

“Becoming Wholly Perfect and Perfectly Holy”

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18 & Matthew 5:38-48

Okay...so after reading those two texts...anyone else want to throw in the towel on being a Christian?

Maybe we don't have to be as serious about Leviticus though, right? It's just Old Testament stuff for special people like priests. Well...what we read today is part of the “Holiness Code”...a group of chapters that describe how the everyday Israelite person should live...so unfortunately it's not just a text for the priests.

And the second passage we read is from none other than Jesus himself, so if being a Christian means following Jesus, then the first step to following him is probably listening to what he has to say...and then the second step? Actually doing what he says.

And while it's true that both of these texts were written years ago in different social and religious contexts than our own -- because they are in our Bible (which is a book we Christians take seriously as a guide for our faith) -- then we can't just write them off as being completely irrelevant for us today.

They are relevant for us today, even if uncomfortably so.

Be holy. Be perfect. Why? Because God is holy and perfect. That's what these texts say -- we are to be holy and perfect because God is. But come on, God is God and we are not! And we never will be.

My yoga instructor, reminds me of this often. As he guides us through a flow of poses in class, he does so, always offering modifications and reassuring us that contrary to popular belief, yoga is not about perfecting one's body - in fact, the most advanced yoga student is one who ceases to strive for perfection in a pose and who instead listens to her body and does what is best for herself in that moment. Fluidity of breath and commitment to keep practicing are far more important than perfecting any single pose in yoga...which is what most students long to do - “if I could just get into handstand...or if I could just get into eagle arms during airplane...”

“Stop those thoughts,” says my instructor. It's like he knows we are thinking these things by the expressions on our faces! *“Just look at yourself. You're alive. You're breathing. You're healthy enough to be here. Be grateful for this*

moment...and through your gratitude your poses will come to be perfect for you. You cannot make them perfect. In fact the harder you try, the less successful you'll be."

On the yoga mat, athletic and results-driven people prone to perfection are forced to grapple with their limitations, and to do so with grace. And that's what makes yoga so incredibly difficult...it's not the physical stuff...it's the mental stuff.

Well - what about our faith? These biblical passages make it seem like the *physical* stuff we do - especially how we treat our neighbors and our enemies - is the *difficult* stuff. That we can think nice things all we want to - but if we aren't physically leaving some of our grain out for the poor folks to pick and if we aren't physically turning our cheek to the person who hits us and if we aren't literally giving to folks who come to us begging...in other words...if we aren't *doing* what we're *thinking* then we are not on our way to holiness or to perfection.

You have heard that it was said, "Practice makes perfect," - but I say to you...does it? Does practice make perfect when it comes to our faith -- is there such thing as a perfect faith, apart from the faith of our perfect God?

Or as the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill once put it, "They say that nobody is perfect. Then they tell you practice makes perfect. I wish they'd make up their minds."

So - which is it...strive to be perfect or accept that we are not?

As Christians, we definitely live in this tension in our faith. We even sang this tension this morning...did you catch that? We began by singing, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty...**Only Thou Art Holy**...There is none beside Thee...Perfect in power, in love, and purity."¹

Then we moments later we sang together, "Holiness, holiness, **is what I long for**. Holiness is what I need. Holiness is what You want from me."²

One minute we're singing that only *God* is holy, the next minute we're singing that *we* need to be holy.

This is a tension worth exploring. So today - if you are wondering about all

¹ Selected lyrics from the hymn, *Holy, Holy, Holy*. Hymn text by R. Heber, 1783-1826. Hymn music by J.B. Dykes, 1823-1876. Hymn tune: NICAEA.

² Selected lyrics from the song, *Take My Life*. Text and Music by Scott Underwood.

the individual laws and sayings and prescriptions in these two texts...that's great. I invite you to go home and dig into them. I wish I had time to do that right now. Sometimes it is fruitful to look at passages verse by verse. Other times it is good to look at their entirety and see what they are saying to us in general...about our lives...about our faith. So while these passages do give us specific kinds of behavior that we need to pay attention to and take seriously --- today I want us to pay attention to and take seriously the call on our lives, from God and from Jesus, to be holy and to be perfect.

You have heard me say it many times before, the word "holy" means "set apart." The Hebrew word, (*qodesh*) "holy," is used 150 times in the book of Leviticus.³ It was an important concept in the Israelite's understanding of who God was (separate and set apart) and in turn, who they were called to be as God's people (a people separate and set apart because of their relationship with God).

The book of Leviticus is a book of rituals and laws. If you've ever tried to read it (and God bless you if you have), you'll know that it's not full of narratives, but rather it reads like a

³ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. "The Book of Leviticus: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreters Bible Commentary* Vol. I (Nashville, Abingdon Press), 1994, pg 985.

legal document in many ways. But - its purpose was just as powerful as some of your favorite stories from Genesis and Exodus. I love the way one commentary put it: "The purpose of Levitical law was to teach, train, and prepare the Israelite people to be God's instruments of grace to others."⁴ Isn't that beautiful? To think of something as dry and difficult as Leviticus as a training manual to mold us into God's instruments of grace?

The section we read today deals with one's neighborliness, or lack thereof. The Israelites are instructed to have regard for the poor and for the rich, to be truth-tellers, to have regard for their employees as well as for the helpless around them, and for their neighbor in general. "The level of ethical performance expected of all persons was that of an imitation of the very character of God."⁵ The entire holiness code in Leviticus serves as both a model (*look* at God) and a motivating force (now *act* like God).

Jesus echoes this imperative, but he takes it one step further (as he is prone to do). In Leviticus, one's neighbor is generally understood to be one's kin and within one's own people - in this case, the Israelites. In Matthew, we hear that our neighbor includes those who are our enemies and do intentional things to harm us or annoy us or to get under our skin.

⁴ Ibid, pg 987.

⁵ Ibid., pg 1133.

Jesus calls us to a whole different level of holiness. This is the major leagues. This is big time. We've just been promoted, whether we wanted to be or not. We've definitely moved here from being a people called to be "set apart" within our own community to a people called to be "perfect" in all communities and situations. It seems that according to Jesus, perfection leaves no room for loopholes...even if it is a "holy" endeavor.

I was at a retreat center outside of Austin a couple weeks ago with Mary Hulst and Beth Loughhead and other American Baptist women pastors from around the country. We had a wonderful time, in part because of the setting we were in – the Texas hill country. On a hike one morning, someone (not from our group, ie: not a pastor) asked about why all the rocks were so holey. Being that we were in a sacred place and there were all these special rock formations and labyrinths and such, I thought the person was asking about what made this place sacred to all who came here for retreat.

Of course, leave it to a pastor to think she was asking about the "holiness" of the rocks; turns out she was simply quite literally asking why the rocks had so many holes in them!

Well, they were limestone rocks, and if you know limestone in Texas...you

know that these rocks are called "honeycomb limestone" or "Texas holey rocks." Our guide answered the woman's question without blinking an eye – she knew that the woman wasn't asking about any sacred dimension of the rocks, but rather was asking about their physical nature...so she went into this explanation about how limestone is formed by the accumulation of minerals being deposited on top of one other for thousands of years, and as the earth has moved, the tightly packed forms have fractured and seeping rainwater mixed with sulfuric gases have gotten inside of these cracks dissolved the limestone. The result is limestone with a honeycomb of chambers...or really holey rocks.

I still claim the rocks were "holy" – in both senses of the word. And I wonder if these honeycomb limestone rocks could be metaphors for our own spiritual lives as followers of Jesus.

We are "holy" not because we are perfect, completely solid in our form...but we are "holy" because all our lives different habits and truths have deposited themselves on top of one another. And then things happen...good things and bad things...things that erode parts of those habits and truths...things that put cracks in our foundation. But those cracks aren't imperfections. Those cracks are what allow the Spirit of the living God to get into us and

mix with what's already there...and maybe that opens up some space...some breathing room...some openings – some holes - that allow others to see through us in ways they hadn't been able to before. And maybe the very fact that we are a bit more permeable...maybe that allows the holiness of God...that is, the complete “otherness” of God...to shape us in ways that would have been impossible had we remained perfectly-formed and solid-looking on the outside.

Are you following me here? I hate to make too much of a rock analogy...but I think it fits. In Leviticus, we have laws to live by that are to help construct us into good people, people who think about others first just as God thinks about others first...people who love our neighbors because God loves us. We grow up with the golden rule and that behavior (hopefully) becomes engrained in us.

But then something changes in today's Matthew text...perhaps because over time the covenant community that was once instructed to love their neighbor has forgotten to do that...and even more, they have come to define neighbor so narrowly that there is no breathing room for God's grace...no room for folks to be cracked open by their interactions with others...they are so tightly bonded to one another that they have become impenetrable. And in a sense,

they are not very holy at all. They are looking less and less “set apart” and more and more “set in their ways.”

So in Matthew, we see Jesus expanding our definition of neighbor...we see the spirit and grace of God cracking us open...and leaving us exposed perhaps...truly seen by others and able to truly see others...and all of the sudden our enemies and really just anyone that interferes with our selfish pursuits of any given hour become the very people that we are to invite into our lives...into those holy spaces...and all the sudden we become “set apart” because we are no longer “set on being right” all the time. And this, perhaps, is perfection. Not being right all the time, but being *loving* all the time, whether someone rights us or wrongs us.

When we hear the command to “*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,*” (Matt. 5:48), most of us hear a command to a kind of moral perfectionism. But that's not actually what the original language implies. “Perfect,” in this case, stems from *telos*, the Greek word for “goal,” “end,” or “purpose.” The sense of the word is more about becoming what was intended, accomplishing one's God-given purpose in the same way that God constantly reflects God's own nature and purpose. Eugene Peterson's *The Message* gets closer to the mark, I think, when he translates

that verse, *"You are kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you."*⁶

Does that let us off the hook with all the other specifics? Certainly not. But it does help us get to the root of the issue. We can only do these other things – repaying evil with good, forgiving and praying for those who harm us – to the degree that we can live into our God-given identity as blessed and beloved children. You can't give what you don't have, and so only those who have experienced love can in turn share it with others.

Which is why it matters who's saying these things in the first place. It's Jesus – Jesus, the one who not only talked the talk of love but walked the walk, treading steadfastly to Jerusalem, enduring the shame and humiliation of the cross, embracing death itself...all so that we might know, experience, and trust just how much God loves us and thereby – and only thereby! – have abundant life.

You see, Jesus not only commands, he also *understands*. He understands just how hard it is for us to love rather than hate, to forgive rather than begrudge, to embrace rather than

⁶ David Lose, "Perfect" on the *Working Preacher* website from Luther Seminary. Accessed at http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=456 on 19 February 2011.

protect, to share rather than hoard, to heal rather than wound, especially when we ourselves walk around so much of our lives wounded and hurt.⁷

Over the past week we have seen a contagion of political riots and protests spread across the Arab world. As one reporter put it, *"Two months ago, a Tunisian fruit vendor struck a match that started a fire that has spread throughout much of North Africa and the Middle East."*⁸ At least fifteen cities have erupted with an energy and conviction that has captured the world's attention. And while the future is uncertain in all of these places – the people in these places are certain about one thing – change. And there's no mistaking that. They are devoting their *whole* being to this – their days and their nights.

I've spent a lot of time this week trying to understand all of these events, and honestly, have had trouble keeping up with them all. But in the end, I kept having this recurring thought: what if we Christians loved our neighbors and our enemies alike in such a radical way as to inspire cities and peoples all over the world to take a second look at Christ? To

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ The CNN Wire Staff, "Unrest in the Middle East and North Africa – Country by Country" on the CNN website. Accessed at <http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/02/21/mid.east.africa.unrest/index.html?iref=allsearch> on 20 February 2011.

have people turning heads, even if no one really understood what was happening or what to make of it?

That's how the light gets in.
~Leonard Cohen

I think becoming *wholly perfect* is a matter of devoting your whole being to the process of becoming who God has created you to be from the beginning – God’s beloved child.

And becoming *perfectly holy* is a matter of devoting your whole being to being “set apart” as one who lives and loves as Jesus lived and loved and still lives and loves today.

Both are processes...that take a life time...hence the word “becoming” in my title.

So does practice make perfect when it comes to our faith? Maybe God only knows. But it seems to me, unless we practice the love we have been shown in Christ, the world may never come to know the holy and perfecting love of God that is a gift waiting to be received.

Our task is big. Lucky for us...God’s grace is even bigger. Thanks be to God for that.

Amen.

Post Benediction Thought:

**Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything,**