

Tuesday Evening
11th Week of Ordinary Time

This evening I want to think with you about one of the most difficult sentences in the New Testament.

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

On the face of it, that sounds like a commandment which cannot possibly have anything to do with us. There is not one of us who would even faintly connect ourselves with perfection.

It helps to unpack the Greek word for perfect *which is teleios*. This word is often used in Greek in a very special way. It has nothing to do with what we might call abstract, philosophical, metaphysical perfection. A victim which is fit for a sacrifice to God, that is a victim which is without blemish, is *teleios*. A man who has reached his full-grown stature is *teleios* as distinct from a half-grown youth. A student who has reached a mature knowledge of a subject is *teleios* as opposed to a learner who is just beginning, and who as yet has no grasp of things.

To put it in another way, the Greek idea of perfection is *functional*. A thing is perfect if it fully realizes the purpose for which it was planned, designed and made. In point of fact, that meaning is involved in the derivation of the word. *Teleios* is the adjective formed from the noun *telos*. *Telos* means an *end*, a *purpose*, an *aim*, a *goal*. A thing is *teleios* if it achieves the purpose for which it is planned; human beings are perfect if they achieve the purpose for which they were created and sent into the world.

Let us take a very simple analogy. Suppose in my house there is a loose screw, and I want to tighten and adjust this screw. I go out and I buy a screwdriver. I find that the screwdriver exactly fits the grip of my hand; it is neither too large nor too small, too rough nor too smooth. I lay the screwdriver on the slot of the screw, and I find that it exactly fits. I then turn the screw and the screw is fixed. In the Greek sense, and especially in the New Testament sense, that screwdriver is *teleios*, because it exactly fulfilled the purpose for which I desired and bought it.

So, people will be *teleios* if they fulfil the purpose for which they were created. For what purpose were human beings created? The Bible leaves us in no doubt as to that. In the creation story in Genesis 1 we find God saying: 'Let us make man in our image after our likeness' (Genesis 1:26). *Human beings were created to be like God*. The characteristic of God is this universal benevolence, this unconquerable goodwill, this constant seeking of the highest good of every individual. The great characteristic of God is love to saint and to sinner alike. No matter what we do to him, God seeks nothing but our highest good.

It is when we reproduce in our lives the unwearied, forgiving, sacrificial benevolence of God that we become like God, and are therefore *perfect* in the New Testament sense of the word. To put it at its simplest, those men and women who care most for others are the most perfect.

It is the whole teaching of the Bible that we attain our humanity only by becoming Godlike. The one thing which makes us like God is the love which never ceases to care for others, no matter what they do to it. We fulfil our humanity, we enter upon Christian perfection, when we learn to forgive as God forgives, and to love as God loves.¹

True disciples need to cultivate the inner attitudes and dispositions that transform the heart and build up love, such as the kind of patience, meekness, purity, and mercy that Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount. This is why Jesus calls us to go beyond external conformity to the requirements of the law and imitate the perfect love of the heavenly Father, who is love himself (5:48; 1 John 4:8).

The love to which Jesus calls us is beyond the capacity of our fallen human nature, but the gift of the Spirit received through faith and the sacraments makes it possible. Jesus summons us to a heavenly way of life; the saints show that it is possible to live this way on earth.

¹ Barclay, W. (2001). *The Gospel of Matthew* (Third Ed., pp. 205–206). Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press.