

## Christians under Construction

1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23

Crossroads Christian Church

Matthew 5:38-48

February 23, 2014 Epiphany 7A

### A Perfect Ten!

What comes to your mind? An Olympic victory? Or Bo Derek in the movie Ten? (That one dates us—it goes back to 1979.) The phrase Perfect Ten owes a lot to both the movie and the Olympics. But the phrase has entered pop culture to stay, as a sign that something—or someone is the best that there is. One friend of mine, when I ask him how he is, says, “Oh, about a 6 ½ or 7,” using a scale of 1-10. And nurses in the hospital will ask you, “On a scale of 1 to 10, how’s your pain?”

So what pizza scores a perfect ten with you? Or what movie? Or which movie star?

In the Bible translations that most of us grew up with, we sometimes gasped when we read the words of Matthew 5:48 as “You must be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.” Talk about being doomed by high expectations! Who would have a chance in that kind of hierarchy? Cardinal fans recall how much hype there was around J.D. Drew and Colby Rasmus—everybody expected them to be superstars, and it just didn’t happen, so we thought of them as bums—doomed by our high expectations. Perfect? Even Sister Teresa of Calcutta had her bad days of doubt and despair. How could God expect perfection? Being perfect like God—what does that even mean? Does it mean moral perfection, that we always do and say the right thing? That we don’t sin? That we’re always loving and forgiving? Trying to live up to that standard leads to trouble. It leads to despair. Saul of Tarsus tried to be perfect. He tried so hard to be perfect in the Law, to follow all 613 laws of the Torah faithfully and completely. But he ended up by realizing that he couldn’t even be good by what he thought were God’s standards of perfection, let alone perfect. “I know that good doesn’t live in me—that is, in my body. The desire to do good is inside of me, but I can’t do it. I don’t do the good that I want to do, but I do the evil that I don’t want to do. But if I do the very thing that I don’t want to do, then I’m not the one doing it anymore. Instead, it is sin that lives in me that is doing it.”

(Romans 7:18-20) That's the trouble with perfectionism—if you can't be perfect, you feel like you've perfectly failed.

So why did Jesus tell us "You must be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect." Is God that strict a grader? Believing that leads us to the kind of Puritanical theology that we're all perfectly damned for not being perfect by the standards of a judging, angry God.

I'm so glad to read a better translation of that verse—you heard it earlier today. The Common English Version puts it this way. "Therefore, just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete." That's not just watered down, it's more accurate. The Greek word is *telios*, the Greek word for "goal," "end," or "purpose." It's more about becoming who God created us to be, not trying to be someone else. Eugene Peterson's *The Message* puts another twist on it, "You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity." In other words, be the "you" that lets God shine through. What's in God's nature, and what is in our best nature? To love. The perfection that Jesus points us to involves returning love to God, and to loving our neighbor as ourselves. We can't do it perfectly, but that's the end—the aim—the purpose—the telios.

Of course, even before Jesus got to the part about being perfect, he gave some uncomfortable instructions; more "you have heard it said...but I say to you." First of all, he says you have heard it said, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say that you must not oppose those who want to hurt you." In its day, the Mosaic law of "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth" was considered a model of fairness in retaliation. You hurt the other person back as much as they hurt you. You didn't blind someone for blacking your eye. You didn't knock out all of their teeth for knocking out one of yours. You didn't kill seven members of the clan across the hill if they killed one of your clan. But Jesus took it even further, and said, don't retaliate. Do good for evil. Bless those who persecute you. If someone slaps you on the cheek, turn the other cheek. If a soldier in the army of occupation tells you that you have to carry his pack a mile, carry it two. Walter Wink, one of my favorite Bible scholars, says that we

misunderstand Jesus if we think that he was just saying for us to be servile, to let ourselves be pushed around. Rather, he was urging a nonviolent resistance. If A slaps B on the cheek, it's right hand to left cheek. It's a matter of A putting B in his place—I'm top dog here. But if B offers his left cheek, it's turned away from another right-hand slap. In that culture, to slap someone with your left hand wasn't acceptable—it was a sign of total contempt that would disgrace the slapper. Likewise, it was the Roman law that a soldier could co-opt somebody to carry his pack a mile; but if someone carried it two and the soldier's superior officer noticed, that soldier would be in trouble. Again, nonviolent resistance, like Dr. Martin Luther King used in the Civil Rights struggles, modeled upon the teachings of Jesus.

The next "you have heard it said," was to love your neighbor and hate your enemies. That's too easy, Jesus said. It's easy to love those who will love you back. It's too easy to be nice to someone who is nice to you. Instead, you should love your enemies and pray for those who harass you. Why? Because that's how God acts. A factory worker may say that their CEO is playing god by throwing power around and closing down a factory to send jobs overseas. When Jesus says that someone is really acting like God, that means they are being loving, even to those who despise him; that they are being fair, giving grace and love not because it's deserved, but because it's what God does. "The rain falls on the just and the unjust alike." God's love is like that. And that goes back to being complete, being perfect, like God calls us to be in verse 48. And that's why Jesus teaches us to pray, saying, "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Why? That's the God way. The reason's right in verse 45. "so that you will be acting as children of your Father who is in heaven."

It's very easy to become a Christian. We accept God's love given to us in Jesus Christ; we accept Christ as our Savior. We don't have to work our way into heaven by being spiritual superheroes. God loves us and accepts us as we are, warts and all. But here's the point—God knows that we are able to let God's love shine through so that others will feel that love; so that the world will become more the place of Shalom, justice, fairness,

peace, and community, that God wants for us. We'll never be perfect at it, but you can always try to be the person that God sees in you; and I can try to be the person that God sees in me.

We're taking our Week of Compassion offering this morning. That vision of Shalom that God has for us, that God wants us to build, is what being the church is all about. We try to create in Crossroads Christian Church a community of love and peace, and we try to be a light to a dark world. Week of Compassion invites us to be like God, who gives life-giving rain to all. We spread God's compassion to places where terrible things have happened. We spread grace and love so that people in need can have a chance for hope.

I didn't say anything about 1 Corinthians yet this morning, and that image of "Christians under Construction" comes from there. Paul is telling the Corinthians that he—and God—are trying to build a church; not from concrete and brick and wood and stone, but from people. He is laying the foundations in their lives as they learn the Jesus way. Later, in this same letter, he'll say that the church is the body of Christ; again, the group of people that try to act, try to teach, try to heal, try to reconcile, as Jesus did. We're not perfect, but we are part of God's perfect plan to redeem the world in love. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon