

“Doing the Best We Can”

Matthew 5:43-48

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A woman spent ten years with a spiritual teacher. Frustrated at her lack of progress, she said to him, “I came to you ten years ago seeking enlightenment. You told me to study, meditate, and help the needy. Now ten years later, I feel no more enlightened than I did then. Shouldn’t I be enlightened after ten years of experience?” Her teacher replied, “You haven’t really had ten years of experience. You’ve had one experience, and you’ve repeated it thousands of times.”

Ever feel like you are living life on a carousel--riding the same horse, round and round, listening to the same annoying music? You know you should, but you can’t quite bring yourself to get off the carousel. Research suggests it takes twenty-one days to make or break a habit. So, imagine the self-destructive habits that form after years of riding the carousel. The mind-blowing revelation about self-destructive habits is we go out of our way to stay trapped in their familiarity.

What if today we decide to get off the carousel? What if we name our destructive habits? What if today we simply agree to do the best we can? Sounds simplistic, but “doing the best we can” is what governs so much of our life. When you were fearful as a child, afraid to attempt something new, what did your mother say. “Do the best you can.” Why not our spiritual lives as well? Taking forever to climb off the carousel may be our best some days. Learning the carousel makes us sick to our stomach may also be our best some days.

Doing our best moves us beyond survival. Richard Dawkins wrote a book in the 70s called The Selfish Gene. He states, “We have to teach generosity and altruism because we are born selfish.” It is here that our gospel text comes into play. Loving our neighbors and hating our enemies is part of our survival agreement. It’s fear-based. When we are in survivor mode, loving our enemies seems impossible. But what if “doing the best we can” stretches us beyond survival to abundance? If enough people make the agreement to do their best, if enough people break the strictures of our selfish gene, then the world becomes richer. Doing the best we can.

There is a phrase in our text that is translated as *be perfect as God is perfect*. The translation doesn’t come close to the heart of the phrase. The Greek word for perfect is “teleioi.” It doesn’t mean flawless. It is not a height word. It is a depth word. It indicates a heart that is open. A Living Bible paraphrase might be we stop building walls with the brick and mortar of our agendas, biases, and discernments about who is an enemy and who is not. To be perfect is to possess an undefended heart.

Chapter five in the Sermon on the Mount follows the same pattern throughout: *You have heard it said...but I say to you*. I sense Jesus is saying “You’ve tried living according to the survival habits of scarcity and fear. Now, why not live by the habits born of the heart, habits born out of abundance, and a deep desire for others to know the same abundance.”

Perfection is not about never making a mistake. On the contrary, perfection is learning that even our mistakes are opportunities for growth. Society defines perfection as a contract. We say, “I’ll love you just the way you are, just as long as you are perfect.” It is a lonely path trying to survive alone. Lucy is talking to Charlie Brown: “I have examined my life and found it to be without flaw. Therefore, I’m going to hold a ceremony and present myself with a medal. I will then give a moving acceptance speech. After that, I’ll greet myself in the receiving line.” She then concludes, “When you’re perfect, you have to do everything yourself.”

The fruits of our best are rarely seen in the short term, or appreciated by others. Vincent Van Gogh was one of the greatest artists of all time, and yet he sold only one painting in his lifetime. Mozart was told his music had too many notes. Einstein was told he was no good at math. A recording company refused to sign the Beatles because “groups with guitars were on the way out.” Steven Spielberg was rejected by film school, twice. The fruits of our best are often found in the greatest good, often more than personal achievement. For example, Sir Edmund Hillary, the first to climb Mt. Everest, used his fame to improve the plight of the Nepalese.

Do you feel free in your spiritual walk? Or are you chained to an impossible idea of perfection that you think God expects. Let me put this out there: As long as we are only concerned about what we “ought” to say, think, do, or feel, we will never be spiritually liberated. When we accept our identity from God, however, we are freed from compulsion and can move without restraints. Do you remember the rich young man asking Jesus to name the greatest commandment? Jesus had hundreds to choose from. He chose “love the Lord God with all you heart, soul, mind, and strength (identity) and your neighbor as yourself.” I find it particularly freeing that Jesus is saying, “If love is your guiding principle in how you deal with yourself and others, then amazingly the rules take care of themselves.” The Sermon on the Mount is not about moral behavior; it’s about our motivation behind our behavior. The theme is not moral absolutes, but abundant living and how we have missed in our pursuit of perfection.

We all have self-destructive spiritual habits, but few are as deadly as our misinformed idea of perfection. What might it mean to consider your life from a place of abundance? What might your life look like if you know and believe that the spirit of God is indeed liberating, sent forth to free you from other people’s judgment? Steve Jobs, founder of Apple, died in 2011. He was not a warm and fuzzy boss. He chided, excoriated, and humiliated employees daily. During his final months of life, however, something happened to Jobs. He wrote, “Our time is limited, so don’t waste it living someone else’s life. Don’t be trapped by dogma—which is living with the results of other people’s fear. Don’t let the noise of others drown out your own inner voice.”

Spiritual growth is not about steps or stages on the way to perfection. It’s about the movements from the mind to the heart through prayer in its many forms that reunite us with God, each other, and our truest selves. Amen.