

Perfect by the Father's Heart

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. Our Bible reading this morning is from Matthew 5, verses 33 to 48.

We're going to be picking up Jesus' Sermon on the Mount partway through, starting from verse 33. Again, you have heard that it was said to those of old, you shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.

But I say to you, do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king.

And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply yes or no.

Anything more than this comes from evil. You have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil.

[1 : 18] But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.

And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

You have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your father who is in heaven.

For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?

Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

[2 : 25] You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect. Heavenly father, you have given us so many good examples through your son of what it is to live as people of your kingdom, as imitators of who you are and what you want for us.

I pray that as I go through the word today, that you will open our hearts and guide my words, that my words can be your words and speak into our hearts for what you want for us. In Jesus' name, amen.

Well, why is it that we are constantly measuring ourselves against the people around us? How we define ourselves creates a lens that we use to define our worth.

If I define myself by my work, I constantly have to check how good I am at my job by measuring against other people doing the same thing. If I define myself by my sporting ability, I need to know who I am beating to know just how good I am.

Now, we're in the midst of the Olympic Games. Athletes have been training for years, decades even, to get to this point. And for some of them, all that hard work, all those dreams are smashed in an instant.

[3 : 52] Imagine you're an Australian swimmer on the Olympic team. You've worked your butt off for most of your life. 4am starts, six days a week, from your early teenage years.

Perhaps moving your family halfway across the country to have a better coach. You have made it to the Olympics. You have qualified.

Now, by this definition, you're one of the top two athletes in this country for your event. Top two. It's a pretty high standard.

Now, you get to the Olympics and you swim in your heat. But you don't qualify for the semifinal. That's it. All that time and effort you have invested, done.

In only a matter of seconds, your dream is finished. But it doesn't just end there. As an Australian swimmer, the standard of qualifying has been upgraded to winning.

[4 : 54] You know that you've not met the standard that you set for yourself. No matter what standard you achieve, the world will always have a higher standard. You are one of the top two athletes in your country for your event.

You're an Olympian. But that is no longer enough. So if we need to constantly meet a standard in order for our sense of who we are and our worth to be recognised, then failing would be personally devastating.

But as people, we're not that bad, are we? I mean, we're not able to compete in an Olympic event. That's a very small portion of the population. But that doesn't mean that the world has not set a standard for us.

Now, the world is divided into two general categories. Good and bad. Now, while these seem like absolute terms, we can find that they're actually a sliding scale.

When we try to understand what the right thing to be doing in any situation is, where do we look for reference? We gauge what the accepted behaviour is by seeing what the majority of the people around us are doing.

[6 : 12] Do we speed down the highway? Do we use our phones while driving? We look to the world to define what acceptable behaviour is and what level of performance defines a good person.

Now, to the world, the laws that Jesus talks about here in verses 33 to 48 are not usually considered bad. Lying? Who doesn't lie?

Justice? Justice should be done. Make them pay for what they've done. And no one will think less of you for wishing ill on your enemy. We're not murderers. We're not thieves.

We're not bad by the world's standards. In fact, we're quite good. We give to charity. We look after people who need help. We only slightly resent those who need something from us when we're just not quite ready to give.

We pay our taxes. We obey the road rules, mostly, except there's no one around and no one's going to get hurt. We work hard all week and then give up the rest that we deserve to come to church because we are good people.

[7 : 20] As Jerry Bridges states in his book, *Respectable Sins*, we who are believers tend to evaluate our character and conduct relative to the moral culture in which we live.

Since we usually live at a higher moral standard than society at large, it is easy for us to feel good about ourselves and to assume that God feels that way also. Now, to Jesus' audience here in Matthew, the Pharisees and scribes were the good standard of their time.

No one was closer to God than them. They were the best of the best when it came to being good people. They were known for their obedience to the law.

They gave to the need. And they usually made sure that everyone knew just how godly they were.

Jesus gives us some examples in Matthew chapter 6. They were such a high standard that in verse 20, Jesus uses them as the example that must be surpassed to enter heaven.

Now, to compare that to the analogy of swimming, Jesus has just said the equivalent of you must be a better swimmer than Ian Thorpe or Ariana Titmuss or Susie O'Neill or Dawn Fraser or Kieran Perkins or Murray Rose.

[8 : 42] Now, I'm pretty sure that I've given a good swimmer from every generation we've got here at church. To beat these people who are defined as the best swimmers of their time would make us good at swimming.

But we don't sit here and think that being a better swimmer than these people is an easy task. Now, can anyone honestly say that we can be more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees?

Can we meet that standard? But that's what Jesus is asking us to do so that we can enter the kingdom of heaven. So to the world, we're not bad people.

But how good are we? Well, that depends on whether we're defined by God, not others and ourselves. So measuring ourselves against the example of the laws that Jesus leads us through in Matthew 5 shows us how good we really are.

Look with me at verses 33 to 37 on oaths. Now, we can summarize these verses by do not take an oath and all. Let what you say simply yes or no.

[9 : 53] Now, have you ever made a promise backed up with, you better believe I will, or even cross my heart and hope to die? Now, to Jesus' listeners, the only time they had to be believed was

when they were making such a promise.

When our truthfulness is questioned, we fall short of God's standard. Do we speak truthfully? Do we live with integrity?

If we live our lives so that our yes and no are believed, what fine examples we would be of the kingdom of heaven? If we are to proclaim the gospel to the people we meet, do we steal something from the words if we have a reputation for lying?

If we are known for honesty and truthfulness, there can be no doubt that the gospel is truth when we speak it. Moving on to verses 38 to 42, these confront us with a different perspective on our sense of justice, of fairness.

Now, we extend through to chapter 7, verse 12, the command of do to others as you would have them do to you. Do we take that command as the opportunity to treat other people the way they treated us instead of turning the other cheek and ending the issue?

[11:17] Instead of treating the people, instead of treating people the way we want to be treated, we demand something back. Now, this makes me think about my driving.

I consider myself to be a good driver for the most part. I bring my focus and my attention to the road and the other people who share the road with us. Now, I have had accidents, but I can justify riding off two cars because they weren't my fault.

There was a mechanical failure on one and the road was wet and I was not even in second gear in another. But there are times, and here I take a page from Rob Patterson's sermons, where my driving stresses out my beautiful wife.

There are times when another road user does not treat me the way that I wish to be treated on the road and the way that I feel that I am treating them.

Instead of continuing on, I find myself thinking, if that's how you want it to be, so be it. I no longer treat them the way I wish to be treated, but treat them the way they've just treated me.

[12:27] Someone swings into my lane and a little bit and I drive right to the edge to make sure that they know that this is my space. Someone doesn't indicate that they're turning in front of me and I just keep going as if they're not, getting closer and closer.

All the while, Jess is sitting next to me wondering if this is the moment we crash. You see, when we demand justice or fairness, what is it that we really want?

Is it according to the law that someone is punished to the exact measure of their hurt that they've caused? Literally, an eye for an eye? Or is it that we want the world to recognise and acknowledge that I was somehow wrong?

Our retaliation, our demand for justice appears to be a righteous act. The wrongdoer should be made to pay for what they've done. But the root of that demand is our own recognition, elevation, being the focus of events.

We crave the glory for ourselves. We want to be in the place that God has set aside for himself. We want to be in the place of God. We want to be in the place of God.

[13:35] We want to be in the place of God. Moving on, verse 44 calls us to pray for those who persecute you. Now, can we honestly say that we pray for our enemies?

Even preparing this sermon, I'm typing out automatically P-R-E-Y, not P-R-A-Y. Now, praying on our enemies seems like a natural thing to do.

We don't know what they're up to. They'll get the jump on us and they'll hurt us and defeat us. We end up with the inevitable pre-emptive strike. So we retaliate so well that we get in there before they can do us harm.

But praying for our enemies, not for their destruction, but for their good, can we take this huge leap forward? It is easy to let our friends get away with an injustice, maybe even a family member, although it seems that friends can get away with a lot more than family, doesn't it?

But someone who's actively seeking my pain, my downfall, Jesus wants me to do what? Jesus shows us that the world's definition of good is vastly different to God's and that our hearts are not in line with God's heart.

[14:58] We cannot live up to his standard. We need a totally new heart. Adam and Israel were unfaithful sons of God.

They were not able to be obedient, not achieving the example God has made them to be. Now, Adam had one simple rule. Don't eat from that tree and he couldn't obey it.

When Israel had all the rules, the physical signs, the explicit instructions on how to live as obedient sons of God, they had the living God bringing them up out of slavery in Egypt, going before them in a pillar of smoke and fire.

Exodus 19 gives us the scene at Mount Sinai where God is sitting on the top of the mountain in a cloud of fire in front of them. Israel's response?

Build us a statue of our God so that we know who our God is. Even with God right in front of them, they are unable to be the obedient sons they are called to be. And like Adam and Israel, we are unable to be the obedient children that we are called to be.

[16:13] but we have an example of someone who is. We don't need to look any further than Jesus for the example of living as a kingdom son.

Jesus did not need oaths to back up his statements of truth. In Matthew chapter 27, when Jesus is questioned by Pilate, he did not respond with many words and grand statements to convince people of his answers.

He speaks a simple sentence. You have said that it is so. Even at the point where he is about to die, when we would think that there is nothing left to lose, Jesus' simple statement of the truth greatly amazed Pilate.

Earlier in that night, Jesus shows his disciples that retaliation is not the answer. In chapter 26, when Judas betrays Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, one of the disciples defends Jesus with the sword, cutting off the ear of the temple servant.

Jesus rebukes his disciples, tells him to put away his weapon, heals the temple servant and provides calm in the midst of two groups of armed men ready to go to war. Jesus leaves calm and turns the other chair.

[17:35] And who can provide us with a better example of loving and praying for our enemies? The obvious act of a sinless man dying for sinful creation. While hanging on the cross, listening to the criminals in the crowds, mocking and demanding that he prove his power, Jesus prays, Father, forgive them.

In the midst of his greatest suffering, Christ prays not for his own relief, but for forgiveness for those who are caught up in this act. Now, to me, the clearest example of Jesus' obedience is in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Matthew 26, verse 39, Jesus prays, My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me, but nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.

in full knowledge of what was about to occur and all the pain that was associated with what was coming, Jesus begs for there to be another way, yet concludes God's way is best.

You see, Jesus is the only faithful son, the only one who can live up to the command of verse 48, you therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

[18:59] In this command, Jesus commands his followers, us, to be perfect, to reorient our hearts from the world's standards, to be in line with God's standards.

But how do we take part in that? How does Christ's perfection become ours? Because our Father calls us to share in his Son's heart.

God loves all of his creation and that love is concentrated in his Son. And through his Son, we too can call God our Heavenly Father.

Romans chapter 8 verses 14 to 17 tells us that we are given the spirit of adoption by whom we cry Father. Now, as Beth alluded to, consider the enormity of having a direct personal family relationship with God, the creator of everything.

The relationship between a parent and a child is particularly intimate. The parent loves and cares for the child, providing all that they need and more, regardless of the child's behavior.

[20:14] No matter how much a child rebels against the parent, the parent will always have a place ready for them. Think of the story of the prodigal son. A man tells his father that he can't wait for him to be dead, so the father gives him his inheritance and his blessing.

The son squanders everything and at the lowest point of his life remembers the love his father shows for his servants. The son does not expect anything more than that of the hired hands, but a father's love overcomes all the rebellion that has been thrown his way by the son to run, embrace, and welcome home his child.

Children are completely dependent on their parents, but only for so long. As a child grows, they become less physically dependent. They can feed themselves, dress themselves, and eventually

even get themselves where they need to and want to go.

But as this physical dependency wanes, they grow in emotional dependency. Even when we become parents, we seek the affirmation of our parents that we're doing a good job.

As children, we imitate our parents to learn about the world from their eyes. And so that's what God wants. He wants us to imitate him. He wants us to turn to him for affirmation of what we're doing is right.

[21 : 46] He wants to provide for us, to look after us, Mark chapter 10 tells us that he wants us to be fully dependent on him. Doesn't that give us hope?

That the unchanging standard of perfection is measured against our creator who wants to care for us, who calls us to an intimate personal family relationship with him, and who lifts us up to that standard with his call.

God. 1 Peter chapter 1 reminds us that we are called to be holy because God is holy. We are reminded that as children of the kingdom of heaven, we are showing the world what it means to be part of that kingdom.

Not the good people, only the same. And Peter goes on. If we call him father, conduct yourselves knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways of your forefathers with the blood of Christ. Jesus' blood shed for us is our sacrifice. The price that is required for our sin before God has been paid. We can now be seen as without sin and can enter the kingdom of heaven.

[23 : 07] In Jeremiah chapter 31, verses 31 to 34, God promised that a new covenant will be written in our hearts. Christ came to fulfill the law that God might write him into our hearts, sealing us to him and remembering our iniquity no more.

God deals with our corrupted heart by writing himself in. God changes the story. In Ezekiel 36, God promises to give us a new heart and a new spirit.

With a new heart, we are children of the kingdom of heaven. We are now aliens here on earth. And as Matt described a couple of weeks ago, we should now live as imitators of our king, not conforming to the culture of this world.

God will repent. When we repent, and if we go back right to the start of the sermon on the mount, Jesus starts his call with repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

When we repent, it is the changing of our heart's orientation. As Dave Bott showed us a couple of weeks back, we need to empty ourselves of the things of this world so that we can be filled with Christ.

[24 : 27] We need to empty ourselves of what defines us by this world and be filled with the goodness and identity that Christ offers us. When the world pushes back against us because we don't belong here anymore, we know that it is because we belong in our heavenly father's kingdom.

We are made perfect because Christ is perfect. But what does that mean for us? We know that the world's standards will always change.

There's always a higher standard. But God's standard is forever the same. We are so willing to spend all our energy chasing after the constantly moving standards of this world.

So why do we stumble when we are called to live out the perfection that has already been given to us? Now we know to note, the call to perfection is not saying that we can earn our way into heaven. Matthew chapter 7 tells us that many people are working out their lives in Jesus name, attempting to gain entry to heaven through their personal righteousness, their attempt to achieve perfection under the law.

[25 : 44] But Christ's response to them is, I never knew. We cannot demand access to God on our terms. this command to Jesus followers is also not a call to strive for perfect law keeping.

In the context of the verses we've just gone through, it should be clear that this is not possible.

Rather, Jesus is setting that standard for his people to pursue and being the example who can and will help his people achieve it.

in the examples of retaliation and loving your enemies, Jesus exhorts us as his people, not only to reject the normal standards of this world, but to double down, turn the other cheek, give your cloak also, love your enemies, but go the extra mile and pray for their benefit too.

When anyone can love their friends, that's why they're friends. anyone can give to someone who we know can pay us back, but we are called to be different, so that instead of giving in to our nature for revenge and self-glory, we end the violence.

And after we've ended the violence, we pray and give of ourselves for the other person's well-being. If we allow ourselves to suffer without seeking retribution, who are we seeking glory for?

[27 : 19] Aren't we showing that we no longer live by the standards of this world and live for something greater, higher? Following that, we see that our language, our honesty and integrity, should likewise signify us as different to this world.

We should be known for our honesty, our truthfulness, our integrity. When we answer a question, we shouldn't have to make assurances. we shouldn't have to cross our heart and hope to die that we speak the truth.

The people we speak to should know that we speak truth because that's what we're known for. Truth and honesty are linked with our character, the fibre of who we are as citizens of the kingdom of heaven, as sons and daughters of our heavenly Father.

God, live as children of the kingdom of heaven and be holy because your God and king is holy.

Pray with me. gracious Father, help us to put aside the things of this world. Help us to stop seeking the world standard and work towards your standard.

[28 : 50] Help us to open our hearts to you and be filled with who you are, that it overflows in this world, that we can show the world your love flowing through us.

Help us to live the way you want us to live, imitating you in all that we do. In Jesus' name, Amen.