
I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change!

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A Sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Epiphany 7A

Jesus said, "Be perfect, as your father in heaven is perfect."
-Matthew 5:48

"I love you, you're perfect, now change!" About fifteen years ago, a great musical comedy appeared off Broadway with that title: "I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change," with words and lyrics by Joe DiPietro and music by Jimmy Williams.

It's one of the great titles of all time, because no one needs to have actually seen the musical in order to appreciate the phrase. In fact, the phrase appeared for the last fifteen years in advertisements all over the sides of New York busses, and inside subway cars.

"I love you. You're perfect. Now change."

Any one of us who has ever been in love knows what that phrase means. It means that our love for another person develops in stages.

The first stage, inevitably, is about ourselves. "I love you." Yes, about ourselves. The first flush of love is usually something inside ourselves. We are aware of desire. Something rises up in us, some rush of hormones or adrenaline; and we call it love.

The next stage, often immediately following the first, is about the object of our desire. "Wow," we say, "You are perfect. You are the very ideal of perfection. Not a blemish on you!" Now, if we are on the receiving end of love, we really like that stage. Someone is calling us "perfect." That feels pretty good! Someone has actually been able to look beyond our faults and been able to call us "perfect." We tend to start believing that projection.

Then. Then ... the third stage. First stage: I love you. Second stage: you're perfect. But third stage: now change. Any of us who has ever been in love knows what this stage means, too. Yes, I love you. Yes, you are wonderful. But, , the way you do such and such really has begun to bug me. In fact, it has always bugged me. Can't you change that habit?

And what about that other boring thing you do ... ? And that disgusting thing , ? Do you realize you are always , ? Grow up! Change!

I love you. You're perfect. Now change.

Ultimately, those are three incredibly powerful words. Love. Perfection. Change. Wonderful words, but also disturbing words. Well, this morning, they are all gospel words.

During his long and severe Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has prescribed almost impossible behavior. If your right eye offends you, pluck it out, he says. If someone strikes you on the cheek, turn the other cheek. If someone takes your coat, give them your cloak, too. If you are angry with someone, it's the same as murder.

We are incredulous, time after time, when we hear those words. No one, not even the greatest saint among us, has ever met those standards, day after day. Jesus has explored the depths of the law and the depths of human conscience; he knows what our thoughts and desires are. And he knows that no one fulfills all the law and the prophets. No one meets every jot and tittle of the law.

Then, at Matthew 5:48, he sums up his severity. "Be perfect," he says, "as your father in heaven is perfect."

Is this supposed to be the kind and gentle, ever-understanding Jesus? The one who forgives us and has mercy on us and loves us? How could any one of us ever be perfect as our father in heaven is perfect?

The answer has to do with understanding perfection. I do not believe that Jesus defines perfection as most of us do. For most of us, perfection means we got it all right. We scored one hundred per cent on the test. We met every standard. We had no blemishes or scuff marks. Maybe we all aspire to that sort of perfection, but every one of us should also realize that no one actually attains it.

And, friends, that is not what Jesus means by "perfection." Being perfect does not mean living a morally sinless and unstained life.

The word for "perfect" here in Matthew chapter five is the Greek word "telios," which means "the end" or "completed." So, I believe that when Jesus says "Be perfect," what he really means, in our language, is "be perfected." He means for us to carry on, to reach that point that God intends us for us, to reach that perfected end to our life journey. He means "Reach maturity. Be completed." Perfection means to be perfected.

In fact, I believe that when Jesus says this, he is actually continuing his *re-definition* and *re-development* of Old Testament law. Remember how he has been re-defining throughout Matthew five? He says, "you have heard that it was said, ... but I say to you," over and over again. "You have heard an eye for an eye, but I say to you turn the other cheek." Right?

Jesus has been changing the meaning of the old law. Jesus has been developing new meaning. And I believe he is doing the same thing here, because his quotation sounds like something out of Leviticus 19:2, "Be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." But Jesus changes the word. Jesus says, in Matthew, "be perfected, as your father in heaven is perfected." Jesus is implying that to be holy, as Leviticus commanded us, actually means to be completed, to be perfected, to reach that perfected end of our soul's journey.

Now, look at another version of these words. In today's gospel, Matthew quotes Jesus as saying, "Be perfect, as your father in heaven is perfect." But Luke, another gospel writer, quotes Jesus another way. In both cases, Jesus seems to be referring to the old Leviticus verse: "be holy, as your father in heaven is holy." But Luke, at 6:36, quotes Jesus as saying, "Be merciful, as your father in heaven is merciful."

What is going on here? Leviticus says, "be holy, as the Lord your God is holy" (Leviticus 19:2). Matthew says, "be perfected, as your father in heaven is perfected" (Matthew 5:48). Luke says, "Be merciful, as your father in heaven is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

The way I read this succession of bible verses is this: "To be perfect is to be perfected, to be changed, and it is to be changed toward mercy." Perfection, then, means change. Perfection means change in just the same way that Jesus changed Leviticus. Jesus changed the words. And then, Matthew and Luke both used different words when they were quoting Jesus!

Perfection means change. I can go no further in this sermon without quoting the great nineteenth century theologian on this matter, the Anglican Catholic thinker who taught many of us that Christian doctrine actually develops. True religious doctrine is not static; true doctrine changes. He was John Henry Newman, later John Henry Cardinal Newman, who

converted from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism later in his life. "To live is to change," he said, "and to be perfect is to have changed often."

To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often. That's the way he said it in the nineteenth century. And it is still being said.

"I love you, You're perfect, Now change." That's the way the musical comedy show said it. But those words are not merely humorous. They are the truth. None of us is perfect by virtue of having satisfied every jot and tittle of the law. However, every one of us being perfected, because every one of us is changing.

We are changing, with God's grace, towards God's grace. We are changing, with God's mercy, towards God's mercy. Be *holy*, said Leviticus. Be *perfect*, said Matthew. Be *merciful*, said Luke. They all meant the same thing: Be changed, be changed, be changed, into the same love which is God himself.

"I love you. You're perfect. Now change." They are three powerful words; they are three gospel words. "I love you, you're perfect, now change."

AMEN.

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