a direct link to Jesus’ words in the Gospel lesson, where the Lord God says: **“You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy”** (Lev. 19:2). Far from relaxing God’s Law, Jesus in the Gospel lesson expands upon it: **“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”** (Matt. 5:48). But what does this mean? Here’s where the oxymoron kicks in: how can we who are unholy and sinful human beings be holy as the Lord our God is holy? How can we who are imperfect be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect?

We’re on the horns of dilemma here: God demands something of us that we’re incapable of doing. As Luther says: “At this point you will discover how hard it is to do the good works God commands... You will find out that you will be occupied with the practice of this work for the rest of your life” (*Luther’s Works, AE 44:109*). When confronted with the demands of God’s Law, we may be tempted to whittle off a point here, a point there, thinking that if we do the best we can God will be satisfied. But God demands holiness and perfection, which we cannot achieve by our own efforts, as God’s Word makes clear: **“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”** (Romans 3:23). This isn’t just the serial killers, or those

guilty of corporate fraud and embezzlement – the large and public sins open to everyone’s scrutiny. This is every last one of us who miss the mark of God’s holiness and perfection by the evil we do and the good we fail to do. We have all sinned and fallen short of God’s glory.

So, what are we to do with this demand for perfection? There’s nothing *we* can do to make things right with God. All of our good behavior, all of our meritorious conduct, all of noble intentions and works – it doesn’t cut it with God. But there is something *Jesus* can do – and has done – to make things right with God our heavenly Father. Through the redeeming work of Jesus – his perfect and sinless life of humble and loving service, his innocent suffering and death upon the cross – we have been declared holy and perfect by God. This doesn’t rest upon our efforts, but upon what Jesus has done for us. This gift is received by faith, and comes to us through the life-giving Word of God in holy Scripture, through the cleansing waters of Holy Baptism, through the forgiving and restoring power of Jesus’ true Body and Blood found in the Lord’s Supper. All of Jesus’ holiness and perfection is now ours by faith. Our imperfection for Jesus’ perfection; our sin for Jesus’ holiness.

Jesus now calls us to live out his holiness and perfection in our lives. This is not as easy as it sounds, and we won’t do this perfectly, of course. Even as God’s redeemed people we continue to struggle with sin and its effects throughout our entire life. We rely on Jesus to help us. Despite our imperfection, Jesus’ perfect love and forgiveness will shine out through our words and actions as we do not return evil for evil, but follow Jesus’ own example of returning evil with good. Jesus’ perfect love and forgiveness will shine out through us as we go that extra mile for love’s sake, as we share with those in need, as we love our enemies, as we pray for those who persecute us. And when we fail in these things – and we certainly will – we return to the Lord with repentant hearts, seeking his forgiveness. And so by God’s grace our prayer becomes the prayer of the psalmist in the opening verse from today’s psalmody: **“Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes; and I will keep it to the end”** (Psalm 119:33). God help us to do this, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.