***HIGH EXPECTATIONS***

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Texts: Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18, 33-34 and Matthew 5:38-48

Some years ago there was a popular country song by Mac Davis with a bold refrain:

*Oh Lord, it’s hard to be humble when you’re perfect in every way*

*I can’t wait to look in the mirror cause I get better looking each day.*

*To know me is to love me, I must be a (heck) of a man.*

*Oh Lord it’s hard to be humble but I’m doing the best that I can.*

Now even Mary Poppins might have a problem singing that not-so-humble song since she is just “*practically* perfect in every way.” Most of us know that we are not even close to *practically perfect* let alone *perfect in every way*. In Paul’s words, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Surely God knows this. Surely Jesus knew this, yet there he is, delivering his Sermon on the Mount to the collection of sinners gathered around him and saying, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” In so doing he echoes that Word of the Lord spoken through Moses to the congregation of Israel, “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.”

Be perfect. Be holy. Those seem like awfully high expectations of God for people like us, unrealistic expectations for us who are not perfect in any way, are unholy in a lot of ways, and hope for only modest improvement at best when it comes to perfection and holiness. What is God asking of us with those lofty commands: Be perfect, be holy? Does God want us to be frustrated perfectionists, unsatisfied saints, or perhaps delusional egotists who can sing Mac Davis’ song with unnerving confidence,

*Oh Lord it’s hard to be humble when you’re perfect in every way…*?

How can Jesus talk about perfection and God command holiness to unholy, imperfect sinners like us?

It is worth noting that neither of these commands exists in a vacuum. The command to be holy is followed by a series of instructions about what holiness looks like, each punctuated with a reminder, “I am the LORD your God!” We who are created in the image of God are called to reflect that divine image in day-to-day living. As one writer notes,

*Whenever we open our mouth, open our door, extend our hand in gestures kind or rude, our neighbor catches at least a glimpse of “the Lord our God*.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

What kind of God do your neighbors glimpse when they meet you –

a God of love, mercy, grace, justice and peace, or

a God of revenge, sass, disdain, greed and indifference?

Who is the God who your neighbors see in you? The God whose image we reflect is a holy God and for that reason, we are to be holy reflections. Lest we be confused about what that reflection might look like in our lives, God offers a series of examples, all of which might be summed up in the 18th verse of that 19th chapter of Leviticus which Jesus quotes as part of the Great Commandment: *Love your neighbor as yourself*.

To be holy is not to be in a holier-than-thou state of mind or to hold some particular belief. It is not being so heavenly minded that you are of no earthly use. It is not striving to be more religious than God! To be holy is to live a certain way, a way that is marked by love for your neighbor, even the neighbors who you might not think of as neighbors – the poor, the hungry, the alien in your midst, the laborer who works for you. In other words, all those people you encounter in the course of a day – the checkout clerk at the grocery store, the child at the next fast food table, the client in your office, the student in your class, the patient in your clinic, the stranger on the street, including those strangers who you might seek to avoid at all costs – all are neighbors you are to love. It is love demonstrated in compassion, honesty and fair play; love that is as tangible as the good grapes left in the vineyard for the poor to glean so that they will not go hungry. It is love that does not engage in lying or name-calling or swearing or taking advantage of those who are disabled in any way. It is love that seeks reconciliation instead of revenge; love that treats the alien – the immigrant or refugee in our midst – not like a criminal but like a citizen; love that offers no abuses, and makes no excuses. I the LORD your God am holy, says the LORD, and you who are created in my image are to be holy in this way!

That holiness is pretty practical even for unholy people like us. It is not the sole province of Mother Teresa and St. Francis of Assisi and your great-grandmother who everyone agrees was a saint. It is holiness that is demanded of all who are created in the image of a holy God. It is holiness that, if practiced by all of us, might bring civility to our politics, justice to our communities, and peace to our world. It is holiness that begins with you, holiness that makes no excuse when your neighbor is acting in an unholy manner or is just a holy terror, for you reflect the image of the holy God who calls YOU to be holy always. Every time that you live into that holy calling, you offer to the world another glimpse of our holy God. Every time that you shirk that responsibility, you incur guilt upon yourself and betray the God who made you. The Lord does not say, be holy as long as everyone else is holy. The Lord says, be holy for I the Lord your God am holy. No exceptions. No excuses!!

The current national debate with regard to immigrants and refugees illustrates the practical nature of God’s holy command. As Christians we are called to love the alien – the immigrant and the refugee – and are called to treat them as citizens in our midst. Those are the words of the Lord! We are called to fulfill that command in our daily lives by welcoming with open arms those refugees and immigrants we meet. But we cannot fulfill that holy command if we do not also support policies that meet that holy standard. There can be debate about what policy is appropriate, but any policy that is put forth by Republicans, Democrats or anyone else, should meet that holy standard for us as people of faith – loving and treating as a citizen the alien in our midst. If any policy fails to do so, we should be the first ones demanding change as God’s people seeking to live holy lives.

As if that were not hard enough, Jesus comes along to urge us to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. Like the commandment to be holy, Jesus’ command comes amid a series of examples of how we should live as God’s perfect people. The examples offer concrete advice about how to respond to oppression and injustice, for those to whom Jesus spoke lived under the thumb of Roman rule. Zealots wanted an armed insurrection. Others wanted to avoid making waves and docilely accepted their plight. Some have interpreted this portion of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount as advising just that – a refusal to resist. But a closer reading suggests that we who are called to be perfect as God is perfect are still called to live into that expectation voiced by Micah: Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God. Jesus here is advocating, not timid acceptance, but faithful resistance. How so?

“You have heard it said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’” says Jesus. “But I say to you, do not resist the evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.” The word *resist* (*antistenai* in Greek) usually refers to armed resistance or warfare. Jesus rejects fighting back with violence even though that might seem to be the proportionate response to the oppression Rome imposed. He refuses to adopt violence as a response to violence or evil as a response to evil. Instead Jesus suggests another way: *turn the other cheek*. Jesus makes a point of saying, “if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.” A strike on the right cheek from someone standing face to face would be a backhand slap, not a right cross. It is a blow intended to insult, humiliate or degrade. It was not administered to an equal, but to one regarded as inferior – a master backhanding a slave, a parent striking a child, a Roman hitting a Jew – to put him or her back in place. By turning the other cheek, the one receiving the blow makes it impossible for the assailant to backhand again – a nose is in the way. The only way to strike again is to throw a punch, which in that culture would suggest that the victim stood on equal terms with the assailant. As Walter Wink notes:

*By turning the cheek, then the “inferior” is saying: “I’m a human being, just like you. I refuse to be humiliated any longer. I am your equal. I am a child of God. I won’t take it anymore.”[[2]](#endnote-2)*

Far from making oneself the victim of further abuse, the act of turning the other cheek is an act of resistance that refuses to recognize the power of the assailant. It offers an alternative to violence as a response to injustice.

Likewise the suggestion that you give your cloak to anyone who sues you for your coat is a form of resistance. In a culture in which indebtedness was used to keep the poor in their place, Jesus suggests that you give not just your coat but also the clothes off your back, in essence saying, “Take it all, if that is the kind of person you are.” In that culture being naked was less shameful to the naked person than to the one causing the nakedness. By stripping the clothes from his back and walking away naked, the debtor shames the creditor who so greedily placed him in such circumstance.

Shortly before the fall of apartheid in South Africa, police descended on a squatters’ camp and announced that the women living there had five minutes to gather all their possessions and leave before the bulldozers would level their shacks. In response, the women stripped naked and stood before the bulldozers. The police were so unnerved and embarrassed that they turned and fled, leaving the squatters’ camp intact.[[3]](#endnote-3)

As for Jesus’ advice to carry the soldier’s pack a second mile, it would embarrass the soldier who could command someone to carry his pack one mile but not more. Having someone carry the pack a second mile would be a violation of the military code and risk punishment upon the soldier. You can imagine the soldier begging the one carrying the pack to put it down after a mile, lest the soldier incur the wrath of his superior. Or perhaps as powerfully, demonstrating that what the soldier intended as a sign of dominance was no big deal.

In essence Jesus is urging holy resistance to oppressive acts, actions that respond to unjust acts, not with violence or revenge, but with nonviolent actions that affirm the dignity of the person and bring to light the unjust demand of the oppressor. It is the same tactic used in the Civil Rights Movement as demonstrators accepted the blows of racist policemen and mobs without fighting back, and in so doing moved the conscience of a nation to bring about change.

We live in a time when “an eye for an eye” seems to be the prevailing mood in our nation and world. The failure to respond in kind is deemed a sign of weakness. Some will even say that Jesus is wrong in this instance, for his advice to turn the other cheek and give the cloak off your back and go the second mile is impractical in the 21st century. But if Jesus is the messiah, as we say, then we ignore him at our peril. To follow him is to obey what he says and to live as he calls you to live – without exception. Jesus urges us to follow a way that affirms the dignity and value of each person, a way that offers holy resistance to injustice and oppression, a way that demands that we love our neighbors and our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. It is a hard path that sometimes runs against our baser instincts, but it is Jesus’ way, a way that we are commanded to follow in order to be more like the perfect image of God we were created to be, in order to be the holy people our holy God calls us to be. To be holy and perfect is not to be right always, but it is to love always as God loves – to love everyone, everywhere. So then, be perfect, be holy, be loving! Be disciples! Amen

1. Kimberly L. Clayton, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2010, p.365 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be*, Augsburg Press, 1998, p.102 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Id. at 105 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)