

The Hard Sayings of Jesus

Bible Study #6

⁴⁸ *“But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.”*

-Matthew 5:48, NLT

REACTIONS TO THIS SAYING OF JESUS

READ CONTEXT: Matthew 5:43-48

COMMENTARY

Some students of Christian ethics make a distinction between the general standards of Christian conduct and what are called “counsels of perfection,” as though the former were prescribed for the rank and file of Christians while the latter could be attained only by real saints.

Such a distinction was not made by Jesus himself. He did make a distinction between the ordinary standards of morality observed in the world and the standard at which his disciples should aim; but the latter was something which should characterize all his disciples and not just a select few. For example, the principle that one good turn deserves another was observed by quite irreligious people and even by pagans. For anyone to repay a good turn with a bad one would be regarded as outrageous. But Jesus’ followers were not to remain content with conventional standards of decent behavior. According to conventional standards one good turn might deserve another, but according to the standards which he laid down for his disciples, one bad turn deserves a good one—except that “deserves” is not the right word. One bad turn may deserve a bad one in revenge, but one bad turn done to his disciples should be repaid by them with a good one. They must “go the second mile”; they must do more than others do if they are to be known as followers of Jesus. If you confine your good deeds to your own kith and kin, he said to them, “what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?” (Mt 5:47). It is immediately after that that the words come: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

This indeed sounds like a “counsel of perfection” in the most literal sense. “Be perfect like God.” Who can attain perfection like his? Is it worthwhile even to begin to try? But the context helps us to understand the force of these words. Why should the disciples of Jesus, the heirs of the kingdom of God, repay evil with good? The ancient law might say, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18), but the fulfillment of that commandment depends on the answer given to the question “Who is my neighbor?” (Lk 10:29). When Jesus was asked that question, he told the story of the good Samaritan to show that my “neighbor” in the sense intended by the commandment is anyone who needs my help, anyone to whom I can render a “neighborly” service. But those Israelites to whom the commandment was first given might not have thought of a Canaanite as being a “neighbor” within the meaning of the act, and their descendants in New Testament times might not have thought of a Roman in this way.

Most systems of ethics emphasize one's duty to one's neighbor, but progress in ethics is marked by the broadening scope indicated in the answer to the question "Who is my neighbor?" Why should I be neighborly to someone who is unneighborly to me? If someone does me a bad turn, why should I not pay him back in his own coin? Because, said Jesus, God himself sets us an example in this regard. "Your Father in heaven ... causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Mt 5:45). He bestows his blessings without discrimination. The followers of Jesus are children of God, and they should manifest the family likeness by doing good to all, even to those who deserve the opposite. So, said Jesus—go the whole way in doing good, just as God does.

The same injunction appears in a similar context, but in slightly different words, in Luke 6:36: "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (RSV). When we find one and the same saying preserved in different forms by two Evangelists, as we do here, the reason often is that Jesus' Aramaic words have been translated into Greek in two different ways. We do not know the precise Aramaic words that Jesus used on this occasion, but they probably meant, "You must be perfect (that is, all-embracing, without any restriction) in your acts of mercy or kindness, for that is what God is like."

When the books of the law were read in synagogue from the original Hebrew, the reading was accompanied by an oral paraphrase (called a *targum*) in Aramaic, the popular vernacular. There is a passage in the law (Lev 22:26–28) which prescribes kindness to animals. In one of the Aramaic paraphrases, this passage ended with the words "As our Father is merciful in heaven, so you must be merciful on earth." Perhaps, then, some of Jesus' hearers recognized a familiar turn of phrase when this hard saying fell from his lips. It is not, after all, hard to understand; it is sometimes hard to practice it.¹

Another point with this hard saying focuses on the word perfect. The Oxford Dictionary defines the word perfect as having all the required or desirable elements, qualities, or characteristics as good as it is possible to be. It means to make (something) completely free from faults or defects. This definition might scare someone into thinking they are to be so perfect that they have no faults. It should bring comfort that the Greek word for the word perfect is *teleo*. This definition means complete or mature. It doesn't mean absolute moral perfection. Being complete or mature may lessen the intensity of the expectation we read in Scripture.

QUESTIONS

1. How hard should we try when following the commandments and dictates of our religious teachings?

¹ Walter C. Kaiser Jr. et al., [*Hard Sayings of the Bible*](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 365–366.

2. How much latitude does God expect from us? Is knowing there is latitude make us more or less likely to obey Jesus' teachings consistently? Explain your answer.
3. What was Jesus getting at?
4. What are some ways we can show our love for our neighbors or enemies?
5. How does this upcoming election provide an opportunity to love our family and friends who disagree with our political opinions and views? How might you show them that you love them?
6. One interpretation of Jesus' declaration to be perfect is to be like God. As God loves others, we should love others. As God forgives, we should forgive. As God is perfect, we should be perfect. How does this strengthen or diminish the concept of moral living?
7. If perfection or maturing is a process, how far along do you think you are? Are you a better Christian today than you were 5 years ago? 10 years ago? What areas of your life do you need to turn your attention to making it better?
8. Charles Wesley, the founder of Methodism, believed that sanctification in his life is possible. He believed that we could all live sinless lives. Do you think he is right? Or wrong? Or misguided? Have you ever gone a day or a week without sinning?
9. What are some ways that you keep connected to God and protect yourself from sinning? What are some ways others might do it?
10. If someone asks us, what are some healthy and helpful ways we might help them see when they are not living up to their Christian commitments or, again if they ask, how might we help them live a more committed life of faith?

CLOSING THOUGHTS

CLOSING PRAYER