

Perfect! - Sermon Based on Matthew 5:38-48
by David Hindman on Sunday, February 20, 2011

Soon after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the 4th century, hundreds of Christians left urban centers of the Empire for Egypt's desert. These first Christian monks lived alone as hermits or in small communities devoted to work, prayer, and utter loyalty to Christ. They fled the Empire's bright lights because making Christianity legal could lead to the state's interests could trump the church's countercultural values and ways. The church's new power and influence could cause it to lose its soul. Discipleship's sharp edge would be dulled. I think they were right.

Today a new monasticism is sprouting among some young adults. They don't flock to monasteries to wear hooded robes or chant psalms six times a day. They move into urban neighborhoods to live among the poor. They're not interested in being a part of the institutional church with all our committees and focus on membership. They're interested in costly discipleship that stands out and is extraordinary.

Shane Claiborne is one of them. He lives in Philadelphia slums in a faith community called The Simple Way. These Christ followers share life and possessions, joys and struggles. In his book *Jesus for President*, Shane tells about walking one evening with another member of The Simple Way

when they realize a group of older boys is following them. The gang calls after the two of them cursing them. When they ignore the guys they take it up a notch and begin to throw rocks at Shane and his friend. They walk faster but the gang catches up and surrounds them and begins to punch them and hit them with sticks. As the situation becomes more dangerous, Shane suddenly shouts, "In the name of Jesus, stop!" That's not exactly what the gang expects to hear and Shane says, "You are better than this! We are disciples of Jesus so we will not fight you. You may beat us; you may even kill us. But because we follow Jesus we refuse to fight you." A stunned silence and then the gang simply ran away. Maybe they thought Shane was crazy. Or maybe Jesus' Spirit was unleashed to protect and save. All I know is that Shane and his friend continued toward home following the simple way of Jesus.

Jesus wants us to be weird like that. Live a simply abnormal way. Love our enemies. Do unnatural acts like forgiving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us. Refuse to respond to violence. Give way to others. Don't demand our rights or resent those who make life inconvenient. Give to anyone who asks, no background check required. In other words, stand out like light in a dark world. In our bland predictable world no one's surprised that people fight fire with fire. Or take each other to court to

demand their rights. Or hold grudges. So Jesus' teachings are more than most of us can take. Me included. I admire Shane and his friend's courageous commitment to the hard way of Jesus. I'm not there yet. But I so want to be. I try to explain away the sharp edges of Jesus' teaching. Jesus is setting a standard so high we know we can't attain it so we'll give up and accept God's grace on us sinners. Or we should aspire to these commendable virtues but never expect to achieve them as forever beyond our grasp. Or these are the ways of heaven we'll live in the spiritual realm but never in this world. Or we're supposed to live these ways as individuals but not as groups or societies. Here's a new one: when Jesus advises turning the other cheek and giving your coat and cloak away, he is really teaching the poor some brilliant subversive actions to shame their oppressors.

But Jesus' hard and challenging teachings are still there. And nowhere in Matthew's Gospel is this footnote "Hey, I'm just kidding." No, again and again Matthew's Jesus says things like "The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Turn you life around. Go a different direction. Bet your life this good news is true." Or "Not everyone who says, 'Lord, Lord,' will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven, but only those who do what I tell them to do," or "Go and make disciples, teaching them to obey all my commands."

Apparently Jesus means every last word. He doesn't care how we feel about our enemies or whether we like them. He expects us to love them and pray for them. He doesn't care if his disciples want to live this way. Disciples don't have a choice. They simply do what the Master teaches. And they believe it's worth it.

So why should we take Jesus seriously or live this way? Because he says so. He *is* the Son of God. With a direct line to God, Jesus probably knows what he's talking about. And Jesus doesn't ask disciples to do anything he hasn't already done. Jesus forgives his enemies. He prays for those who torture and murder him. He gives himself away, body and soul. Jesus puts himself at God's disposal because his life is not his own. It belongs to God. If we want to follow Jesus and experience the life he lives, we walk his same simple way. And we take Jesus seriously because these are God's ways, too. God's gracious love is reckless, extravagant, extended to the just and the unjust, boundless, persistent, patient, perfectly free. God's true sons and daughters are chips off the old block. We can choose to live the ways of the world. Violence. Revenge. Selfish greed. Tit for tat paybacks and rights demanded. That's the way to become sons and daughters of the Evil One. Or we can become sons and daughters of God and walk the Way of Jesus. It is the peacemakers who are the children of

God; God's true children love their enemies and pray for their persecutors. They stand out from the pack as different. There's no glory in loving folks who love me, or showing kindness to someone nice to me. Anyone can do that. The stand-outs walk a different way, the Way of Jesus.

We say it can't be done. But there's Jesus showing us otherwise. In fact, to be like Jesus is finally to become real and truly human. And there's Shane and his friend. They are living proof this simple way is no illusion. And there are countless other A+ disciples in a C- world of ordinary living: Amish farmers forgive the their children's killer; the founder of Habitat of Humanity walks away from a millionaire's lifestyle with a new passion to build homes and hope for folks who have neither. Black South Africans choose not to take revenge on their white oppressors but simply ask for truth and reconciliation. A 4000 member church in Alabama is moved by God to pursue Jesus instead of the American Dream. They strive for perfection because they want to be full of God and God's ways. Perfection is God's gift to those hungering and thirsting for God. They want lives perfectly filled with God's presence and power and keep the door open to receive the gift. The simple way of God takes root in good soil and lives more and more in them. And along the way their lives become transparent with the love God.

Once all Methodists were asked questions now only clergy answer:
Are you going on to perfection? Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this lifetime? Are you earnestly striving after it? Of course we still are fallen creatures and sinners. Even our best desire to love will sometimes go terribly wrong. But God's gracious power can fill us with this one desire: to love as God loves. That's really what perfection is – to love with the heart of Jesus. Here's great good news: today's text is translated wrongly. The Greek isn't, "You must be perfect," but, "You will be perfect!" As we learn by heart forgiveness and love and as we mature and grow up into Christ and as we live the simple way of Jesus we will be perfect – perfectly in love with God, perfectly in love with our neighbor, perfectly restored by Christ into the image of God we were created to be. Thanks be to God.