

**Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon W. Jensen, Rector**  
**Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania**  
**The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A**  
**February 19, 2017**

*Matthew 5:38-48*

A man had to go away from his family for a few days on business. It was an opportunity to teach his ten-year old son some responsibility. When I'm away, he said, I want you to take care of things. Think what I would normally do around the house and you do it for me. He had in mind, of course, cleaning up the kitchen, washing the dishes, taking out the garbage, and so on.

On his return, he asked his wife what the son had done. Did he clean up? No. Did he wash the dishes? Nope. Did he at least take out the garbage? Negative. What happened? He was supposed to watch me and do what I do. Well, she said, it was strange. After breakfast he made himself another cup of coffee, put on some music, read the newspaper for half an hour, and complained about his boss. He is truly his father's son. What would happen in your house?

In this passage from the Gospel, we are told to watch what the heavenly Father does and then do the same thing ourselves. We are called to be perfect as God is perfect. How?

This passage in Matthew is a call to change our perceptions, our attitudes – to live differently – to be free. So, we are given an impossible task to get us out of our regular way of thinking. Be perfect like God. To be perfect as our heavenly father does *not* mean to live without a moral flaw. We'll get it wrong much of the time or focus on unhelpful things. The word perfect here is also translated as "mature" or "complete." We believe that God is love. To be perfect like God is, is to love without distinction or hope of reward. Immature or incomplete love embraces those who embrace us and rejects those who reject us. Everyone does *that*. To be perfect like God is to respond in love to both the evil and the good in our lives.

To be perfect challenges us to think differently about God. Without partiality. Without favorites. Offering love to all. This message is given to the people of Israel who understood themselves as the *chosen* people. Christians also understand themselves as chosen people. We are chosen *not* because we are better than everyone else. We are chosen to be an example. Chosen to show the world a different way to live with God at the center of our relationships.

Jesus calls this way to live by a special name – the Kingdom of Heaven. It does not refer to a specific place. It is not physical or another realm out there somewhere. It's not even after we die but breaking into this world now. The Kingdom of Heaven is God's love coming through us... Holy light casting out darkness... Heaven come to earth... Peace with justice.

Today, we hear examples of what opening ourselves to the Kingdom of Heaven might look like. They are contrasted to the wisdom of the world that is familiar to us. It's an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. If someone hits you then hit him back harder. Jesus contrasts this way with living in the Kingdom. "You have heard it said" is the world or the Law. It's what everyone already knows. "But I say to you" is God's way – the Kingdom. He then gives several examples of what Kingdom living might look like- how to be perfect or spiritually mature or complete.

The first example is a slap. If someone slaps you on the cheek, turn and offer the other one. Don't fight or resist evil. Don't stoop to their level. In Jesus' time, to be struck on the cheek meant to be hit with the back of the hand. It was not intended to hurt physically as much as it

was an insult. To be struck that way meant you are worthless – an inferior, of no account. It meant one person exerting power over another to demean them. Hitting back, with a slap or an unkind word, only continues evil. Turning the other cheek deflates the power of one person used over another. But it does not mean we remain silent in the face of evil or injustice. Don't close your hand but open your mouth.

The second example is from a court of law. Someone wants to sue you and take the literal shirt off your back. You can't win but you can expose what is really going on. Give him your cloak as well. In that world, a man would wear two garments, a shirt and a cloak. They usually had one pair. By giving both you shame him with your nakedness. Go ahead and take them but name what is really happening. My possessions don't control me and neither do you.

The third example reflects the Roman military occupation of Jesus' time. Roman soldiers had the right to force civilians to carry their equipment for *one* mile. The law was strict. The soldier could demand no more than one mile. Jesus says turn the tables on him. Don't plot, fret, or fume when people make outrageous demands. It's your choice, your free action. Go an extra mile on your own, be free, and show everyone around you a different way to live and love where people cannot be used or treated as a means to an end.

We have made these provocative statements about how to live in the Kingdom into everyday expressions. Turn the other cheek. Give him the shirt off your back. Go the extra mile. All make good from evil. These examples are all acts of protest to embody what God is like- to turn evil into good. They are examples for us to understand and then apply in our own situation. We can't take them all literally, like the boy in the story, or we will miss the point. How can we make good from evil and let God's kingdom come through us?

You have heard it said, when someone spreads rumors about you, you should discredit them and say worse things about their mother. But I say to you, let it go, and if someone asks you about it tell the truth without malice or revenge.

You have heard it said, he who dies with the most toys wins. But I say to you, don't let your things own you for the entire Kingdom of Heaven is yours. And don't let others live without love or hope or basic necessities.

You have heard it said, fight fire with fire but I say to you that destroys everything. Let the one who seeks to do you harm burn themselves out but don't fan the flames. God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous. Discover a perfect, holy love- impartial, unbiased, free of all constraints.

Jesus gives not just good advice but good news. You are the free and chosen people. It does not matter who the rulers of the world are at the moment. They, too, will pass. We simply have more opportunities to show the world who and what our God is like – to bring heaven to earth. Speak out, act out with love to embody peace with justice for all.