



THE PROBLEM WITH PERFECT
SCRIPTURE: LEVITICUS 19:1-2; 9-18; MATTHEW 5: 38-48
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
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I have a confession to make.

You may think I am a bad parent. You may think I am a good parent. But the truth is, this is what I use to do when my kids were little and someone gave them a toy that beeped, talked, asked questions, lit up, or basically made any noise at all. I removed the batteries before the children knew the toy's capabilities. Yes, it is the truth. I did it. I did it many, many times.

There were three toys that the manufacturer had made to foil parents like me. The batteries were not replaceable and they were not accessible. One was a small, handheld size Scoop the digger from Bob the Builder. Sidney took it everywhere. And so for months I heard the word "Can we fix it?" and "I can dig it" over and over again.

The second was three little ducks that you could pull behind you and they waddled together while going "quack, quack, quack, quack." Our cat liked to pull the string to make them quack—often at 3:30 in the morning. A particular kind of joy for a young mother who would do anything to get some sleep at night.

And the third toy, my nemesis, that had a permanently embedded and inaccessible battery was a tiny guitar, glittery, bright colors—one of those things that looks like a box of neon markers blew up and splattered all over it. This was a gift to Mary Elizabeth when she was around 3 or 4. This delightful toy blinked lights and had the voice of Hannah Montana (aka Miley Cyrus) singing the chorus to "Nobody's Perfect."

Nobody's perfect
I gotta work it
Do it again til I get it right.

I still have a visceral reaction when I hear that song. I can remember breathing deeply—saying my edited version of the Jesus prayer (Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a mother)—praying for patience, praying not to succumb to the burning desire to take the toy and hit it with a sledge hammer until I couldn't lift my arms any more.

But seeing my little curly haired girl in her pink cowboy boots and grass stained leggings dancing over and over again to the same three lines:

Nobody's perfect
I gotta work it
Do it again til I get it right.

Seeing her internalize this musical mantra convicted me. I needed to be more generous about letting her love what she loved. I needed to welcome the message even if the messenger was not what I would have chosen for her.

I did not want her to be burdened with any expectation having the perfect body, the perfect disposition, being the perfect student, the perfect girl friend, the perfect wife, the perfect mother.

Everyone is susceptible to the perfectionist trap, but at times I feel especially protective of my daughter—in a world where women's bodies are hyper sexualized, even little girls bodies—and where pressure to get straight As and be gifted and be friends with everyone and do well at everything single thing you do, to always make everyone feel at ease, to be the hostess with the mostest, to take care of everyone's feelings—are still real expectation for girls and women in many aspects of our culture—including in some expressions of Christianity.

The problem with perfect is that our very understanding, our very templates of perfection, are distorted by sexism, racism, homophobia, and materialism. And so, Jesus' exhortation to his friends to "be perfect like my Father in Heaven is perfect" is something we must attend to with great care.

There is a song I sing when I need to remember God's love. And I sing it to people when they are in vulnerable spaces—on the threshold of death, in the throws of despair, in the bondage of self-loathing.

Listen and then sing it with me when you are ready. It's ok if you don't get it exactly right—you'll catch on.

(Sing: To call myself beloved, to feel myself beloved on the earth.)

We cannot come to these passages in Leviticus and Matthew without surfacing the distorted scripts of our understanding of holiness and perfection. If we don't surface those distortions, if we don't name the radically different reality that Jesus' vision of perfection requires, then these passages can become tools of deprivation, instruments of our languishing.

Far from burdensome demands of a hard-nosed God, these are messages of a God who wants us live into how we were made to be.

How can we hear them, how can we receive them for the beautiful gift that they are?

The answer is simple; the practice is much harder. We have to be healed, first, of our distortions—and ones that infects us the most deeply, the ones that spawn the “isms” that otherize. And one that forms and feeds these “isms” is the individualism that defines the mentalities of the Western world.

We’re told in many ways that we are isolated individuals—somehow able to be separated out from relationships, from contexts, from culture, from experiences. Our legal system is based on the rights and responsibilities of individuals, our economic system is built on self-interest, our politics are about opposition to each other, and many strains of Christianity invite an over-individualized purification of personal morality.

Individualism tells us lies—that separate us from each other. Individualism makes others objects, it makes others commodities, it makes others a means to an end, it makes us sometimes feel like we are all alone in this cut throat world.

Individualism makes others something to conquer, something to dominate, something to manipulate, something to demonize, something to fear.

Individualism creates mentalities of “the other” –even hostility toward the other, the stranger within ourselves.

Healing the wound of individualism takes practice.

(Sing: To call myself beloved, to feel myself beloved on the earth)

Leviticus is not a book often associated with a liberating message. In fact, it is often held up as an icon of oppressive legalism. Leviticus is where we find all sorts of obscure rules and regulations—about the thread used in clothing, about where a woman can sit when she is menstruating, and about how to punish those who break the Sabbath. It can be distorted into a handbook for personal piety.

But our passage today—often recited by our Jewish brothers and sisters for Yom Kippur, is a beautiful collective invitation—an invitation to community lived in right relationship with our neighbors, with ourselves, and with God.

And the most important thing about this passage is from whence this invitation to holiness comes—we are invited into this way of being not out of obedience, but out of our very created nature. God is Holy and so we should be Holy, too. We are made in God’s image. And the Ten Commandments, which this passage is practical

application of, are all about living together like God intends us to—not out of selfishness, but out of the wisdom of our interdependence.

Holiness is a practice that makes us our true selves—it is not a burden, but a blessing of the spark of Divinity that defines each one of us.

We are made for relationship—relationship with each other, relationship with God, relationship with our created nature. And our truest humanity means that NO ONE, NOBODY should ever take advantage of another person’s vulnerability.

Let me say that again: NO ONE, NOBODY should ever take advantage of another person’s vulnerability.

Just think about how many of the ills of our society would be cured if we could just trust each other enough to believe that our vulnerability would be handled with gentleness and tender care.

Enter Jesus, who was and is perfectly trustworthy when it comes our vulnerability.

Jesus rejects any ethic of retribution. He dismantles any worldview that allows us to demonize people with whom we disagree, or even people who hurt us. We are called to see the God-instilled spark of Divinity in all people.

And so, Jesus’ invitation to be perfect is not about absolute moral purity—it is not about getting everything right, it is not about a dualism of good vs. bad—it is about being well with ourselves—our whole selves—and our whole selves include the hardest to love and the most beautiful to encounter.

Jesus’ perfection is an enmeshed interdependence. It is about my well-being, my vitality being tangled up with yours, and with the person who cuts me off in traffic, and with the person who oppresses me, and with the person who enrages me, and with the person who enlightens me.

We are living on sacred ground so everything we do matters; the way we encounter each other in the most intimate and fragile moments of life, matters.

I have another confession to make. There was time in my life when believing that God loved me this way was a real challenge. I felt so alone, like that grace, that compassion was true for everyone else but me. Maybe that sounds like a familiar place to you.

I had mixed up the message. Instead of trusting God’s love and my place in the human family, I thought it must be up to me to make myself acceptable.

There have been many healing moments along the way—one stands out—sitting in a church pew when I heard anew that words that I had somehow lost track of in my pain—You are God’s beloved.

This Christ-centered perfect, this God given capacity for holiness require first truly receiving and truly believing that we are loved, that we are not alone.

Now come, beloved, and live like you trust this Holy and perfect truth about you.

(Sing: To call myself beloved, to feel myself beloved on the earth)

Perfect.

Thanks be to God.