
Everybody's Perfect

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18 and Matthew 5:38-48

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How would you describe the perfect person? Perhaps your perfect professor is a well-liked intellectual who has published critically acclaimed books, taught mind-blowing lectures, and still has time in her schedule to have coffee with every student. Maybe your perfect musician is someone who observes the world and transposes his observations into something beautiful for all to enjoy. And I don't know about you but my perfect dentist is someone that feels content NOT to ask me questions while my mouth is gaping open and stuffed with gauze and polish residue.

Today, Matthew's Gospel gives us a pretty clear imperative, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Despite how unattainable that seems, people are desperately searching for a way to accomplish this directive. If you Google the question, "How to be perfect" you'll get over 2.5 billion results...many of these promising a quick and easy way to be perfect...with minimal effort of course. From White Strips to Shake Weights, Fad diets to Pajama Jeans there seems to be an endless supply of ways to better your life.

How often do you think about perfection? I'm willing to bet that seeking perfection has been a source of much suffering in your life. When I ask you, what do you least like about yourself, does something immediately come to mind? Do you wish you looked different, talked different, were smarter, were more social, could finally be that child your parents can be proud of, could finally be that employee worthy of that promotion?

Has it become an obsession for you? Perhaps that obsession manifests itself in extended hours at the office? Or maybe you grimace at the mirror or scale. Do you spend money you don't have so that you can look like the people in magazines or on TV? Do you find yourself exhausted because you just can't seem to get it right?

Today marks the closing ceremony of over two weeks of competition in the Winter Olympics. 294 medals were given out to the top-performing athletes and only 98 of them will be considered the best by winning Gold. Billions of dollars are spent on this momentous occasion to give us an opportunity to marvel at the world's best athletes. Their flawless technique and tireless devotion to both country and sport has unified people for years. But to become an Olympic athlete is not only grueling but also rare. And just like the average athlete hoping to one day qualify, perfection seems to us, unattainable, a constant process. It feels like an end state one can never reach, but one can at least orient themselves towards and hope we do it well enough that someone takes notice.

But, what if I were to tell you that your perfection has already been achieved? Would you believe me? I wouldn't blame you if you didn't. But as Christians, we profess that we are perfected, made holy, by the redeeming work of Christ. Through His sacrifice on the cross, we were freed to be perfect. And, as it seems to happen time and time again, the redemptive work of the cross was completed by a man who, despite being divine, was no one's image of perfection, shamed and suffering, bruised and battered, alienated, abandoned. Breathing His last breaths, He proclaimed, "It is finished."

Despite this gift of grace, we retreat from this image of perfection. We refuse to show our true self. Just as Eve demanded clothing in the Garden, and Moses hid his face from the people, and the disciples hid away in fear of being known, we too cover ourselves with fear, lies, deceit, greediness...sin. And it's this that creates our perverse perception of perfection. Instead of living into the truth of our redeemed nature, we believe the lies of this world. The lies that tell us we aren't beautiful, we aren't worthy, we aren't enough.

In his book, *Airman's Odyssey*, Saint-Exupery, ponders this complex nature of perfection. He holds, invention is most beautiful in the process. He acknowledges that the final product created is wonderful and good, but he finds the method to be truly telling of the art. He describes a sculptor, who is chipping away at a marble block. Slowly and carefully the sculptor reveals something beautiful and complete. As the sculptor works he does so NOT to form an image from his mind but rather to unleash a piece of art trapped beneath layers of marble. With every hit of the hammer, the statue comes to life. The author says, "Perfection is achieved, not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away."

The wonderful beauty of that statue does not come when the sculptor adds a feature from his design, but rather when its true beauty is revealed by getting rid of its rough excess. It's no different with us. Beneath that rough edifice we have built around ourselves to hide, that wall we have erected to separate us from others, and the covering we have hid under to escape God, is something truly beautiful. Holy. Perfect.

Perfection is complicated. It's not only about being perfect because of the redemption we have received in Christ but it's also a call to reveal that perfection to others. When we seek earthly perfection, we quickly lose ourselves. With every desperate attempt to seem together and spotless we cover ourselves and hide our true essence. The image we were created in quickly disappears under a mundane block of marble. Just as the statue was always under that rock waiting to be released, we too are perfect beings desiring to show our true selves to others.

But Why? Why do I need to be perfect? Leviticus reads, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." Similarly, at the end of every one of the "shall nots" we find God saying, *just in case you had forgotten who you were dealing with*, "I am the Lord your God." Likewise, in Matthew's Gospel, when we are instructed to be perfect, we are told to do so, "as [our] heavenly Father is perfect." These statements not only remind us that God is sovereign and we are to revere his glory but also that God, who created us in His image, shaped us to not only be perfect but also to desire perfection. Because our God is perfect, complete, holy, whole, we as His creation are too. We are not to cover ourselves in insecurity, lies, or deceit but rather expose the caring, loving, compassionate beings God made us to be.

How do we reveal our perfection? Just like the billions of google searchers out there, we need to know how to accomplish this. When we think of perfection in today's world, we quickly think of tangible gains: The perfect job with the perfect colleagues, the perfect house in the perfect neighborhood, the perfect hair that perfectly frames your face, the perfect swoosh on your new kicks that have the perfect shade of blue...Duke Blue. These are all things we feel we can affect by changing something about ourselves. If I only do this I can achieve the much more appealing state of that. If I work harder, or if I buy that, or if I get her to like me, or if I say the right thing, I will be more desirable, more accepted, perfect! It's all about adding something: out with the old, and in with the new.

The Gospel reading for today, however has a different story...perfection seems to be all about giving everything away. If you get sued for a coat, give them a cloak also. Someone demands a mile, give them two. You have just been slapped on your face...well just give them the other cheek. "Do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you." Give. Give. Give.

We heard in our Old Testament reading that perfection looks something like this: Honor those who have come before you and keep the holy days. When you collect the harvest or pick in your vineyard leave some for the disadvantaged, do not steal, lie, commit fraud, withhold wages, insult the deaf, fool the blind, be unjust, make illicit profit, or bear a grudge...and our passage from Leviticus for today is just the beginning of a long, long list!

On the surface these expectations just seem like a list of specific requests, however if we look deeper we see that the Laws we are given in the Leviticus passage and Jesus's re-envisioning of them in Matthew describe a state of relationship. It seems, that to be HOLY, means to look at our neighbor with as much care and fervor as we look at ourselves, if not more.

This focus on honest relationships makes complete sense because. After all, we worship a God who is in perpetual state of relationship. The Holy Trinity which exists in three individual persons finds

unity in the Godhead. This most divine relationship trickles down to all of creation. In the second chapter of Genesis, as God looks upon the Creation he sees Adam alone in the Garden and exclaims, "It is not good that the man should be alone." Creation was NOT complete until humanity became plural. And again, through the redemptive work on Calvary our Lord freed us from our bondage to selfishness and opened us up to love one another.

So with every act of love and charity we find ourselves resembling more and more the image God has envisioned for us. But the trouble with seeking this heavenly perfection of relationship, compassion, and empathy is that it leaves you, like the marble statues in a museum, naked and exposed for the world to marvel at your beauty. And that can be pretty scary.

About a year ago, like any good college student, I was distracted from work and found myself on Facebook. I ran across a story about a boy named Tripp Halstead. When Tripp was two, while he was playing outside at daycare the remnants of Hurricane Sandy caused a limb to fall and crush his skull. Tripp was knocked unconscious and rushed to the hospital where the doctors assumed he would live out his last hours. Tripp went through hours of surgery and miraculously survived.

I have to confess, as a pre-med student, I had read about plenty of these types of stories: miraculous recoveries, dramatic turn-arounds, unprecedented recuperations...so I quickly forgot about Tripp and his progress. It wasn't until a couple months ago when I found myself back on the "Tripp Halstead Updates" page. I was astonished, within a few months this kid had stolen the hearts of nearly one million people. In a very public manner, his parents posted daily updates on how Tripp was doing: health progress and regression, joys and sorrows, hardships and blessings. The level of honesty was humbling and although I'm sure his parents enjoyed the community, it is pretty obvious that this had and still continues to be a painful process. Yet every time they share how Tripp is doing, they chisel away at the marble block that is their family and boldly reveal the most beautiful thing in the world, their love for one another.

Tripp is nobody's image of perfection. He will probably never do any of the things our society says the perfect child does. He will never win the Olympic gold let alone a participation trophy on a local soccer team. He will likely never win the science fair with baking soda- paper machete concoction that minimally represents a volcano. He will never outsell the other boys in his boy scouts troop that overpriced but devilishly delicious popcorn.

But to his parents, Tripp is perfect. They love the way he is at peace when he is floating in a pool. They love the way he uses all of his remaining facial muscles to sideways smile when he sees people he loves. They love the way he snuggles and falls asleep in their arms when they watch the latest Disney-Pixar film. Tripp's story has stolen the heart of so many people not because of pity, but because of the surprising strength of this family and their audacity to simply love Tripp because he is here. And that love has opened them up to the world...to be in God's image...exposed.

The redemptive work of the Cross assures us that we are perfect. But, with this great gift comes a greater responsibility. Our scripture today gives us a call to action: to show the world the love that has redeemed us. Who among you is willing to take that chisel and hammer and break away the callouses, shed the dust, relinquish the coverings? Who is willing to love both friend AND foe simply because they are here? Who will lace up their shoes and go the second mile? Who will tell the truth. And deliver not only justice but also mercy. Who will feed the hungry and clothe the poor? Not sure you have the strength right now? Don't worry...I hear practice makes perfect.