

TFTD 23.6 Tuesday 28 February 2023
Be perfect (really?) Matthew 5.17-48



Jesus does have a habit of putting impossible demands before us:

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Surely the scribes and Pharisees were the people who excelled in scrupulous observance of God's law? But here is Jesus asking his followers to go even further!

And Jesus follows up with a series of practical illustrations:

- The Law says don't murder, but I say you mustn't even be angry;
- The Law says don't commit adultery, but I say don't even look at a woman as if you fancy her;
- The Law says you can divorce but I say divorce leads to adultery;
- The Law says don't swear a false oath, but I say don't swear oaths at all;
- The Law says an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say turn the other cheek;
- The Law says love your neighbour and hate your enemy, but I say love your enemies and pray for them.

It's just one impossible demand after another. And then, to cap it all:

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Really? Does God really demand perfection? Because if so what hope is there for us fallible humans?

After all, if God demands perfection doesn't that make him like one of those impossible parents for whom whatever you do, however hard you try, it's never good enough? Ever so many people have been scarred for life by parents like that, saddled with a feeling that they are always failures, that nothing they do is ever good enough.

And isn't the trouble with Lent that it just reinforces all this; it just keeps on reminding us that we are moral and spiritual failures?

In reality, however, it seems to me that Jesus isn't in the business of laying heavy burdens on us, and he isn't in the

business of condemning us or threatening us (“do this, or else...”); it’s more that he places before us ideals, challenges, in order to raise our sights, to draw us onwards and upwards. The ideals and challenges are extremely demanding, and Jesus knows, and we know, that we won’t ever achieve “perfection”; but he wants to draw the best out of us, he doesn’t want us to settle for our lives as they are, he wants us to realise that people created in God’s image are capable of living much better lives than we think we can.

Of course we will never fully live up to these ideals; we will never be able to satisfy Jesus’s impossible demands - but don’t panic: the good news is that God is a God of mercy. He knows how often we fall short of the ideals but he has pity on us all the same and is always ready to forgive.

Lent is a time for being honest about ourselves, for trying to see ourselves as we really are, warts and all. But all this must be done within the overarching conviction that, despite everything, despite all our imperfections, God loves us still, and always will.

So strive to fulfil Jesus’s impossible demands, but learn to live with the knowledge that you’ll never be able to live up to them; and remember that God knows that too and is able to live with it.

As so often, it’s the psalms that put this best:
The Lord is full of compassion and mercy,
slow to anger and of great kindness.
He will not always accuse us,
neither will he keep his anger for ever.
He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
nor rewarded us according to our wickedness.
For as the heaven are high above the earth,

so great is his mercy upon those who fear him.
103.8-11)

(Psalm

God bless,
John Murray

