

Be Perfect!

Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time - Mt 5:38-48

Ave Maria Catholic Church, February 12, 2023 - Fr. David M Vidal

As we continue reading St. Matthew's gospel, we can recall from the last two weeks, that Jesus invited us to live the life of the *beatitudes*, to be the *light of the world* and the *salt of the earth*, and to say "yes" when it means "yes," and "no" when it means "no." This Sunday, Jesus tells us: "*You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect,*" (Mt 5:48).

These are extraordinary words! How should we understand them? Perhaps, we should pay attention to Jesus's words: "*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust,*" (Mt 5:44-45).

We are called to share in the generosity of God. We are asked to do not only what is strictly necessary, but we are called to go beyond that and show kindness even when it is not appreciated, offer our help even when nobody requires it, and be ready to forgive even when the aggressor does not ask for forgiveness.

That goes beyond the script! That goes beyond the requirements of the law! However, this is the invitation of Jesus. He did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it and to bring it to perfection!

Now, what does the term "*perfection*" mean?

The words "*perfection*" and "*perfect*" come from the Latin verb *perficere* which means "*to be complete or to bring to completion.*" In other words, not lacking anything.

Sometimes, we are satisfied with a partial understanding of goodness in our lives. Then, we happily say: "*I do not kill anyone, and I do not steal from anyone.*" However, is that everything? Is that the fulfillment of our lives? Is that the golden rule of our actions?

Perhaps, our view is broader than that. Then, we do not reduce perfection to the fulfillment of two or three commandments, but we expand our obedience to the entire law of God. This is the way the Old Testament describes holiness.

In the Old Testament, when God chose a people as His own, He commanded them to be holy: "*Be holy, for I am holy*" (Lev 11:45); "*Walk in my presence and be perfect*" (Gen 17:1). "*Yahweh must be served with a perfect heart*" (1 Kings 8:61). And the holiness of God's chosen people was found in their observance of the Law: "*Blessed are those who walk in the law of the Lord,*" (Ps 119: 1).

However, if we reduce “*perfection*” to the fulfillment of the law, we are still lacking something. We lack the revelation of the only begotten Son of God, who became flesh for our salvation, holiness, blessedness, and complete happiness.

Now, let us go to the New Testament and hear what Jesus says.

In the New Testament, Jesus reveals that the Most Holy God is our Father. Therefore, Jesus challenges us: “*Be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect,*” (Mt 5:48). Now, in the New Testament, it is revealed that our perfection is measured not only by obedience to the old law but by obedience to the “new commandment” of Jesus: “*Love one another, as I love you,*” (John 15:12).

God the Father loved us so much that He gave us his only begotten Son for our salvation, (John 3:16). Jesus becomes our brother, but He is more than that! He is the model to follow! He is *the way, the truth, and the life*, and no one goes to the Father except through Jesus! (John 14:6). Therefore, we must walk in the footsteps of Christ. (See Lk 9:23; Mt 11:29).

Love has its fulfillment in Jesus: Jesus is patient and kind; Jesus is not jealous or boastful; Jesus is not arrogant or rude. Jesus is not irritable or resentful; Jesus does not rejoice at wrong but rejoices in what is right. Jesus bears all things and endures all things.

The standard that is set before us is not merely to give each one his due. The standard of perfection has a face and a name: “Jesus Christ.” In Jesus, we see the Father, and we discover the perfection and holiness that is in the Father. Then, Jesus becomes the perfect model of love and the source of our perfection and holiness.

Is it important to look for *perfection* or fulfillment in our lives? It is not only important. It is absolutely necessary.

First, we must look for the *substantial perfection of sanctifying grace*. Sanctifying grace brings friendship with God because we walk in His ways. However, in a state of mortal sin, we are not God’s friends. We walk in our ways, and we move away from God. Therefore, the first and most necessary step for perfection is to walk according to the law of God.

Second, perfect love does not consist of avoiding a transgression. Would it be perfect love to say: “*I love you so much that I will avoid insulting you.*” That is a given. Perfect love requires more than that. Perfect love means union and communion.

When you love someone, you enter into a relationship of union and communion. You share a style of life, a way of thinking, and a way of acting. What happens then, when you love God *with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength*? (See Deut 6:5).

When you love in this way, *there is no terminus or limit to our love of God because, as St. Augustine teaches, God gives us the grace to love Him, and when we love Him, He gives us the grace to love Him more.*

When you love in this way, perfection becomes imitation. We do not merely follow the law, but we truly walk in Jesus's ways; we truly follow in his footsteps.

Jesus invites us to a complete union of love with God. And Jesus's call to experience the perfection of the blessed is a universal call. St. John Paul II reminds us: "*All the Christian faithful, of whatever state or rank, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of love.*" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 30).

Let us raise our standards! Let us live according to the high standard of Christ: "*Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" Amen.