

Perfection Matters to the Master

From the Series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe.”

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Introduction

We’re going to start today by hearing a story about a former president. James Carter (also known as “Jimmy” Carter) once told a story about a life-changing job interview he experienced.

Carter was a graduate of the Naval Academy. Getting into and graduating from that institution is no small accomplishment. That school prepares people to be leaders of the most powerful navy in the world.

In this interview, the young officer Carter was attempting to gain entry into one of the most important divisions of that Navy - The Nuclear submarine fleet. At the time, it a very new concept in warfare.

The new division was headed by a legendary leader: Admiral Hymen G. Rickover. Rickover was said to be a very intimidating man. The admiral started the interview by asking young Carter what he wanted to talk about. That’s an exciting prospect; being able to pick topics you believe you know about. So, Carter picked a few: current events, seamanship, music, literature, naval tactics, electronics and weapon operations.

Each time young Carter said something, the Admiral would ask follow-up questions. As the Admiral asked these questions, something happened - The young officer found he didn’t know as much as he thought. The admiral was very good at asking probing questions - Questions that showed holes in someone’s knowledge.

After a while of being cut down to size, Carter was asked a question that he thought was easy. This was his chance to make an impression. The Admiral asked about Carter’s final academic standing in his class at the Academy. Proudly, he blurted out, “Sir, I stood fifty-ninth in a class of 820!” If you run the numbers, Carter was well into the top ten percent of his class at a prestigious school. That’s no small accomplishment. Carter sat back and waited for a word of congratulations.



President James (Jimmy) Carter



Carter as a young naval officer

Instead of a compliment, Admiral Rickover asked the following question:

“Did you do your best?”

After he thought about it, Carter replied, “No sir, I did not always do my best.” With that, Admiral Rickover asked his final question:

“Why not?”

With that, the Admiral turned the back of his chair to young Lieutenant Carter and ended the interview.

Imagine that. Here’s James Carter, a man who would eventually be a president of the United States - One of the most powerful people in the world. At the time, he was a young man who thought he knew things. He thought he achieved things. But he stood before a man who clearly only wanted the best.

Did you ever meet someone who made you feel like you’re climbing a steep mountain and you can never reach the top? Carter knew a lot about a range of topics. Not good enough - In the Admiral’s mind, he should have known more. Carter was in the top 10 percent of his class at a very competitive school. Not good enough - He should have been higher. Carter worked really, really hard through 4 years of high school and 4 years of college. Not good enough - He didn’t try his best every minute of that time.

There are people in the world who settle for nothing less than perfection. Those people can be very difficult to be around. We have mean names for those people: Names like “slave-driver” and “task-master”.

I mean, hey, can anyone be perfect?

We’re working our way through the Gospel According to Matthew in the series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells us about the King of the Universe.” We’re in chapters 5 through 7, a section we’re calling, “The Christian Manifesto”. Today, we’re going to finish a sub-section of the manifesto. In this section, we’re learning “What Matters to the Master”.

Today we’re on a topic that will sound intimidating at first. To some it will sound very discouraging, but please hang in. Today we’re going to learn that perfection matters to the Master.

Let's read:

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:48)

Perfect! Wow. That seems strict. That's the New International Version. I wonder what this looks like in different translations. Sometimes different translations choose different words.

English Standard version - ESV

You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

New American Standard Bible - NASB

Therefore you shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

King James - KJV

Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.

No. It's not the translation. The word in the original language is best translated into English as "Perfect".

Is God saying that he has very strict standards, and that any failure to meet those strict standards eliminates you from his kingdom? The answer: Yes, and No. That's confusing. To complicate things, here are some statements that Jesus makes in other places.

28 Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-29)

How can you be perfect when you're resting? How can someone who demands perfection be gentle? How can perfection be easy? It seems like pursuing perfection should be tiring. Jesus says come to him if you're tired.

If Jesus wants perfection, shouldn't he skip over all the people who are imperfect? Matthew quotes the prophet Isaiah who describes the Messiah, the great King.

A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out...
(Matthew 12:20)

In those days reeds were used for a cane or walking stick. If your cane had a weakness, a bruise, an imperfection, it could break. If it broke when you were putting weight on it, it would produce splinters that would go right into your hand. Ouch! That would hurt. If you saw a bruise in your walking stick, if your walking stick was imperfect, you would break it in half and throw it away. Jesus said that he would never break a bruised reed.

In those days people lit their homes with oil lamps. You make one by taking a bowl with some oil. At the edge of the bowl you insert a wick. If some imperfection got into the wick, instead of light, it would produce smoke. Who wants their house filled up with smelly smoke? If a wick was smoldering, if it was imperfect, you would snuff it out. We're told that the great King would never snuff out a smoldering or imperfect wick.

So, what's going on here? On the one hand, we see a demand for perfection. On the other hand, we see acceptance of imperfection - Big imperfection. How can the two things co-exist?

These things come together in something called, "Grace". Here's what Grace is. Jesus just told us that our heavenly Father is perfect. When God created humans, we were perfect, too. However, we chose to disobey God. We sinned. Because of that, we are all imperfect - Very imperfect.

There are a lot of ways to look at grace. For now, let's say that grace the way that our perfect God deals with those who are imperfect. It's how he manages the difference.

What's the alternative? Let's think about that. If there were no grace, what else could a perfect God do with the imperfect? In particular, with those who disobeyed him and broke the perfection that he gave to them?

1) If there were no grace: God could become angry.

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness... (Romans 1:18)

We're told that godlessness and wickedness make God angry. If there were no grace, he could simply let it loose.

2) If there were no grace God could judge sin and evil.

4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge. (Psalm 51:4)

We're told that God is right and justified when he judges sin. What do wrath and judgement look like?

47 And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, 48 where the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched. (Mark 9:47-48)

Look at that: "...and the fire is not quenched." Some people say to me, "Pastor, you've got to stop talking about hell. It scares people". My friends, Jesus talked about hell and judgment a great deal. He had no problem scaring people if it would lead to their salvation.

There is one final thing God could do if there were no grace. If there were no grace, He could give up on us. He could abandon us. He could just walk away.

But he won't do that. Do you know why?

9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (II Peter 3:9)

Fortunately for us, God does not want anyone to perish, but he wants everyone to have the opportunity to come to repentance.

We've learned some important things about God over the last few sessions. We've learned that God is humble - That is to say, he values others. We've learned that God is love. He loves us. In fact, he cherishes us. Those things and more work together to make God show us grace.

How does God show us grace? What does it look like?

First, God's love for us made him remember his original plan for us. He created us in his image so that we could know him. He created us so that we could enjoy him. He created us to be perfect, like him. So, God created a plan to rescue and restore us. This is called redemption. God wants to redeem us.

Let's look at the two parts of redemption – rescue and restoration.

How does God rescue us? That involves paying the price for our sin.

18 For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ... (I Peter 1:18-19)

The cost of our sin was high. Not silver, not gold. Not the most valuable commodities on this earth. God paid for our sins by sending his Son to die in our place - to pay the penalty.

We've seen how God can rescue us. How does God restore us? He gives us new life through his Holy Spirit.

17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! (II Corinthians 5:17)

In his grace, God rescues us by paying the price for our sin. He restores us. He sets us back on the path to being what he's always planned for us to be by giving us new life.

Here's where we hit a crossroad. One of the things that God gave us when he made us in his image is the ability to make choices. Here's why that's important. You must choose to accept God's grace. You must choose to accept God's forgiveness. You must choose to turn away from your sin and follow God. If you don't choose the right way, you will never see the benefits of God's grace. You will see wrath. You will see judgement. You will see what it's like to be abandoned by God.

26 If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, 27 but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. (Hebrews 10:26-27)

That's terrible! We don't want that for anyone! Let us tell you how to choose to accept God's grace. If you do, you will enjoy it forever. We'll have some instructions for you at the end of this article.

For those who make the choice to follow God, here is the next step: He invites you into his presence.

There's a passage we visit a lot. It's the story of the prophet Isaiah when he was shown a vision of God's throne in heaven. It's told in the book of Isaiah, chapter 6. Isaiah saw God on his throne. He saw mighty angels worshipping. They cried out, "Holy, Holy, Holy". Isaiah saw the glory of God. Here's how he reacted to this vision:

5 "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." (Isaiah 6:5)

Isaiah was a righteous man. Yet, when he stood before God, he felt unclean. Why? Because one of the things he saw was the holiness of God. Holiness means that God is free from any moral imperfection. Isaiah saw the moral perfection of God. That made him see his own imperfection. And it wasn't small. When he saw his moral imperfection, he couldn't hold the words in. He cried out, "Woe is me – I am ruined."

Later in his life, Isaiah learned about grace. He learned about the Messiah -The one who would come to take away the sins of the world. In order to learn about Grace, Isaiah had to learn about his own moral imperfection. To do that, he needed to be exposed to the moral perfection of God.

Isaiah was exposed to the moral perfection of God through a vision. Today, most people are exposed differently- We're exposed through the Word of God, the Bible.

7 The law of the Lord is perfect,
refreshing the soul.
(Psalm 19:7)

When we open the pages of Scripture, we meet God there. Among other things, we see his moral perfection. And right away, just like Isaiah, we see our imperfection.

This is where everything we've learned so far in the Sermon on the Mount, the Christian Manifesto, comes together. Let's review.

Jesus started at the beginning of chapter 5 with the beatitudes.

3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
4 Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.
(Matthew 5:3-4)

When you see the moral perfection of God, you realize that you are spiritually poor. You're empty. In economic terms, you're bankrupt. On the day you realize that, Jesus says you are blessed, because now the kingdom of heaven is yours.

When you see the distance between your moral imperfection and the perfection of God, like Isaiah, people are caused to mourn. Jesus says that on that day you are blessed. You're blessed because you will be comforted. The God of love puts his arms around you and teaches you of his grace.

People who see themselves as spiritually rich don't see the need for grace. People who are happy with themselves don't understand grace. People who see their spiritual bankruptcy see their need. People who mourn over their sin welcome grace and the comfort it brings.

After this, more happens.

5 Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.
6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

(Matthew 5:5-6)

When you see the perfection of God, you begin to understand your place in the universe. He is the Creator - He is infinite. We are the creation - We are limited. This would be true before we sinned, but after that the gap becomes even greater. We see these things and we become meek or humble.

And then, we begin to hunger and thirst for righteousness. We are no longer content with ourselves. We realize we need God.

And God reveals himself to us. Jesus moved on from the beatitudes to tell us about himself. He told us about the things that matter to him. - The things that matter to the master.

We learned that God's Word matters to the master (Matthew 5:17-20).

In the pages of Scripture God reveals himself to us. We learned that the religious leaders of the day left out blocks of God's Word. They wanted to imagine that they were better than others. They wanted to imagine that they had arrived. So, they left out the parts that would have made them face their sin and moral imperfection. But we learned that we need all of God's word.

Then we learned that human life matters to the Master. (Matthew 5:21-22). People knew they shouldn't murder, but they stopped there. Jesus said that wasn't good enough. The standard was much higher. Jesus taught that those who hate others are also guilty. That's because laws against murder are not just empty rules. They're based on a principle - Human life Matters to God. From there we learned that from conception to the last minutes of breath, every human life matters to the Master.

We then learned that Marriage matters to the Master. (27-32) People in the days of Jesus were concerned about adultery and divorce. But Jesus went deeper. We learned in that study that Marriage is a wonderful gift from God to human kind. The standard is high. Jesus said that even looking at someone with lust was a serious offense. That's because Marriage matters to the Master.

Jesus moved on to tell us that Truth Matters to the Master. (Matthew 5:33-37) In the days of Jesus, the religious leaders encouraged people to make promises they knew they could not keep. But Jesus taught that our word means something. At least it matters to him - Because truth matters to the Master

Jesus then spoke about revenge. (Matthew 5:38-42) But we dug deeper. Really, what Jesus was referring to was humility. Humility assigns value to others. All humans are made in God's image. The humble person takes that into account when they react to people. Humble people, even if they've been hurt, consider the value of another person.

In the previous session, we learned that love matters to the Master. (v 43-37) Most people are happy to show love to people who make them feel good. Most people are happy to show love when they get something back. Jesus taught us that the person with true love in their hearts shows that love even to their enemies. Jesus gave us a reason to do this: So that we can be children of our Father in heaven. The Father has true love in his heart. He wants his children to be like him.

And finally today. Perfection matters to the master. Why? Because our heavenly Father is perfect.

God's Word matters to the Master. How should we follow it?

- Perfectly.

Human life matters to the Master. How should we honor it?

- Perfectly.

Marriage matters to the Master. How should we honor this wonderful gift?

- Perfectly.

Truth matters to the Master. How truthful should we be?

- Perfectly.

Humility matters to the Master. How should we show humility?

- Perfectly.

Love matters to the Master. How should we love?

- Perfectly.

You say, "But no one can be perfect." Yes, that's right. That's where grace comes in. When we fall short, God forgives. The cross of Jesus Christ fills the gap between our sin and God's moral perfection.

Let's ask one final question: Why does God continue to ask for perfection when he must know that no one can achieve it? Why does it sometimes feel like we climb a steep cliff and the top is nowhere in sight?

Answer: ***Because there is always more of God for us to enjoy.*** Sometimes the path to getting more of God requires effort on our part.

The apostle Paul said something that relates here:

...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose. (Philippians 2:12-13)

So, do we work, or does God work? Here it seems to say both. God works through us. But it certainly feels like we're exerting great effort. So, we must continue to work towards perfection. Even though it's painful sometimes. Even though we often fail.

Let's pull this all together.

Conclusion

Many years ago a young officer named James Carter sat before a very demanding Admiral. Young Carter thought he knew things – he thought he achieved things. But it wasn't good enough. That could have been a crushing experience. He could have quit – he could have bailed out. Instead, because he was challenged to be something better, he grew. He eventually became President of the United States.

Many people walk through life thinking they know things - Thinking they've accomplishing things. Then one day, they're confronted by the awesome perfection of God. On that day they realize their moral bankruptcy. On that day, they mourn. But then, they start to grow. They allow themselves to be challenged. They start to become something more. That something isn't something they claim for themselves. They attribute it to God and to his grace.

Friends, will you let yourself be exposed to God's awesome perfection? You'll find that the path will sometimes feel like a steep cliff with no end. In fact though, it's a journey. We don't climb a steep cliff with no end. Yes, we climb a mountain, and the mountain is high. Yes, it is far away. But, we have a guide who will take us there and walk with us.

You see, God is not a heartless taskmaster who takes and take and takes. He is a loving Father who gives and gives and gives. God is not a slave driver who wants more and more and more from us. He is a generous Creator who wants to share more and more and more of himself. He is not an uncaring overlord who demands great things and gives us no help. In fact, he cares so much that he shows us his great grace.

If you will let him, God will show you wonderful things about himself. But you must be willing to be set on a path whose end is nothing less than the best - Nothing less than perfection.

Because perfection matters to the Master.

May God bless us as we seek to follow him with the help of his grace.

To learn more, visit the following sites:

Trinity Church of Teaneck, NJ

TrinityTeaneck.org

Phil's Site

PhilBrainerd.com

To learn how to start a new life with Jesus Christ, visit Billy Graham's site.

PeaceWithGod.net
