

Sermon on the Mount 4: Be Perfect, as Your Father is Perfect (7th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A)

Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18

1. “You shall be holy (Hebrew *qadosh*), for I the LORD your God am holy” (19:1-2)
2. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (19:17-18; cf. Matt 22:39)

Psalm 103—The Lord is kind and merciful

1. The LORD slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love (vv. 10, 12-13)

Matthew 5:38-48—Last Two “Antitheses” and the Call to “Be Perfect”

1. Nonresistance/Radical Generosity:
 - a. Moses forbid excessive retaliation (Exod 21:24); Jesus enjoins generosity
 - b. “Do not resist one who is evil”: What does this mean in *context*?
 - c. Strike on the right check = serious insult (Job 16:10; Lam 3:30)
 - d. Sue for your “undergarment” (*chitōn*); give your “outer cloak” (*himation*) also!
(e.g., takes your essential clothing; cf. Exod 22:26-27)
 - e. Forces you to go one mile = conscripted labor
(e.g., Roman soldier, Simon of Cyrene; cf. Mark 15:21)
 - f. Give to him who begs = generous almsgiving
(e.g., “open wide your hand to your brother”; cf. Deut 15:11; Prov 19:17)
 - g. Lend to him who asks for a loan = generous lending (cf. Deut 15:9)
 - h. Catechism: Jesus’ teaching does *not* exclude legitimate self-defense or the duty to defend others (see CCC 2263-67, 2302-03).
2. Love Your Enemies:
 - a. Moses commanded “love your neighbor” (Lev 19:18)
 - b. “Hate your enemy”? Nowhere in the OT (cf. Exod 23:4-5; Prov 25:21-22)
 - c. Jesus commands to “love” your enemies
 - d. Prayer for persecutors = “sons of your Father in heaven”
 1. Sun: rises on the evil and the good
 2. Rain: falls on the just and unjust
 - e. Pagans/tax collectors: love those who love them
 - f. Catechism: love of neighbor includes love of “all enemies” (CCC 1933)
3. “Be Perfect”: Is Jesus serious? Is this possible? What does he mean?

Moses on Mount Sinai
Be “holy” (Hb. *qadosh*)
as the LORD is holy...

Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount
Be “perfect” (Greek *teleios*)
as your heavenly Father is perfect...

“All the faithful, whatever their condition or state—though each in his own way—are called by the Lord to that perfection of sanctity by which the Father himself is perfect.” (Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* 11.3; cf. CCC 825)

You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem... to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven... and to the spirits of *just men made perfect* (*teteleiōmenōn*)... (Hebrews 12:22-23)

Questions for Discussion and Reflection (7th Sunday Ordinary Time, Year A)

1. Go back and re-read the context of the old law of “eye for an eye” and “tooth for a tooth” (Exod 21:24; Lev 21:20). What circumstances does it seem to envision? How is it tied to the desire for revenge and retaliation?

2. When Jesus commands us not to resist evil, does this exclude legitimate self-defense? Review the Church’s teaching on this matter in the Catechism (see CCC 2262-67, 2302-03). Then discuss what it *does* mean for us to love our enemies as Christ loved us and to avoid retaliation and vengeance (cf. Rom 12:17). Why does Jesus elsewhere say love of neighbor is the second “great commandment” (Matt 22:39)?

3 What do you think of Jesus call for us to be “perfect”? Is that really possible? If so, how? Can you think of examples of the kind of radical discipleship in the Sermon on the Mount—nonresistance, love of enemies—in the lives of the Saints?

For Further Study in the *Catechism*

- 1. Legitimate Self-Defense (CCC 2262-67, 2302-03)
- 2. Almsgiving (CCC 1434, 2447)
- 3. Love for Enemies (CCC 1933, 2303)
- 4. Call to Holiness and Perfection (CCC 825, 2012-15)

The Living Tradition: Further Study

- 1. Saint Augustine, *Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount*, in Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), Volume 6, pp. 24-33. (Also available at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/16011.htm>)