

Matthew 5:38-48

We all know what selective hearing is. We all practice it from time to time. We may not be as familiar with the term, “interpretive hearing,” but we should be, because we practice this type of hearing possibly even more. Interpretive hearing is taking the words we hear and interpreting them in the way that we want to understand them. When our children were little, they understood the word *maybe* from their mother to mean *yes*.

“Can we go get some ice cream?”

“Maybe.”

“Yay! We get to go for ice cream!”

Oftentimes the word *no* is interpreted as anything but *no*. Husbands know that the word *soon* really means *it’s going to be a while before I’m ready*. And wives know that when her husband says *I cleaned it*, he really means *I wiped it with my shirt*.

We use interpretive hearing with other people, but when God speaks, we dare not use it. For if we do, we are changing God’s words to suit us; to fit in with our lifestyle and our view of ourselves and our world.

Today we hear Jesus say, “*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” Do we let these words stand as is? Sadly and tragically, no. We interpret them to mean “do the best that you can.”

This is how most people cope with the thought of dying and the afterlife. “As long as I do the best that I can, God will be fine with that, and accept me.” Nowhere in the Bible does God say anything even resembling this. Instead He says, “*You must be perfect...*” not, “as perfect as you can be considering who you are.” You must be perfect *as your heavenly Father is perfect*. That’s perfection in its strictest sense.

Looking at the context of Jesus’ words, we find examples of how we are to be perfect. He says, love, not hate, your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Do not seek an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but instead of retaliation, show kindness to the one who insults you.

All of this goes against our human nature. Take a cookie away from the hand of a two-year-old, and what will he instinctively do? Offer you the cookie in his other hand as well? No, he will demand his cookie back. As adults, we practice this fine art on a higher level. Do I really need to give examples?

We’re good at loving those who love us, showing kindness to those who deserve it; but we’re lousy at loving our enemies. We’re lousy at holding back with retaliation. We’re lousy at being perfect. I’m not even sure that we do the best we can.

You and I are not perfect, but our heavenly Father is. What does it mean that God is perfect? We may be surprised. A mechanic spends hours working on a car, and he says to his customer, “Your engine is running perfectly.” An orchestra performs a difficult piece, and the conductor tells them, “You played it perfectly.” A perfect score in class is awarded to the student who gets

every question right. This is perfection by how we see it, but this is not what it means that our *“heavenly Father is perfect.”*

Perfection for God is that He is merciful. God’s perfection is that He loves His enemies; that He does not seek retaliation against those who hurt Him. For God, perfection is in turning the other cheek; in not resisting the one who is evil; in praying for those who persecute Him and crucify Him. God’s perfection is not in punishing all who disobey Him, but in covering their wickedness with the blood of Jesus. On the cross, Jesus cried with His dying breath, *“It is finished!”* (*completed...perfected*). Our society has not improved since that day; it has gotten worse. There is a great chasm between our wickedness and God’s holiness. But in Christ we see our perfect God acting in mercy, not counting the world’s sins against them.

To be sons and daughters of our heavenly Father, therefore, is not to live by the Law and demand that others do the same. It’s to show mercy because our Father in heaven has shown mercy to us. This is where we fail the most. When someone treats us unfairly, we are quick to judge them even though God forgives us who were unfair to Him. A perfect church is not one where every member lives how he is supposed to, but where God’s mercy is displayed among the members of the congregation.

Does this mean we are to ignore the Law and sin? Far be it! We are a holy people, for we are baptized into Christ. Holy people do not desire to live lives of un-holiness. Where we fail - and we do, all of us, pastor and congregation each day - we confess our sin and ask God to forgive us and help us to amend our sinful lives by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now as you believe that you are forgiven, so will you forgive others. To live in God’s mercy is to be merciful to others. As our heavenly Father is perfect in showing mercy, so will we desire to be perfect in showing mercy to others.

“You must be perfect” is not a demand to be the best we can be. Nor is it telling us that our God only accepts us if we obey Him perfectly. Your heavenly Father is merciful to you. He does not judge you because of your many sins, no matter how awful they are. He forgives you. God has no enemies because He has forgiven all who once were His enemies. You cannot get right with God by living better because He is already right with you. Your heart is not perfect, but God’s heart is, for it is full, not of anger, but of mercy.

This is how we cope with dying and the afterlife. We trust what Jesus says - that our God is perfect with mercy; that there is forgiveness with Him. Your God is not your enemy. No, the engine of your heart is not running perfectly. Your life is not a piece of music played flawlessly. You and I do not deserve to be awarded a perfect score for how we have lived; for how we have treated others. But our hope is not within us; it’s in the mercy that God has for us. We have treated God as our enemy, but He treats you as a friend; more than that, as a dear child.

“You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” is not a threat of the Law; it’s an invitation to peer inside the heart of God. And when you do, you see the face of Christ; you see mercy looking back at you. Amen.