

Text: Matthew 5:43-48.

7th Sunday after Epiphany.

February 19, 2017.

Grace and peace are yours through our perfect Savior, Jesus. Amen.

If you didn't know Jesus, you would think he was crazy. Seriously! Jesus said some crazy-sounding things. "If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out!" What? "If someone hits you once, tell them, 'You missed a spot,' and let them hit you again." Really? "Love your enemies. Pray for those who hunt you down to do you harm." Come on, Jesus, you cannot be serious. And then, there's the craziest one of all, "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Be perfect? But, Jesus, no one is perfect. Nobody's perfect. Everyone can agree on that. I recall one time I was talking with a gentleman. We got to talking about how you get to heaven. I asked him, "Do you think you'll get to heaven?" He said, "Yes." I asked him, "What makes you sure?" He said, "I've been good." I asked him, "On a scale of one to one hundred, how good do you think you've been?" He thought a while. Said, "I really think I'm really close to 100. Maybe I should say 98?" Really? And Jesus is the crazy one? Anyone here want to put themselves anyplace close to 100?

Jesus, did you really mean, perfect? I mean, Jesus, didn't you mean, try your best? Did Jesus say, "Try your best, just like your heavenly Father tried his best"? Well, Jesus, maybe you meant do some good things. But did Jesus say, "Do some good things, as your heavenly Father did some good things"? No! Jesus said, "Be perfect!" Maybe, maybe, Jesus, maybe you meant, "Be better than most other people. That should be good enough, right?" That's not what Jesus said. Jesus didn't say, "Be better than most other people." He did say, "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Jesus didn't say, "Be good enough as your heavenly Father was good enough." Jesus did say, "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Man, Jesus says some crazy things.

Do you want to hear another crazy one? "You are perfect! You are 100." Now it just got real crazy. Here's how. Jesus was perfect. In your place. Jesus was holy. Just for you. Jesus took his perfect life and counted it as though you had lived it. You don't have to be good enough. Jesus already was perfect. God doesn't grade on a curve. God grades on the basis of Christ. Our perfection is in Christ alone. In Christ we are perfect. Jesus' perfection washed over you in baptism. With those words and with that water, God boomed his voice from heaven, "You are perfect! You are my child! I am pleased with you." It's kind of hard to follow up perfect. I know it will take a while for that to sink in. I know I need to hear that again and again and for the rest of my life. It sounds so crazy, "I'm perfect in God's eyes"? And yet it's so wonderful and so certain, could you ever hear it enough, too often? But Jesus didn't say just one crazy thing in this part of God's Word in front of us. Be perfect and you actually are. Jesus said another crazy thing. Love your enemies.

Not only does that sound crazy to us, it sounded even more crazy when Jesus said it. The conventional wisdom, the words of the scholars, the popular and accepted view, was this, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." Where do we start with this popular opinion? Love your neighbor is in the Bible. Leviticus 19, verse 18. Jesus repeated it here and later in the book of Matthew. The words convey a certainty. You will love your neighbor.

But then, the teachers, the conventional "wisdom" added something else. "Hate your enemy." Hate your enemy is not in the Bible. Certainly not in Leviticus chapter 19. In fact, the same verse that says, "Love your neighbor," says, "Don't bear a grudge." Other verses, if your enemy has a donkey and it wanders off, take it back to him. If your enemy is hungry, give him something to eat. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. Not only does the Bible not say, "Hate your enemy," it says the opposite. So where did this idea, "Hate your enemy," come from? Well, it's kind of a logical corollary to love your

neighbor. I'm not defending or excusing the false idea, "Hate your enemy." But I'm saying, it's easy and natural for all of us to fill in the blanks with Bible opposites. For example, "Everyone who goes to heaven, gives God all the credit." True statement, from the Bible. So... everyone who goes to hell, gives God all the blame. Logical corollary, but not true. Everyone who goes to hell, bears all the blame. True statement. So everyone who goes to heaven, gets all or at least some of the credit. Not true. Maybe this has been too much explanation. Maybe more than you wanted. But don't you see, how easy it is to add to the Bible and let that addition become just as important as the Bible, whether the Bible actually says it or not.

So Jesus had to set the record straight. With another crazy saying of his, "I tell you. I, myself, am telling you. Don't listen to these false teachers. Don't get dragged away by the popularity of the conventional 'wisdom.' Listen to me. I myself am telling you this. Love your enemies."

Love your enemies. Keep on loving them. Never stop loving them. They don't have to be lovable. Love them anyway. God loved us when we were his enemies. He sent his Son to die for us, sinful as we were (and still are). While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Christ was always and is always concerned about our eternal welfare. Christ was and is always concerned that we get to heaven. That's his love. Christ's love didn't ask, "What will I get out of this?" Christ's love asked, "What will they, my beloved children, get out of this?" So we don't ask, "What will I get out of loving my enemies?" We ask, "What will my enemies get out of my showing God's love to them?" Love is not a selfish thing. Love is a selfless thing. The thing that was said, "Hate your enemy," made love selfish. But selfish is not love. That's a huge thing! To be selfless is a totally different mindset, a mindset that doesn't ask, "What's in it for me?" But asks, "What's in it for my enemy?" That sounds crazy. But Jesus said some crazy things.

Maybe it would help if we define love a little more. Love is not necessarily the same as like. Like usually implies a back and forth. I like ice cream because it tastes good. But if it sits in the freezer too long and starts to taste like the box, I'm throwing it away. I like my friends because they tell me how cool I am. But if one "friend" tells me a hard truth I don't want to hear, that I don't like, then I'm not going to be his friend anymore. Don't like your enemies and only be nice when they are nice to you. That probably ain't gonna happen. Love your enemies. Always be concerned about their eternal welfare. They don't have to be lovable. Love them anyway. They don't have to be nice to you. Love them anyway.

Pray for them. Even when they persecute you. Yeah, there were guys in the Bible who were thrown in prison for helping people and telling them the good news about Jesus and the way to heaven. And what did they do in prison? They prayed and sang hymns. They stopped the warden from committing suicide and spoke the word of God to him. They baptized him and his family. That's love!

Jesus himself, while he was on the cross, loved his enemies. People were making fun of him. They had whipped him. Beaten him. Blindfolded him and spit on him. What was the first thing Jesus said, while he was on the cross? A prayer, for those who persecuted him. "Father, forgive them." That had to sound crazy. But, Jesus said some crazy things.

Jesus practiced what he preached. Actually, as true God, he was practicing it for thousands of years before he ever became a man and walked on the earth. For thousands of years, Jesus made the sun rise on the evil and the good. The sun doesn't just rise over your house because you came to church. The sun rises over everyone in the neighborhood. And let's be clear, the evil are those without faith. The only ones good in God's eyes are not good because of their works. They are good because of Christ's work in their place, in our place, his life to declare us perfect, his death to wash us clean, the faith he's given us to trust in him as the Savior. And yes, that Savior sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. That rain that waters crops, that sustains life, that gives food, that rain God sends on those

who thank him daily and those who think the rain is just a natural occurrence of the water cycle that has nothing to do with God.

I've heard this verse used and rightly so, to comfort Christians in times of trouble. Trouble comes to the righteous and the unrighteous. Blessings are given to the evil and the good. And that's accurate. But Jesus is pointing us to how God operates. God loves his enemies. God blesses those who don't care about him, even those who are opposed to him. Jesus wants us to be like God and think like God no matter how crazy it seems. God wants us to pray for those who persecute us, love those who hate us, be his children and do as he does.

I know that can be hard. I know it can be incredibly tough. But being a Christian means rising above humanity. Following Christ means not always following conventional wisdom, but having a higher wisdom, a greater wisdom. Jesus asks us to consider this from the other side. What if you did love only your neighbors and hated your enemies? Think about that. How then would you be different from any one else? Even the tax collectors love those who love them. Let's just leave it at tax collectors were cheats and robbers and liars. So as a wise Christian once said, "If you are only friendly and kind to your friends then you are as pious as thieves and scoundrels." Even pagans will greet their brothers! You are better than that.

You are perfect. Remember that crazy thing Jesus said? You are perfect, already, in the eyes of God. Live out what you are. The word perfect has the idea of mature. Maturity takes a while to achieve. It doesn't happen overnight. You will have to keep on studying God's Word to become more and more mature. You won't use that maturity to look down on others who haven't had the same time, the same training, the same spiritual opportunities you have had. Instead, you will see that maturity as a way to patiently lift others up, to lovingly invite a brother to walk along with you on this journey of following Jesus. As a follower of Jesus, you have to be the mature adult and rise above the hate. You have to be the follower of Jesus who is inspired by his love, empowered by his death, invigorated by the perfection you already have. I know we can't live up to that perfect status God has given us. But we can keep on listening to Jesus' Word, so we grow more and more mature. We can keep on loving our enemies so they see Jesus in us. We can pray for those who persecute us, so they too can enjoy the same perfection from the same Jesus. I know these things sounds crazy. But Jesus said the craziest thing of all, "I love you so much, you are perfect!" Amen.