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## Holiness As Perfection in Love : The Christian Sense

Like the door to a building or light during the day, we have become so used to the presence of some realities that we take them for granted. Though they are necessary it seldom occurs to us to question why they are there or what they mean. In the history of spirituality, the “call to holiness” has often been associated with Matthew 5:48: “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” It is one of those scriptural “realities” which “should be there” or “immediately come to mind” when talking about Christian moral development or sanctity. So, from the monastics to Francis of Assisi and Francis de Sales, to the Protestant reformers and John Wesley, this passage had held a fascination for many and even inspired a theology of “perfection.”<sup>1</sup>

This passage has continued to fascinate us even in our own day, as the Documents of Second Vatican Council (1961–1965) clearly indicate. For example, it is quoted early in the fifth chapter of *Lumen Gentium* entitled “The Call of the Whole Church to Holiness”<sup>2</sup> as well as in *Presbyterorum Ordinis* in the first sub-section of chapter three entitled “The Priestly Call to Perfection.”<sup>3</sup>

The problem with the non-contextual use of this passage is that its meaning is not immediately evident. When examined, and not glossed over, it raises even more questions than it answers. This certainly accounts in part for centuries of a variety of interpretations of the meaning and practice of the theology of “perfection.”<sup>4</sup>

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1. R. Newton Flew, *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology*, (New York : Humanities Press, 1968).
  2. Walter M. Abbott, ed. *The Documents of Vatican II*, (New York : Guild Press, 1966) p.66.
  3. Abbott, p.558.
  4. Flew, pp.397 – 398.

Some immediate questions might be: What is the meaning of perfection intended by St. Matthew and how can this meaning be discovered? How does the term "perfect" apply to the "heavenly Father"? Then, how does it apply to the believer since the passage seems to ask the divine of human beings? Or if it is not a command but merely an admonition to imitate God, how can people ever hope to even imitate their "heavenly Father"? Also, holiness always implies an element of distance and the foreign, something that is beyond human beings. Even the word for "holy" in the Old Testament (*āgīos*) "carried the idea of separation, isolation and reserve."<sup>5</sup> This passage seems to continue that notion in the New Testament by proposing an impossible ideal. As such, how can this passage be an encouragement to holiness in the life of the Christian?

### A. The Statement in its Immediate Context

"Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" is a part of the "Sermon on the Mount" which is found in chapters 5–7 of St. Matthew's Gospel. This "Sermon" is the first of five main discourses. It is in these discourses, collections of sayings drawn from various sources, that Matthew sets down most of Jesus' teaching.<sup>6</sup>

The teaching of the Sermon begins with the Beatitudes, a group of didactic blessings much in the tradition of the Old Testament psalms.<sup>7</sup> They are followed by six "fulfilment" or antithetical passages. They are fulfilment statements because they indicate that Christ completes rather than disinherits the promise of the Old Testament. They are antithetical statements because the Law is stated as it was in traditional teaching then redefined as Christ would teach it. It is clear that the Old Testament Law is re-interpreted *at the root* by Jesus. The Law is not made more legalistic, as 5:18 ("not an iota, not a dot will pass from the Law") might suggest, but rather returned to its original intention which had been muddled by casuistry.

To establish the sense of 5:48, it is important to summarize these antitheses. The first antithesis (5:21–22a) states that not only murder

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5. J. J. Van Rensburg, "Sanctification According to the New Testament", *Neotestamentica*, Vol. I (1967), p. 73.

6. K. Grayston, "Sermon on the Mount", *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 4 (New York: Abingdon 1962), p. 279.

7. A. W. Argyle, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Cambridge: 1963), p. 44.

is ground for judgment, but even anger or the insult of a brother deserves judgment. The second (5:23-26) calls for reconciliation within the community. In the third (5:27-32) adultery is stressed as an inner condition as well as an external action, and divorce is condemned. The fourth antithesis (5:33-37) concerns oaths. False swearing was condemned in the past because God was involved in the broken oath. Jesus says that really all oaths involve God and that none should be taken. The fifth antithesis (5:38-42) concerns retaliation and rights. Not an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth, but the turned cheek, the given coat *and cloak*, the extra mile. The advice is not to insist on rights but to give beyond what is demanded.<sup>8</sup> The sixth antithesis (5:43-47) deserves to be quoted :

You have heard that it was said ‘you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you ? Do not even tax collectors do the same ? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others ? Do not even the Gentiles do the same ?<sup>9</sup>

The next line is our passage : “You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” This line, is unique in the synoptics and original to Matthew<sup>10</sup> although some opinions associate it with Aramaic tradition.<sup>11</sup>

A similar line is found in Luke’s “Sermon on the Plain” (Luke 6:27-49) but the word “merciful” (*oiktirmones*) is substituted for the word “perfect” (*teleios*) in his version (Luke 6:36). This difference is important because the epithet “merciful” often refers to God in the Old Testament, rarely to human beings. “Perfect” on the other hand is usually attributed to human beings and rarely to

8. Grayston, pp. 286 – 287.

9. All scriptural quotations are from the *Revised Standard Version*.

10. I. Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels*, The Library of Biblical Studies (New York : KTAV, 1967), p. 151.

11. Herman Hendrickx, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Slough : St Paul Publications, 1975), p. 103.

God.<sup>12</sup> This is the hint that leads to the next step in our search to understand the meaning of Matthew 5:48.

But our first tentative conclusion based on the context of the Sermon on the Mount is to suggest three ideas.

(1) Matthew 5:48 is a direct conclusion to the sixth antithesis. So the command to be perfect is practised by loving one's enemies. The Greek use of *oun* ("therefore") at this point, clearly binds 5:48 to the last antithesis.<sup>13</sup> The "heavenly Father" of 5:48 must refer to the "Father who is in heaven" of 5:45. Yet to limit the statement's function to the last antithesis would again decontextualize it.<sup>14</sup>

(2) The last antithesis is a part of the five which precede it. The sixth antithesis does not stand by itself. As such, "Be perfect" can also refer to all six of the antithesis, the "perfect" of 5:48 echoing the "righteousness" of 5:20. In this way it enhances the radical nature of Jesus' reinterpretation of the Law.<sup>15</sup>

(3) Some writers even suggest that Matthew 5:48 summarizes the theme of the entire Sermon up to this point.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, while the inherent meaning of 5:48 is not yet evident, it is obvious that this statement cannot be adequately understood apart from the pericope it describes and reinforces. Though the antithetical setting is Matthew's, Jesus as a Jew and the Messiah had to come to His own terms with the Law. This first section of the Sermon shows how Jesus radicalized love and the other demands of the Law. "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" has a direct relationship to this endeavour.<sup>17</sup>

#### **B. The Meaning of the Word "Perfect" (teleios) in Both 5:48 And the Pericope in Which it Occurs.**

Matthew uses the Greek word "*teleios*" to mean "perfect" in 5:48. As suggested by the parallel passage in Luke, it is probable

12. T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus*, (London : SCM Press, 1964), p. 55.

13. Paul J. duPlessis, *TELEIOS, The Idea of Perfection in the New Testament*, (Kampen : 1959), p 168.

14. John Piper, *Love Your Enemies* (New York : 1979), p. 146.

15. Piper, p.146.

16. Hendrickx, p.104.

17. W. D. Davies, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge : 1966), p. 146.

that the use of this word was a redaction by Matthew. Luke's version: "Be merciful (*oiktirmones*) as your heavenly Father is merciful" (6:36) is a far more traditional formulation, having many pharisaic as well as Old Testament parallels,<sup>18</sup> *teleios* occurs only in one other place in the synoptics and that is also in Matthew, this time in 19:21 where Christ asks the rich young man if he desires to be "perfect."<sup>19</sup>

Some take Matthew 5:48 as a variant of the Old Testament "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." (Leviticus 19:2).<sup>20</sup> Perfection is also indirectly predicated of God in the Old Testament (for example, Judges 9:5, 2 Kings 15:32, Psalm 18:31a). But nowhere in scripture is it so absolutely expressed as in Matthew 5:48.<sup>21</sup> Also, rabbinic literature has no verbal parallel to Matthew's form.<sup>22</sup> So the uniqueness of the use of *teleios* cannot be missed.

The question that is difficult to answer at this point is why did Matthew use this word? Different authors find varying significance in the use of the Word. For example, while writing on the theme of enemy-love, John Piper states: "This leads us to the conclusion that for Matthew the command to be *teleios* is a summation of all the radical commands of Jesus which, when obeyed, set a man off from the Pharisees on the one side and from the Gentiles on the other, and finds its clearest expression in the love of one's enemies."<sup>23</sup> Leopold Sabourin concludes: "In other words, Christ says in Matthew that perfection is the mark of discipleship, therefore the mark of Christian ethics, which are an ethics of obedience to God's law, a total commitment to do his will."<sup>24</sup> Herman Hendrickx, in his consideration of the *Sermon on the Mount* has a different interpretation: "The word 'perfect' does not denote moral, aesthetic, or other perfection. Seen in the light of its Old Testament

18. Leopold Sabourin, "Why is God Called Perfect in Matthew 5:48?", *Biblische Zeitschrift*, Vol. 24 no. 1, (1980), p. 267.

19. Piper, p. 146.

20. G. C. D. Howley, *A New Testament Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969), p. 146.

21. Sabourin, p. 266

22. Abrahams, p. 151.

23. Piper, p. 146.

24. Sabourin, p. 268.

and Jewish background, (*tamin*, etc.), it means rather, wholehearted, sincere, honest, undivided."<sup>25</sup>

The variation is clear. Furthermore, even the word *teleios* has a rather wide range of meaning. "Perfect" is the obvious rendering, but what is the correct synonym or an equivalent term for "perfect"?

In the Septuagint, the word is translated as "unblemished", "un-divided", "complete", "wholehearted" and "whole". In the New Testament, it often means totality, wholeness, or undivided in obedience to God.<sup>26</sup>

What is clear even among these nuances is that *teleios* has a totalitarian sense, that is, no half-measures are allowed. It denotes complete obedience to God's will and being wholly true to God.<sup>27</sup> Also it is important to note the special New Testament emphasis and development here: (1) perfection's direction is Godward, (2) it seems less concerned with the pure, "unblemished" meaning. But because of the nuances, a history of interpreting in this context finds Wesley stressing its moral connotations, Preisken discovering its eschatological implication, Beitzenstein emphasizing the mystic, and Bultmann the gnostic aspects of this word.<sup>28</sup>

Our conclusion then is that just as Matthew 5:48 loses some of its meaning when taken out of its proper context, so too, the concept of perfection must be something more than the meanings and interpretations usually attached to the word *teleios*.

Indeed, it seems that *teleios* is a prism word; it reflects and shapes the light that surrounds it.

### C. The Use of the Term "heavenly Father" and the Relationships It Implies

As a prism word, *teleios* certainly reflects the term "heavenly Father." One way to formulate the meaning of "heavenly Father" in Matthew would be to examine all the usages of *Pater Ó*.

25. Hendrickx, p. 103.

26. Gerhard Delling, "Teleios" in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. VIII (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 72 - 73.

27. duPlessis, pp. 170 - 171.

28. Paul J. duPlessis, "Love and Perfection in Matthew 5:43 - 48", *Neotestamentica*, Vol. I, (1967), pp. 32 - 33.

*urianos* in this Gospel. However, within the limits of this paper the Father usage in Matthew 5:44-45 will<sup>29</sup> at least give us an idea of the Father in its relationship to human perfection.

These two verses say that by loving enemies and praying for persecutors we become "sons of your Father who is in heaven" (45a). This expression is unique in the whole of New Testament and makes clear now that God is a Father and we are his sons (and daughters).<sup>29</sup>

But how, specifically in this context, does Matthew portray God as the Father? For Matthew might present the Father as progenitor, protector, or authority. Although all these may be implied, Matthew focuses on the Father's care, his impartial goodness and forgiveness. The quality of his love is what he wishes to impress on us.<sup>30</sup> Also, Matthew does not say here that we *are* God's sons, even though that may be true, in Christ. Matthew seems to want the title "sons" to imply a certain obligation attached to it.

So, we can become sons by doing as the Father does. This means love of enemies and really embracing all the demands of the antithesis. It follows, then, that we are to be perfect as our heavenly Father is "perfect", that is wholehearted, complete in his love and in rapport with people. An ever-expansive human love is thus our challenge.

The one relationship not yet examined is that of the Father with the Son who utters 5:48. The content and import of this relationship remains to be discussed.

#### **D. Impetus For Imitation and to Holiness**

Matthew 5:48 seems to reinforce a radical call to expansive love as well as a radical adherence to the spirit of the Law. It says that we are God's sons if we practise this radical charity as our Father does. Thus the context of this statement gives a clearer idea of the content of its demand and the relationships involved.

But several questions still remain unanswered. How can such a demand like this be placed on human beings? Love of enemies and

29. Hendrickx, p. 107.

30. Gottlob Shrenk, "Pater" in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. V (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 991.

prayer for persecutors are great expectations, and to accept them seems immediately like a programme doomed to failure. Obviously these ideas are grandiose. Yet should not our ideals be realistic and attainable? How may people be motivated to meet an impossible demand? A key to these posers may be found in the idea of imitation.<sup>31</sup>

Judaism, as well as many world religions, has a long tradition of striving to imitate God. The beginning of this notion is traceable to the Book of Genesis where humanity is created in the "image of God." Based on this, the attempt to grow in God's image never ceased. This human instinct for "perfection", namely, improvement and wholeness, has caused whole religions to try to recreate people, more and more in God's image. I, Abraham comments on this ideal in Judaism and its relationship to holiness and perfection :

But what of the Divine Holiness? Does it not stand for the supreme and unique hall mark of Deity, the fence to his unapproachable Self? Here surely, imitation is impossible; and if so, what becomes of the Imitation ideal? But as with the divine uniqueness so with the divine holiness—there is the constant correlative, the derived holiness of Israel. Holiness means separateness, but it is a separateness in which man may have his reflected part. How the old idea of separateness clung to the term is seen from the comment of the sifra on Leviticus xix 2. "Be ye holy—be ye perushim" (separated), "even as God is parush" (separated). And then, since separateness means aloofness from the foul, the unchaste, the cruel, the term "holiness" came to concentrate in itself the whole of the perfect life as Israel understood it; life perfect ritually, morally, spiritually. The word *kadosh* grows ever richer in significance with the ages. Ritual cleanliness, dietary abstinences, communal separateness, detestation of the grosser indulgences and vices and moral licentiousness, the inspiration to purity of thought, action, and belief,—in brief the hallowing of life, and of the martyrs' sacrifice of life for the hallowing of God—all these ideas, and more, accumulated round the Jewish conception of *kedushah* (holiness).<sup>32</sup>

Thus if God's holiness means separateness and human beings reflect God's holiness by separating themselves, this is then their

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31. Manson, p. 55.

32. Abrahams, p. 150.



“perfect” life. While this quotation reflects the Jewish idea of imitation, this pharisaic and rabbinical notion of the bond between holiness and perfection is also useful for clarifying the difference between the Christian and the Jewish conceptions. It in fact sets them in clear relief. It also highlights the meaning and revolutionary nature of Matthew 5:48.

(1) In the rabbinic notion, God is a Deity, fenced off and transcendent. In the passages we have considered, God is called Father, still transcendent, but the tone of the transcendence is different.

(2) Like the Deity in the quotation, God is unapproachable. In Matthew, God as Father is approachable even as “sons.”

(3) Holiness means separateness as God the Deity is separate. But in the sixth antithesis, holiness also means union with God, just as a Father is united to his sons. This truth is profound in Christ. The one who expresses the way of the Father in all of this is Christ, who is the perfect expression of the Father. As such, He is *the Son*, who does exactly as his Father does. This is the critical significance of Christ’s relationship with the Father. Christ illustrates that love is possible and at the same time He can be one like us. We are created in the image of the Son, Jesus Christ, who inspires us and gives us confidence in our attempts to seek perfection.

(4) In the rabbinic passage, people must imitate what God does. Thus God’s holiness is reflected when people separate themselves from those who are sinful and unclean. The perfect like means growth in separateness from the blemished and implies lack of blemish for those who practise it. In Matthew’s Sermon, however, people must also do what God does. And what God does is to make the sun rise on the *good and the evil alike*. He sends rain on *the just as well as the unjust*. For the ordinary believer, the perfect life means growth in love, even of enemies, prayer for prosecutors and finesse in relationships.

Notice too, that Matthew does not indicate that perfection means lack of blemish. He does say that perfection means *totality*—of love, that is loving *good as well bad*, the *totality*. Thus holiness means excelling in human relationships always mindful that the Father excels in them. Here love, not separateness, is the hallmark of God’s holiness.

## E. Conclusions

- (1) Matthew 5:48 takes on a specific and rather innovative meaning when considered in its proper context. This has clear implications for understanding our "call to holiness" and spirituality.
- (2) A critical theme becomes evident, that of filiation. This passage is a way of understanding the importance of Jesus Christ the Son, in this process, as well as indicating how believers become sons (and daughters) of God.
- (3) Our passage is a corrective to any concept of perfection or holiness which is based on the absolute transcendence or separateness of God. Indeed Matthew 5:48 portrays God as Father, who is over all but yet also as God working in relationship with humanity (the Father and Christ).
- (4) Finally, the real key to this passage is the Christ of Matthew's Gospel. The life of Jesus Christ is an expression of what 5:48 and the antitheses say. Thus any authentic theology of "perfection" or "call to holiness" must start with incarnation of Divine Love and His challenging imitation to personal holiness through human love.

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