

# Matthew 5:38-48

Epiphany 7, Supplement Series A, February 19, 2017

Theme: Your heavenly Father is perfect

I. He is completely without sin      II. He is your heavenly Father

INJ      Revenge holds out the prospect of being so sweet, doesn't it? After the way they humiliated you, you will make them pay! You will turn the tables and show how mighty you are. "Revenge is a dish best served cold" is the way I have heard the advice. It means that the desire for revenge festers and grows silently while my evil plans are made. You won't see it coming when I finally get even.

Perhaps the term revenge has been supplanted by the word justice in our modern society. The cries for justice from those who have been wronged often seem like an excuse to get revenge on the perpetrators of a crime.

But revenge isn't ever as sweet as it promises. You end up acting in as vile a manner as they once did. Pangs of conscience and the burdens of guilt pile on. Getting even isn't even close to forgiveness. Making myself the powerful manipulator also makes me a target for additional revenge.

God warns us against seeking revenge. He plainly tells us to leave it to the Lord, and not to carry out personal vengeance. Our lessons today show us remarkable examples of those who avoided passionate payback. David didn't kill King Saul when he had the chance. Paul says to the Romans " Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse." Jesus urges us in our sermon text to " love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." How can we resist the allure of revenge and walk the path of Christian forgiveness and faith? It is a difficult question!

The answer comes when we look outside ourselves and to our heavenly Father. Fathers are supposed to be the people in our lives who teach us right and wrong. Who model what it means to be stable and productive. Fathers are completely patient and slow to anger and ...

I know that human fathers are never perfect. They (we) often are frustrated and mean-spirited and thoughtless and cold. Fathers have been addicted and absent and violent. But our heavenly Father is not like us. He is perfect. In love and compassion and in grace and in truth, he is never incomplete or unaware. Today we learn from him and grow in our desire to be just like him. He is completely without sin, and he is our dear Father.

Revenge is a nasty word and it brings to mind nasty pictures. But the sin involved is not always so obvious and repulsive. Jesus starts us at the events that begin the feud. Don't even let revenge get started! " Do not resist an evildoer. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. If anyone wants to sue you to take away your shirt, give him your coat too. Whoever compels you to go one mile,

go with him two. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."

Notice the absolute perfection God expects. He doesn't depart a millimeter from the complete holiness that is his essence. Your heavenly Father is perfect. He doesn't strike back or snap at those who insult him. He does not resent the burden or the inconvenience of another's need. He gives freely and generously.

How opposite that is from what we are! We feel entitled to a reaction when someone insults us, don't we? An eye for an eye is accepted practice. You hit me, I hit you. You embarrass me, I will throw it back in your face. You might be able to force my compliance, but you cannot compel my submission. I remain independent and unbeaten, and I will get revenge!

Do you feel proud of those emotions and actions? Look what I did – I stood my ground and I resisted the unfairness. I was strong. But my reactions are always incomplete. They are dripping with sin and saturated with selfishness. The perfect Father in heaven is a stark contrast to us!

You can see perfect obedience to God's Law when you look at Jesus. He was unjustly arrested and convicted, yet he did not open his mouth. He was beaten and mocked, and he did not retaliate. All the ways we fail to reflect the perfection of the Father, Jesus displayed. He is the substitute for you and for me. He is completely without sin, though we are full of sin.

" You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" That seems reasonable, doesn't it? The enemy seeks my harm, so I should seek his harm. Someone has to win, and it might as well be me. It might be a type of revenge, or something in the same vein. Out there are tax collectors and pagans. Out there are drug dealers and sex traffickers and scam artists and murderers. Real wickedness exists, and they don't deserve the time of day from respectable people like me!

Compare your perfect Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good. The rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous. Plants grow and food is produced by believers and unbelievers. Scientists who deny God's existence still measure and observe the orderliness of God's creation. The Lord God does not discriminate in the giving of daily bread and his providential care. Who are we to demand that some should be hated and despised and dumped on? Doesn't Jesus expose our hearts to be corrupt?

" So then, be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." I know how our sinful mind is still seeking to get around this obstacle. Maybe God doesn't really mean perfect. Do you think we can sneak by with something close? Maybe perfect just means better than last time. Or better than the way you do it. Do good intentions count? Because I wanted to turn the other cheek, and I wanted to love my enemy, even though it didn't turn out that way.

Yet the Law of God still stands unmoveable. Be perfect. Your heavenly Father is perfect. He doesn't just do things partially or on the surface. His image is not just for show. He is completely all the way through and without a bit of variance – holy. Now, you be holy, too! Thoroughly. In every detail and at every moment. Don't use Jesus' words here to make yourself feel good or look good or to boast about your obedience. You are not perfect. That is the only conclusion the Law accepts. We have failed to be holy. How could the heavenly holy one ever be our Father?

Gazing toward our perfect heavenly Father is intimidating. It leaves us feeling exposed and guilty. Crushed by the failures we have achieved. If this perfect Father is so impressive, then to whom shall we go for help in our need? I can find no hope inside myself – not in that filthy mess! Will I find relief out in the world? It doesn't even care! Can I make a deal with the Devil? It won't turn out as you might think. What can relieve the burden and guilt of your sin? Jesus invites you to look again at your heavenly Father and see his perfect, complete love – for you. He deals with you as his dear child.

The perfect heavenly Father did not come crashing into the world to crush the life out of us. He sent his own Son to take our place. Jesus entered humanity in the quiet and humility of the manger. He hid himself under the demands of the law, those maddeningly thorough requirements, and he met every one with complete obedience. Jesus spent every moment receiving injustice and hatred and insolence from those he came to serve, yet “ he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows ... He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”

Do you recognize the depth of love the Father showed by giving his Son in this way? It is a love that took action for your benefit. It is a love that suffered and groaned and cried out in pain for you. It is a love that endured the forsaken-ness of hell for you. Jesus bore the sins of the world in his body on the cross, and he paid the debt of every one of them with his holy and precious blood. Do you see the complete and total love of your Father?

Jesus rose from the dead to proclaim the victory won over sin and death. He lives to show your Father's love. It is a love that accepted Jesus' payment in full, a love that now declares you to be perfect. Your Father covers you in Christ's perfection and sees you as holy. Your heavenly Father has loved you and made you his dear child in Christ Jesus. He administered that promise to you in Holy Baptism. You are perfect – not by your actions, but by his declaration. Your Father calls you his own in Christ Jesus.

Your Father in heaven continues to show his love to you. Now that he has filled you with faith, sending the Holy Spirit into your heart, he also moves you to live as his dear child. That means when the Law bites hard

exposing our sin, we don't make excuses to keep doing it. We turn away. We drown that sinful self in daily repentance. We drink in the refreshing Word of God that proclaims peace. My heavenly Father has said it, and so it is true! I am forgiven!

Now, dear children of God, where is there room for revenge? Don't retaliate, but turn the other cheek. Go the extra mile. Give generously. We want to express our thanks to our heavenly Father with our holy living. These righteous things flow out from us without a thought, even, because they are also gifts from our Father. And the best part is, that though our efforts are halting and stumbling and never good enough, our Father accepts them. He takes our feeble works and covers them with the perfect righteousness of Jesus. He clothes us with Christ's obedience so he sees what we do as pure and blameless and without wrinkle or blemish. Your heavenly Father does this for you, and it is wonderful to behold his love.

Jesus commands us: “ Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven.” You are children of your heavenly Father, and your love for your enemies reflects the love you have been given. No, the enemy does not deserve your love, but neither do you deserve the love of God. He showed it to you, and you cannot help but pass it on.

Your prayers even ascend to heaven for those who mistreat you. Remember how Jesus prayed for those who nailed him to the cross? “ Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Pray for their repentance. Pray that they realize opposing the Lord is not good or wise. Pray that they come to know the Father's love that draws even them into the family and forgives even their rebellion.

Does that sound like you? Loving enemies and praying for persecutors? When it doesn't, when you are incomplete and vengeful, then return to the cross of Christ and to his payment on your behalf. Flee to the Father who has loved you perfectly and who daily and completely cleanses you of all your guilt. Draw near to the Savior who dresses you in righteousness and who dwells in your heart. Come to the Word where God reveals himself to you as your Father and through which he sends you his Holy Spirit.

Your heavenly Father is perfect! Yes, that is a harsh declaration of the Law, and we are so obviously not perfect. We need the consistent call to repentance, or we would try to hide the fact and retaliate against all who confront us. Revenge is a downward spiral that leads to death! But don't miss the point that the perfect one is your heavenly Father! Find refuge in the Father's love that sent his Son – not to pursue revenge against you, but to be your Savior. His love is complete, and it is a love that calls you his dear child. We give eager praise and thanks to our dear Father in heaven! SDG Amen.