

October 4, 2015

BE PERFECT

Matthew 5:43-48

The Christian faith is about love as much as it is about salvation.

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent His only Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent us His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and His love is perfected in us... God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the Day of Judgment. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because He first loved us. Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from Him is this; those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” (1 John 4:7-12, 16-21)

Always remember that we love others, not because of who they are, but because of who we are. As Christians, our way is the way of love. And *“love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in truth. It bears all things, believes all things; hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends...”* (1 Corinthians 13:4-8a) *“When the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away!”* (v. 10)

Perfect love. Not perfect wisdom or perfect art or a perfect economy... our purpose is perfect love!

You have heard that they used to say, *“Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.”* Sometimes we need to leave the past behind. We need to give up old ways. Paul said in His Letter to the Philippians, *“One thing I do; forgetting what is behind and straining forward to what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus!”* (3:13b-14)

John Wesley preached about sanctifying grace. This is the grace that leads on to perfection, to holiness, to sanctification... our ultimate goal and God’s ultimate purpose for His creation! It is experienced in our spiritual growth, our spiritual enrichment, our becoming mature believers. John Wesley emphasized this grace in his teaching, and wrote a little book called *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. All too often, when we think of perfection, we think of perfectionism. We think of as sort of precision, an exactitude, expectations that are too high. John Wesley taught that Christian perfection was more of as moral thing. But not so much a pure sinlessness, but as a matter of being made perfect in love.

Perfect love is unconditional. It doesn’t weigh, first, whether or not someone was deserving of the love we could offer, it is indiscriminate, the way the sun shines everywhere and the rain falls on everyone (Matthew 5:45), even the good and the evil, the righteous and the unrighteous. We are to be like God, who wants to bless everyone. The more we can be like God, the more we will be known as sons and daughters of our Father in Heaven. (v. 45a)

The way of Christ would compel us to love even our enemies, He also compels us to go so far as to pray for those who persecute us. (5:44) This is the will of God. The will of God is not hate (except to hate sin). The story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37 shows us how to love, even when the one

you should love is not your friend. They are your neighbor because *you* can be neighborly! You can show mercy and offer kindness, because you have it in you by... faith!

There is no real virtue, according to Jesus, in loving only those who love you, or only those who are like you. We are to be better than that. The challenge comes in thinking love is an emotion tied to affection...as if we have to like someone in order to love them. There *is* love that is called *brotherly love*, and it *is* a good thing. But divine love, or godly love; goes beyond that. It reaches out with grace and loves someone even when they are unlovable.

Jesus tells us to pray for those who persecute us. Stephen was chosen by the Twelve Apostles in Acts 6 to be a special servant in the Church in Jerusalem. He "*did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.*" (6:8) But this aroused opposition. He was arrested, and after his beautiful testimony in court, which provoked the ire of the keepers of the status quo (the old way), they stoned him to death. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed for his persecutors. "He fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them!'" His last words....Perfect love. In a world where we sometimes define ourselves by what we hate, by what we are against, by what we see as wrong in the world, Christians are to be defined by love.... By a love so perfect it would be called godly. A love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. A love that never ends. A perfect love!

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect!" (Matthew 5:48)