

Perfect Love

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Golden Gate Community Church*

Jeff Finger

I'd like you to raise your hand if you've ever heard of a company called 3M. 3M is a global firm far more diverse than you might initially think. It's actually comprised of 6 businesses ranging from office supplies (with which most of you are probably familiar) to that of technology and even health care. I did a small Google search on this company because I was curious, namely about what the three M's were. The company was founded in 1902 as Minnesota Mining & Manufacturing. Today it's simply known as 3M.

As you might guess, I've got three M's of my own, that of my assessment of the passage I'm about to read. Allow me to do that first. It was the disciple Matthew who wrote in his gospel account of Jesus in chapter 5:48 the following words, words that Jesus himself uttered: "Be perfect therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." [Pray – penetrate our minds, soften our wills, and change our hearts]

In these next few minutes I'd like you consider my thoughts on this passage under the following banner headings – the *State of the Matter*, the *Fact of the Matter*, and the *Heart of the Matter*.

The State of the Matter is that on the surface and read out of context, it's fair to say that Jesus' words in 5:48 constitute a ridiculous imperative, a state of being to which we can't possibly be expected to give much credence as a possibility in this life. What is surprising to me is that there are many scholars who depict this passage as saying precisely what we find ridiculous – that Jesus calls us to flawless execution of moral law.

My 3 M's stand for **mishandled, misunderstood, and utterly maligned**. That's my summary of the effect of many approaches to scripture. By importing a vast array of notions that are tied to philosophies, systematic theologies, current day assumptions and personal convictions, they mishandle scripture in terms of its interpretation, leading to a misunderstanding of scripture in terms of its meaning, culminating in a maligning of scripture in terms of its application to life. All the while, these approaches that give lip-service to the supposed authority of scripture fail to take seriously what the Bible actually states – in its own voice and on its own terms.

I have been amazed over the years to read the thoughts and musings of highly respected scholars like John Calvin and John Wesley and others like them who by and large seem to be at *least* as loyal to their own theological and systematic persuasions as they are to what the scriptures themselves actually say. This is not to take a thing away from them as they are creatures of their historical time and place inasmuch as I am creature of my own. But the effect of interpreting Jesus' first-hand words is a

serious business and not without repercussions if we do so without a ruthless commitment to hear them with as many of our own notions of truth laid well aside.

As a result of these approaches, perfectionism and a relentless pursuit of it is a fairly widespread phenomenon, ironically quite prevalent in ostensibly grace-filled churches like this one. Sometimes the effect is downright comical. In recent days I have acknowledged my own human condition a lot more readily than I did when I was younger, when I just assumed I was super-human, or at the very least hyper-human. Most who knew me back in the day can confirm that I was, indeed, a hyper-human. Today I freely admit that I have at least a light dose of what psychologists call obsessive-compulsive disorder, OCD for short. With any glancing observation of my car, my music, my equipment, my files, my books, my apartment, my closet, my clothes rack, even parts of this very church in which you now sit, one can see that there is so much order present, it's as if God himself took an extra 7 days just to create me. Would it surprise anyone that I know exactly how long this message should take to deliver? 22 minutes and 35 seconds. Don't think I don't know because I timed it last night. What irritates me the most is that I am throwing it off by telling you.

Indeed I'm an amusing story just as are you I might add, but there is a painful underbelly to such humor. Perfectionism is a treadmill from which there is no escape and for which there is no end. It leads down a dark path to an even darker place where we assume that we'll never be quite good enough or disciplined enough, that we'll never behave well enough for long enough to please God and receive his blessing. It's an exhausting and demoralizing dance that has no joy and for which, by grace thankfully there is no partner. Because God stops the music and says, that's not the right song. And it's not one I'm going to let you sing.

So from the state of the matter we turn to the fact of the matter and raise the first of two important questions, "As to this perfection of which Jesus speaks – to what does it refer?" The immediate context of this passage provides our answer.

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be ye therefore perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

It's **right** there. In so many instances, the scriptures are right there for us to hear if we'll but listen. The best ears for Jesus' words are most often those who've never heard them before or never even given them a second thought. When Jesus drops the "perfect" bomb, he is speaking about love. Indeed in doing so, he is summarizing and fulfilling both in his person and in his words everything to which the moral law ever pointed. Paul in the 8th chapter (v. 31) of his letter to those in Rome penned the finest definition of biblical love in asking, "If God is *for us*, who can be against us?" Having nothing to do with emotion, by using the word "agapao" Jesus is talking about an act of the will that can best be described as being "for others." Every action, sentiment, and word spoken is done to bless somebody else.

When Jesus says to be perfect, he is talking about perfect love. My father was an excellent tenor, my mother and sister accomplished pianists. It shouldn't be surprising then to hear that I am convinced that I sang long before I ever spoke but since it came out as screaming, my parents didn't recognize it as singing. Having been involved in music my whole life, I'd like you to listen to a sound clip that is fitting for this part of the teaching. It's the first minute of a song by Marc Cohn and was released in February of 1991.

[Play "Perfect Love" first 1:06 fading from 1:03-1:06]

Perfect love – it's what all of us single folks are waiting for. Meanwhile all the married folks are saying to the single folks, "Don't hold your breath." It's obvious that this is **not** the kind of love that Jesus is talking about. That fact gives rise to our second question. "If love is his concern, what might he mean by perfect?" I point to this picture of "perfect love" in the song by Marc Cohn only as an example of the immediacy of our own lexicon, our own vocabulary and experience just waiting in the wings to inform our interpretation of new words and messages that we encounter.

We have to remember that all meaning, particularly when it comes to language, is socially constructed. This came home to me as a teacher a few years ago. I've been teaching in high school on and off for about a decade and I remember a few of my students making remarks to me about my car. "Mr. Finger, we think your car is sick." "What do you mean? What's wrong – what'd you do to my car?!" It turns out they were neither saying there was anything wrong with it nor were they insulting it – the fact of the matter is they thought it was cool. I thought to myself, "Why didn't they say that in the first place?" They *did*. That's precisely what they said but they did so in their lexicon, their language. Matthew uses the Greek word *teleios*, here translated with the English word "perfect," only three times in his entire gospel. Two of those

occurrences are right here in this passage, an occasion of his teaching. The other? Wouldn't you know it – it occurs in a social setting in his 19th chapter, verse 21.

A young man approaches Jesus and asks him a question,

*“What good deed must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responded saying, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” The man asked him, “Which ones?” Jesus said, “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; also You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The young man said, “I have kept all these; what do I still **lack**.” Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be **perfect**, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor...*

Jesus wasn't addressing a place where he messed up. He was addressing something that he was mis-sing. Teleios or “perfect” doesn't mean flawless – it means **complete, whole**. This word is not a club with which we're to be beaten, but a message by which we're to be redeemed, re-made. Perfect love is given not only to one another, but *every* other. Perfect love is love indiscriminately and recklessly given not just to friend and family, but to stranger and enemy ... and especially these. He's addressing what he earlier referred to as salt – that substance of character which makes his followers different, what makes his own recognizable in distinction from the world around them.

In recent months, the men's group of which I'm a part has unbeknownst to us raised this question, the very one Jesus is raising here. What is different at all about those who follow Jesus? If we're just as inclined to drop a colorful word when we hit our finger with a hammer, how is that any different from the guy in the garage next door?

The difference is that we are called by Jesus to be advocates of those who have nothing to give us in return, those who have no reason to believe that they should receive anything from us, strangers for instance and better yet, enemies, people at odds with us, people who talk differently, dress differently, think differently. Shifting our understanding of perfect from flawless to whole and complete doesn't necessarily make this imperative a whole lot easier to honor. But it certainly makes it possible and makes a lot more sense of a Jesus who, though fully divine, was fully human when he stood up that day to address blood and flesh men and women, just like the ones I'm addressing today.

This new fact of the matter now brings us finally to the heart of the matter. Jesus has no interest in shaping and forming us into white-knuckle-I'll-do-what-you-ask-

despite-myself behaviorists. The heart of the matter in which He is most interested is just that – the heart.

While his remarks on perfect love conclude the immediate passage, they also conclude his first major portion of what is called the Sermon on the Mount, a series of 6 occasions where he begins by saying, “You have heard that it was said in times of old, but I say unto you...” Every one of these is an example of his first major point in 5:20, “For I say to you, unless your righteousness *exceeds* that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” We can see again how *teleios*, “perfect,” is actually a comment on finishing the work of love, completing it, making it whole by extending it beyond the immediate and easy targets of friend and family to the stranger and the enemy. But the further work Jesus intends is evident here in these extensions that He applies.

The Pharisees went to great pains to honor the letter of the law but not its heart, doing well not to commit adultery for instance but in all likelihood not doing much to avoid going around the block, as we men like to say. Looking at a woman for a long enough time to create details of what it might be like to be with her - has gone past the rightful admiration of her beauty to what the scriptures call lust. Every man in here has had an occasion where he needed a brother to say to him, “Hey, I see her too but don’t go around the block.” Jesus desires such a relationship with us that he not only effects the action of hand and foot, but the very epicenter from whence these actions spring – the heart where all thought and ideas begin.

In Matthews’ account chapter 21 where Jesus answered the young man’s question about which commands he was to follow, Jesus made one glaring omission from the list. Care to guess which one? You shall not covet – the one command that addresses not the external or the physical, but the internal and the heart. That’s what the man was missing – the heart of the matter. Jesus wanted, as he does in the case of us all, to affect, change, redeem, deliver, and save the hearts of men and women.

I close today with a story that profoundly illustrates Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:48. In Brooklyn, New York, there is a school that caters to learning-disabled children. Some children remain there for their entire school career, while others can be mainstreamed into conventional schools. At a fund raiser dinner, the father of one of the students delivered a speech that would not soon be forgotten by those who attended. After extolling the school and its dedicated staff he cried out, “Where is the perfection in my son, Shaya? Everything God does is done with perfection. But my child cannot understand things as other children do. My child cannot remember facts and figures as other children do. Where is God’s perfection?” The audience was

shocked by the question, pained by the father's anguish, and stilled by the piercing query.

"I believe," the father answered, "that when God brings a child like this into the world, the perfection that he seeks is in the way people react to this child." He then told the following story about his son, Shaya.

One afternoon Shaya and his father walked past a park where some boys Shaya knew were playing baseball. Shaya asked, "Do you think they'll let me play?" Shaya's father knew that his son was not at all athletic and that most boys would not want him on their team. But Shaya's father understood that if his son was chosen to play, it would give him a sense of belonging. Shaya's father approached one of the boys on the field and asked if Shaya could play. The boy looked around for guidance from his teammates. Getting none, he took matters into his own hands and said, "We're losing by six runs, and the game is in the eighth inning. I guess he can be on our team, and we'll try to put him up to bat in the ninth inning."

Shaya's father was ecstatic as Shaya smiled broadly. Shaya was told to put on a glove and go out to play in center field. In the bottom of the eighth inning, Shaya's team scored a few runs but was still behind by three. In the bottom of the ninth inning, Shaya's team scored again, and now had two outs and the bases loaded, with the potential winning run on base, Shaya was scheduled to be up. Would the team actually let Shaya bat at this juncture and give away their chance to win the game?

Surprisingly, Shaya was given the bat. Everyone knew that it was all but impossible because Shaya didn't even know how to hold the bat properly, let alone hit with it. However, as Shaya stepped up to the plate, the pitcher moved a few steps to lob the ball in softly so Shaya could at least be able to make contact. The first pitch came in, and Shaya swung clumsily and missed. One of Shaya's teammates came up to Shaya, and together they held the bat and faced the pitcher waiting for the next pitch. The pitcher again took a few steps forward to toss the ball softly toward Shaya. As the pitch came in, Shaya and his teammate swung at the bat, and together they hit a slow ground ball to the pitcher. The pitcher picked up the soft grounder and could easily have thrown the ball to the first baseman. Shaya would have been out and that would have ended the game. Instead, the pitcher took the ball and threw it on a high arc to right field far beyond the reach of the first baseman. Everyone started yelling, "Shaya, run to first. Run to first." Never in his life had Shaya run to first. He scampered down the baseline wide-eyed and startled. By the time he reached first base, the right-fielder had the ball. He could have thrown the ball to the second baseman who would tag out Shaya, who was still running.

But the right-fielder understood what the pitcher's intentions were, so he threw the ball high and far over the third baseman's head. Everyone yelled, "Run to second, run to second." Shaya ran toward second base as the runners ahead of him deliriously circled the bases toward home. As Shaya reached second base, the opposing shortstop ran to him, turned him in the direction of third base, and shouted, "Run to third." As Shaya rounded third, the boys from both teams ran behind him screaming, "Shaya, run home." Shaya ran home, stepped on home plate, and all 18 boys lifted him on their shoulders and made him the hero, as he had just hit a "grand slam" and won the game for his team.

"That day" said the father, "those 18 boys reached their level of God's perfection."

May we be so fortunate as to do the same.

By the help and kindness of God, this is the word of the Lord. May all glory belong to Him.