

Real Christianity: The Sermon on the Mount

#19: Loving those Who Do Not Love You

Matthew 5:48

"You are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matt 5:48 NLT)

Don't diminish God's standard

Many commentators claim that Jesus is merely saying we need to be spiritually mature, or our commitment to God's will needs to be complete and wholehearted. But Jesus made such ideas impossible when He said, *"Be perfect, just as your Father in Heaven is perfect."* God is more than mature or fully committed. He is morally perfect. Sinless.

Other commentators diminish what Jesus is saying by suggesting He is only referring to our positional righteousness. But it is clear He is commanding us to live in a certain way. *"You must always act like your Father in heaven"* (Matt 5:48 CEV).

Nevertheless, let us pause for a moment and recognize how this statement magnifies the incredible gift of forgiveness God has given us. Any time, any minute, we act, think, or feel something less than moral perfection, we have sinned against God. We need a lot of forgiveness.

This command to be morally perfect is repeated in various ways throughout the NT. (John 13:34; 1 Pet 1:14-15; Eph 4:32-5:2).

The repeated efforts of Bible scholars today to diminish what Christ is saying is an outgrowth of the moral standards of American Christianity today. It was partly out of a concern about this that I wrote the *Christian Essentials FRUIT* study. This is why in the study I am so hard on what I call Coping Christianity, living in your own will power instead of the Spirit's power.

We imitate God when the Holy Spirit controls us

There is a lot of critical theology in Galatians 5:16. The NASB has it: *"Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh"* (Gal 5:16 NASB).

The Apostle is saying that when God's Spirit controls you, sin cannot and will not control you at all. You are always controlled by either the Holy Spirit or sin.

If you are struggling with sin or being tempted by sin, then you are still being controlled by your sinful nature. The Holy Spirit never struggles with sin or feels tempted by sin. And neither will you when you are controlled by Him.

If your love is not pure, unconditional love, but is still mixed with anger or selfishness, or anything else except pure love, then you are still being controlled by your sinful nature because the Spirit's love is pure love.

Therefore, when God's Spirit controls you, then what will happen? Later in the text Paul says, *"The Holy Spirit [automatically, unconditionally, effortlessly] produces this kind of fruit in our lives: [God like] love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control"* (Gal 5:22-23). Those things are what God is like.

Here is the amazing truth. Through the indwelling of God the Spirit, you have a perfect Person living inside of you. In Galatians 2:20 Paul says what every born again Christian can say: *"Christ lives in me."* You do not possess just a part of Jesus. A complete and fully functioning Jesus Christ lives inside of you!

Ephesians 4:24 says it this way: *"Put on the new self, [already] created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness"* (ESV). Because God lives in you, you can live like Him, when He lives through you.

Can a Christian be perfect? The answer is yes and no. In a sense, we can never always be perfect in this life. The Bible says: "*If we claim we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us*" (1 John 1:8).

So how does God expect you to "*Be perfect just as your Father in Heaven is perfect*" (Matt 5:48)? The answer is this: We need to understand the difference between always obeying God and fully obeying God in a moment. In the moments you are controlled by the Holy Spirit instead of your sinful nature, you will imitate God.

Practical applications

1) Do not accept anything less than God-like love, joy, peace, and holiness in your life.

The power of the Spirit in you is demonstrated by the greatness of the commands that God expects you to obey. God did not put such commands in Scripture to frustrate you because you cannot do them. God put these commands in Scripture because they tell you what is possible with the power and Person of God's Spirit living in and through you. "*By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life*" (2 Pet 1:3)

Christian, you are not only FORGIVEN for all the times you do not obey God's commands. You are also EMPOWERED to fully obey those commands.

2) Pursue being transformed by the renewing of your mind so you will "shrink" your sinful nature and be more consistently controlled by God's Spirit in you.

How do you grow to have the Holy Spirit control you more consistently? The difference between being controlled by the Spirit or sin in any moment is what you are believing about yourself in that moment.

This is why Romans 12:2 says "*be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*" The sinful nature is simply made up of the lies programmed on your mind. If you renew those places of your mind and replace the lies with the truth, you shrink the sinful nature.

Why does such renewing of your mind transform your life? Because when you renew your mind, and are trusting more truth, the Holy Spirit will control you more consistently.

So, finally, how do you renew your mind so you can be more consistently controlled by the Spirit? The best way I know is the Renew Ministry we offer at New Life.

Discussion ?'s

- 1) What is your initial response to Jesus' command, "Be perfect just as your Father in Heaven is perfect" (Matt 5:48)?
- 2) What are some ways that commentators attempt to diminish what Jesus is saying? Why are these incorrect?
- 3) Why does God expect us to be morally perfect like Him?
- 4) What is meant by saying we will never be perfect always, but we can be morally perfect in the moment?
- 5) How do we grow in having the Holy Spirit control us?
- 6) The difference between being controlled by the Spirit or sin is what we are believing in the moment. How is this helpful to you?
- 7) If you have experienced Renew Ministry, how has it helped you? What was challenging about it? What are some reasons that people avoid it? How would you help them?
- 8) What was most meaningful to you about the Sunday message?