

“A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Holy Perfection”
A Sermon by Rev. Jack Miller
Preached February 19, 2017, Beaufort, SC
Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18
Matthew 5:38-48

You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy...

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Be holy. Be perfect. Yeah, right.

A funny thing happened on the way to holy perfection. We started to believe it was not possible to get there.

We believe God spoke through Moses and told the people of Israel to be holy. We believe Jesus told his followers to be perfect. These are divine decrees. Executive orders, if you will. Be holy. Be perfect. Yet over the course of time theologians, and scholars, and pastors of the Church began to think critically about these statements. It seemed to become apparent that no mere human being could live up to such a high standard. These learned folks began formulating excuses for why we could not achieve holy perfection. They began offering rationalizations to explain away the implications of being holy and perfect, and in so doing, they smoothed over the rough edges and dulled down the challenging responsibility. For many Christians, including me, these words make us wriggle like worms who want to get off a hook. We believe we cannot achieve the standards of holiness and perfection. Yet that does not change the fact that God and Jesus both demand our holiness and our perfection. If we believe these statements are true, then we need to take them seriously.

This is where things get tricky, though. We approach these texts with assumptions about holiness and perfection that don't align with what the texts mean. Most people today regard being holy as being superior, 'holier than thou.' They think of perfection as having it all together,

of never making any mistakes, of being flawless. When we begin with those understandings of holiness and perfection, we start to wonder if these texts have anything to say to us. We feel like we cannot live up to those standards. So we turn that skepticism towards the texts, and try to figure out how they might mean something different than what they say.

We look back to that time when the Israelites were wandering through the wilderness and find out what it meant to leave the edges of fields unharvested. (Incidentally, I have two brown thumbs and couldn't grow a weed, so I am pretty sure I am off the hook here, anyway.) We wonder if there were alternative definitions of stealing, and lying, and defrauding. Maybe hate meant something different back then than it does today. Surely taking vengeance and bearing a grudge against anyone else applied to something completely unrelated to anything we might understand.

And if I step into Jesus' world, and understand that there were elements of shame tied up in the way someone slapped you, and that dress codes were different then than they are today, and that nobody really ever asks us or forces us to walk a mile, then I might begin to believe that none of those injunctions apply to me. If nothing else, Jesus did not understand what the word enemy has come to mean, because if he did, he probably would not tell us to love those people. If I am completely honest with myself, I find it extremely easy to read these texts from Leviticus and Matthew and think, "That was ok when life was simpler, but this is now, and the world is so much more complicated."

I can also rationalize all of this another way. I am a Presbyterian, connected to the Reformed tradition of Christianity. I preach grace. I breathe grace. I need grace. But sometimes grace becomes my crutch. When I cannot achieve something difficult, when I cannot measure up to the standard I believe God sets, then I can say, "I tried, I failed. Thank God for grace!" I am a

work in progress. I believe we are all works in progress. And I truly believe that we need not worry, because in the end, grace will get us to our destination. But grace is never an excuse, never an out. Grace never negates the Word of God, especially a word that spurns us to holiness and perfection.

God meant for us to be holy. Jesus meant for us to be perfect. Perhaps we just need a new perspective and understanding about what it means to be holy and perfect. The texts from Leviticus and Matthew set out a series of guidelines and expectations on how we, as children of God, are supposed to live. We can parse it out as long as we want, yet the stark reality remains that God calls us to be holy and perfect. Based on these texts, that has something to do with loving people by being generous with them, not harboring animosity, hatred, or ill will towards anyone, and practicing justice and fairness with our friends, our neighbors, strangers, aliens, and even our enemies.

We've heard this before. This is the time in the sermon where I illustrate my point with a story about one of the giants in the world of love, peace, and reconciliation, but are any of us capable of being one of *them*? This is fine and good for the Gandhis, the Martin Luther Kings, the Mother Teresas, and the Mary Johnsons of the world. Wait, who's Mary Johnson?

Mary Johnson is the mother of Laramiun Byrd. In 1993, Laramiun, 20, was shot and killed at a party in Minneapolis by a 16-year-old boy named Oshea Israel. A jury found Oshea guilty and sentenced him to prison. After 12 years, Mary went to the prison to visit the man who had murdered her son. She simply started to tell Oshea about her son, and Oshea, for the first time, began to see Laramiun as a human being. When Mary broke down crying, Oshea embraced her and held her up, hugging her like she was his own mother. When she left the prison that day, she remembers thinking, "I just hugged the man that murdered my son.' And I instantly knew

that all that anger and the animosity, all the stuff I had in my heart for 12 years for [him]—I knew it was over, that I had totally forgiven [him].”^{vi} Mary and Oshea now live next door to each other. They are neighbors. Mary treats Oshea as a son, accepts him as her own child. They look out for each other and encourage one another. Oshea says that the way Mary treats him, “Motivates me to make sure that I stay on the right path.” He told her, “You still believe in me. And the fact that you can do it despite how much pain I caused you—it’s... amazing.”^{vii} In my eyes, Mary Johnson is living out the biblical definition of what it means to be holy and perfect. It was not easy for Mary to treat her son’s killer the way she is, but her love for Oshea is changing his life, and the lives of countless other people who belong to families of murder victims and murderers.

God is supremely concerned about the way we treat other people. Jesus teaches us that the way we treat others reflects our relationship with God. When we treat others with love, generosity, compassion, and justice, we are glorifying our Father. When we do not treat others this way, we are like the tax collectors and sinners to whom Jesus refers – despised by others and separated from God. Yet another thing happens when we treat all people with love, generosity, compassion, and justice – we live out the reality that all people are created and loved by God. It is not up to us to decide who should be treated well and who should not. That decision belongs to God, and God alone, who makes the sun rise on the evil and the good, and the rain to fall on the righteous and unrighteous. If God loves all people, and we are created in God’s image, then God created us with the capacity to love all people, too. Family, friends, strangers, aliens, and enemies. Our purpose, then, is to love with God’s love.

And in the biblical sense, that is what it means to be holy and perfect – to love with God’s love. Perfection, as Jesus means it, is fully becoming the person God created you to be. God did not create us to foster animosity, hold on to bitterness and resentment, to desire revenge,

or to fear that we will not have enough. God created us for love. God takes care of us, and as we are created in God's image, we are called to love and take care of one another. That is the true definition of being holy and perfect – achieving God's purpose for us, becoming more Christ-like, growing to resemble God, our heavenly Father, just like children resemble their parents. Being holy and perfect means that we completely imitate the ways of God. That we love with God's love. God's fullest demonstration of this love is revealed in the death of Christ, that saving act that reconciles us to God and reveals to us the truth about how we are called to love others. It is when we reproduce that image of God – the image of unwearied, forgiving, sacrificial benevolence – that we become like God, and therefore holy and perfect. Let us, therefore, as children of our heavenly Father, never settle for anything less than being holy and being perfect.

ⁱ <https://storycorps.org/listen/mary-johnson-and-oshea-israel/>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.