

Be ye therefore perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect - Matthew 5: 48

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Preached on Sun 27 Feb 2011 @ Church of the Ascension, Hilton

I preached my first sermon ever at a little church in the village of Apuldram when I was just 22 years old. Students at the theological college were sent out to little country churches to try their hand. Apuldram was set in fields near Chichester Harbour in Sussex. There was a congregation of about 14 people. Those of you who know Chichester Harbour will know it is stockbroker belt country where £1m might buy you a very small cottage. The congregation looked prosperous, middle aged, and self-satisfied.

22 is a good age to preach because at that age you know everything, and you know that older people have got it all wrong and have messed up the world. I looked at them in a challenging way and took this as my text: "Be ye therefore perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect". "Are you perfect?" I asked. "Not just respectable, not just nice, but perfect? For God demands no less". And of course, at 22 years of age, I knew I was much closer to perfection than were they.

They looked unimpressed. They looked bored. In fact, I don't think they listened to a word, as they leafed through the pew leaflet and the hymn book and whatever else lay before them in the pew - you see, we can notice from the pulpit when you do that, so stop looking to see what the next hymn is going to be and listen. But outside in the field a donkey brayed. "Hee Haw Hee haw", it said, and I guess that was the most sensible comment on that particular sermon.

I'm not 22 any more and I know I don't know everything and I'm not that much closer to perfection. We're none of us perfect, not even stockbrokers. And how can we be perfect? The Bible rules are so many. Rules are good, and the rules set out for us today in the passage from Leviticus are entirely sensible. Leave some gleanings in your field for the homeless stranger. Don't steal or defraud. Don't insult a man who can't insult you back. Don't put obstacles in the path of a man who is blind. And love your neighbour as yourself - you can see from whence Jesus got his summary of the law.

But that was only 10 verses. Leviticus goes on for 27 chapters of rules and laws and no-one can keep them all or even remember them. The law is useful, but no-one can observe it all, says Paul, who tried so hard to be a good Jew.

You can't stand before God and say "I've kept your law". You can only say, "I have fallen short, but I stand before you in the name of Jesus." That's what Paul calls justification by faith. Actually what he says today in 1 Corinthians is something like "As far as I can see I'm doing OK and at the moment I can't think of any wrong things I have done. But only God can judge and he knows laws that I didn't even know I had broken."

You see, some of the laws you might break quite by accident and not even know about it. You might accidentally catch a glimpse of your father in his underwear. That's breaking the law. You might unawares brush against a woman having her monthly period. That's breaking the law. You might have to run to catch the cat before it escapes on a Sabbath. That's breaking the law. You could get quite desperate about the whole thing, says Paul. No-one can be perfect and if you try you will be in despair.

But John Wesley, founder of Methodism, said that you could. He said, "It's not enough to say I'm justified by faith, I'm a sinner and I know I'm a sinner, but I've been washed in the blood of the lamb and I've been saved." Wesley said, of course you are justified by faith. But having been justified you can't just stay a sinner. By the grace of God you then have to become perfect, just as the text today says. To the workers of England who followed him, to the new immigrants in America who followed him he said "Don't excuse your drinking and your swearing and your chasing after women saying We're all sinners but God will forgive us in Christ. In Christ, having been forgiven, you must become perfect. And he tried very hard in his own life, which was not easy because he had a difficult wife who didn't like him travelling around evangelizing and, it is said, would shout at him and cry and pull his hair to make him stay. So I guess he put his doctrine of perfection to the test.

But I don't think that by perfection Wesley meant you must keep all the rules. Because, difficult though it would be to keep all of Leviticus, Jesus upped the rules.. "Love your neighbour", said Leviticus, "and love the stranger who looks for gleanings in your field.. Be kind to the afflicted and handicapped." Jesus says, "love your enemies, and be kind to them."

Who are your enemies? When I first thought about it I said to myself, I don't think I have any. That lets me off the hook. But then I thought of people that I don't like - politicians, gravy trainers, Mr Mugabe, Col Gaddafi. Does Jesus want me to love them? "Pray for those who persecute you", says Jesus. Do I? Can I?

"Don't steal or deal fraudulently", says Leviticus, "don't rob your neighbour". Fair enough. And then Jesus says, "Ah, but when your neighbour defrauds you and robs from you, turn the other cheek, offer him the rest of your property." Wesley surely can't have expected us to match up to that?

Well, in a way perhaps he did, but not in a rule based way ticking off the rules we have kept and putting a cross against the ones we have not. Nic has been reminding us over the past few weeks that Matthew 5, and the sermon on the mount, is not about rules but about virtue. There are a lot of different theories about ethics. All of them have problems. There is Biblical Law based ethics - do what the Bible commands. But as Nic pointed out last week even the most fundamentalist of Christians don't take seriously Jesus' command to pluck out the eye and cut off the hand that causes us sin.

There were Bentham's famous utilitarian ethics - do whatever brings the greatest good to the greatest number of people, But how do we know which is the greater good? Should you have a large family and multiply like the Bible says, or is it better to have a small family and keep them in middle class comfort? Should you spend your limited education budget on teaching children maths or on teaching them to appreciate Shakespeare? Opinions will differ. And if it is whatever is best for the greatest number, what about vulnerable minorities? Don't they count?

Or there was Immanuel Kant - don't worry with all this nonsense about theories, he said, because you have a built in moral imperative, you just know what is the right thing to do? But do you? Don't you have to be trained to recognize the good? There was Joseph Fletcher and his situation ethics - never mind the rules, he said, just do whatever is most loving. But in lots of situations we don't know what is the most loving thing to do and are often choosing between one tough choice versus another.

Are you getting a little breathless with all this? Are you getting left behind? So you should be! We live in a morally confusing world. Of course we should take the Bible seriously. Of course we should try to do whatever helps most people. Of course we must always try to do what is loving. And of course it's true that quite often we know in our heart of hearts which is the right course to follow.

But things have changed, haven't they. It's really complicated in our changing world. You take as a matter of course things that would have horrified your granny. Like Cole Porter said, "In olden days a glimpse of stocking was thought of as something shocking. Now, heaven knows, anything goes." That seems to be true. But is that good? How do we guide our young people? How do we guide ourselves? Rule based ethics only work so far, and then the nature of the game changes,

So Nic was saying that we turn instead to virtue ethics. Many scholars of ethics have gone back to the Greeks - maybe that's why Nic likes it - to what they call virtue ethics. What's that? What is it to be virtuous? Well, it's a whole basket of things. It means to be honest, to be truthful, to be considerate, to have integrity, to be unselfish, to care for those we love, to care for those in need. And a whole lot more.

These aren't rules. You can't define unselfishness with a set of rules. You can't pin down in rules what it means to be considerate. These are characteristics. These are qualities. They're not rules. Virtue ethics say that if we strive for these characteristics, if we train our young people in these characteristics, if we develop these characteristics then faced with difficult or confusing or demanding ethical issues we will do the right thing not by rules but almost out of instinct.

It does take training. It does mean that in our nightly self-examination we ask ourselves, not, what rules did I break, but was I honest? Was I truthful? Was I considerate? It does mean teaching our children and our grandchildren these virtues.

And if it all sounds too complicated, think of it in terms of the song from Goodbye Mr. Chips ... You know, the one that goes "In the evening of my life I will look to the sunset; and the questions I will ask only I can answer, Was I brave and strong and true? Did I fill the world with love my whole life through?"

Well, maybe that's a bit too sentimental. Jesus said it better. In the beatitudes with which Matthew chapter 5 begins, Jesus doesn't say, blessed are those who keep chapter and verse of the laws of Leviticus and the Torah. He says, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are the humble, blessed are the merciful. If we practice these virtues enough, then what seem like complicated moral issues become straightforward. We will know, because we are shaped by virtue, we will know what to do and how to act and what to say. You will have become, as Wesley believed we should, and as Jesus commanded us, perfect. Can we try?