

BETTER THAN PAINTING BY NUMBERS

8th in a Series Called, “What Did He Say?” – Topic: Being Complete
Matthew 5:48

A few years back Will Smith starred in a movie called *I Am Legend* that has echoes of world events today. In it a virus turns lethal, killing 90% of the world’s population. Nearly all of the survivors are turned by the virus into violent, cannibalistic mutants who can’t survive sunlight. Smith plays the central character, a US Army virologist named Lt. Col. Robert Neville. He lives alone in total quarantine, venturing out in broad daylight, but holing up in his fortress at night. To make a long story short, he is able to create a serum that is a cure for the virus from his own blood.

Wouldn’t it be great if somehow something like that could happen today? I wish the blood of survivors of COVID-19 could somehow be the cure for the disease. Wouldn’t it be great to have immunity to the disease? You’d be like a super hero. You’d be “COVID Man.” Maybe you could wear a big red C on your chest. Many superheroes wear a mask, but you could do just the opposite to display your power. You could walk into a grocery store and when they say, “Excuse me, but you need to have a mask,” you could answer, “No need to worry about me, Citizen. I’m COVID Man.”

Yes, we all wish there were a cure for the Coronavirus. But there is a deeper problem, a sickness, if you will, in the human race. But there is a cure for it. And the cure came from the blood of someone. But this cure has been badly misunderstood and distorted often. Today I want us to look at one simple verse that does not seem hard to understand, yet it is fraught with difficulty. Yet when we understand it in its broader context, it turns out to be revolutionary. I hope today to help you see what a profound message Jesus brought in this one idea, a message that provides a momentous paradigm shift, and a cure for what ails the human heart. It is a key verse in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, one that has huge implications. Let’s think about Matthew 5:48. “Be perfect, therefore, as your Father in heaven is perfect.”

JESUS SEEMS TO ASK THE IMPOSSIBLE

This is another verse that doesn’t appear at first glance to be hard to understand. Jesus says, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” So he’s setting the bar really high. In fact, it is as high as it could be. You can’t be any better than perfect.

This is a problem for us, because we aren’t perfect, and we can’t be. No matter how hard we might try, we always have flaws. There are some people who might think I’m a perfect idiot, but it’s not true. There are times in my life when I do things that aren’t idiotic, and so spoil the perfection.

The tendency when we encounter this verse is to write it off. It is so far out of the realm of possibility that we end up ignoring it. It’s like Jesus might as well not have said it because it just isn’t relevant to us. We think, “Well, I’m not perfect. I’m never going to be perfect no matter what I do, so I’m not going to worry about this.” Doesn’t it seem strange that Jesus would say things

that have no relevance for people? Thinking that is odd, many Bible students have looked for an explanation of this verse that makes sense. A common one is to point out that the Greek word translated “perfect” in this verse isn’t exactly the same as our word “perfect.” I guess you could say it’s not a “perfect” match.

The Greek word is *teleios*. It can mean flawless, totally pure, as our English word does. But it also meant complete – mature, or reaching its intended end. With that definition this sermon conceivably could be “perfect.” I once had a conversation with a friend about a sermon I preached in which my friend mentioned how they really liked how I explained one part of the passage. But I realized that this person had not heard what I said at all. In fact, I had specifically said the explanation they heard was not correct. This person had no sense at all of what I actually said. Yet the person actually got the main point of the sermon and it had significantly impacted them. In one sense the sermon clearly was not flawlessly perfect because I had apparently totally failed to explain one point. And yet you could say the sermon was perfect because it reached its main goal, its desired end. It had the effect on my friend it was intended to have.

This then becomes something more reasonable for us. Be perfect in the sense of becoming who you are supposed to be. Be the person God intends for you to be. Now this command begins to be more feasible. It gives us a way to think about it. Except for one thing. Jesus didn’t stop with “Be perfect.” He went on and said “therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” The “therefore” implies that this is a conclusion to what Jesus has already been saying. But the real sticking point is that comment about “as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

The heavenly Father isn’t just mature, complete, reaching his intended goal. He is perfect in the sense we typically use it. He is without blemish, without flaw, pure, perfectly 100% good, totally holy. That being so, we are dumped right back into the dilemma. We think, “But I’m not God. I can’t be like him. I have tried my best but I am far from perfect and I can’t fix that.”

So what do we do with this verse? We take our cue from the word “therefore” and recognize that this ties in to the larger context of this sermon. When we see this verse in its larger context we begin to get a glimpse of the fact that Jesus was doing something breathtaking. He was smashing barriers and introducing a whole new way of thinking. I will show you what he was doing.

JESUS INTRODUCED AN ENTIRELY NEW SYSTEM

The people of Jesus’ culture were steeped in a system of thinking. They had grown up with it and it was all they knew. The leaders of their society all were heavily invested in this system of thinking. It ruled every aspect of their lives and their thoughts, and they continually promulgated it. The most respected proponents of this system of thinking were a familiar group called the Pharisees. This sermon is a thorough, frontal assault on their system of thinking that framed their whole culture, and on the lives of the Pharisees themselves. Jesus completely deconstructed the entire system in this sermon. Sadly, people often miss that this is the whole point of the sermon.

The system had to do with their view of holiness. It was about how to be what God wants us to be, what he requires of us in order for us to be a part of his kingdom and to be loved by him. They believed we get that status by obeying the rules. God gives a whole lot of rules. Then we try to understand and explain what behavior those rules require in as many contexts as we can think of. As long as you stay within the boundaries and keep the rules, then you are being what God requires you to be. You are being holy. Those who are the best at following the rules, obviously, are the holiest and the most blessed by God with good things.

This is a system all humans understand. In fact, we naturally tend to think this is how things work, because it is how every system we've been a part of since we were born has worked. There is a problem with this way of thinking. Inevitably it looks only at outward actions. The rules dictate behavior. As long as you are outwardly behaving according to the rules then you are holy.

Why is that a problem? The rule says, “do not murder anyone.” As long as you haven't physically taken the life of another person you have obeyed that rule. You are holy. Unfortunately, you could be spiteful toward people, hateful, you could despise them, you could harbor deep seated anger and resentment toward them, you could mistreat and even abuse them, you could assassinate their character to other people, but you have obeyed the rule – so you are holy! You may be a horrible person inside, but you haven't physically killed anyone, so you are welcome in the kingdom.

And the rule says, “Do not commit adultery.” As long as you don't physically have sex with someone other than your spouse you have not violated this rule. You could be leering at women all over town, you could be making suggestive, unwelcome comments to them, you could be enflamed with lust toward them, you could be drooling over salacious pictures of them, but if you don't actually have sex with them, you've kept the rule.

The rule also says, “love your neighbor.” Well, that's a challenge. Over the years we've had some neighbors who were hard to love. But who is my neighbor, Mr. Rogers? In fact, once when Jesus taught about loving our neighbor, a person raised that specific question. Are my neighbors just the people in the houses directly contiguous to our property? Or are they all the people on our street? Or are they all the people in the Promenade at La Costa, our neighborhood of 70 homes? How far does this neighbor thing extend? There are been people who have treated me badly, who have not been neighborly toward me at all, and they don't live near me. So it seems to me there is no sense in which they are my neighbors. Therefore, the rule that I must love my neighbor does not apply to them. I can't murder them, because that would violate that other rule, but short of that everything else is fair game, right?

In short, the problem with this outward system is that one could be an outright horrible person and still be sure they are holy. As C. S. Lewis put it, one could have a zoo of lusts on the inside, but could be considered holy because he or she behaved by the rules. Which means that humanity

could, as a whole, be a terrible group of people, but still be holy. And that is unfortunately exactly what happens with this system.

So Jesus came to bring us an entirely different system. As I said it is all too common for people to fail to grasp that the point of this sermon was to completely dismantle that old system and inaugurate a totally new one. You can see that beginning to happen right at the outset of the sermon. Jesus began by saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Wait, what makes us holy in God’s sight and thus qualified for his kingdom, is being poor in spirit? It is knowing and admitting we are spiritually poor, that we don’t even get close to truly obeying the rules and we’re helpless? That’s just shocking.

His listeners at that point were reeling, trying to understand how that could possibly be true. Then in verse 14 he said something impossibly shocking. “You are the light of the world.” Who are the “you” in that verse? It is the people who are following him. But who are those folks? They were not the elites of society. They weren’t even the respectable people. The people who followed Jesus lived in the boondocks, in flyover states. They were fishermen, trades people, dirt farmers, shepherds, blue collar workers. Many of them were rejects and outcasts, those who lived in the crummy underside of society. They were not respectable. They could never hope to live by the rules the way the top shelf religious people, the leaders of their nation, did. Those respectable, influential people either looked down on these people or didn’t notice them at all because they didn’t matter.

Jesus said these no-accounts, these people of ill-repute, were the light of the world! He said “You are what the world needs.” The kingdom of God belongs to you, to humble, poor in spirit, no-name people. It does not belong to the respectable, the acceptable, the “good” people who are influential. It does not belong to those who seem to keep the rules better than anyone else! The rabble were drawn to Jesus specifically because even though they were poor in spirit and didn’t measure up, Jesus affirmed them, said they had the kingdom of God, and that they were the light of the world.

They were the light of the world because they knew they couldn’t play the game of “Holiness by the numbers.” They couldn’t keep all the rules like the respectable people did, which meant *if they were ever to be accepted by God into his kingdom it would have to be by a completely different system.* They were thrilled because Jesus brought that new system they needed.

Then in verse 20 Jesus dropped a bomb. This was no small blast. It was a spiritual nuclear explosion. He said, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” Wait, what?? We have to be more righteous than the Pharisees? But that’s impossible. No one is more righteous than them. Jesus might as well have said you have to grow to be 10 feet tall to enter the kingdom of God. It’s just not going to happen.

The key point that we must grasp is that Jesus did not bring a system that is a new set of rules to obey, a new bunch of requirements for us to meet that are more stringent, a whole new set of disciplines. This is not, “Hey, the Pharisees are super disciplined and really good at following rules, but I’ve got a set of rules that goes way beyond anything they have done.” It is common to encounter teaching that this is exactly what the Sermon on the Mount is. It could have been titled, “Hah, you thought what the Pharisees did was hard? Wait until you hear this.”

But if that’s what Jesus was saying, how could he also have said to the rabble who couldn’t get anywhere close to the Pharisees’ level, “You are the light of the world?” In what sense would this be good news to them? “Hey, I know you’ve been getting a D Minus at best under the old Pharisee system, but I’ve got a new system. This one is way harder and you won’t even get an F Minus on this one.” Hey, that’s really good news. Can’t wait to hear it.

Well, what is this new system? How does it work? Take a cue from Matthew 5:21-22. Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.” The old system said, “You shall not murder.” I have an A plus on that one. This is great. This system is an easy A. I like this system. And then Jesus says, “Here’s my new system. You must not even be angry at someone.” Uh, what, now? Don’t even get mad at anybody?

Laurie is due to get her driver’s license renewed. She wants to get a Real ID, as opposed to a fake one I guess, but that requires she have a copy of our marriage certificate to prove that she is, in fact, Laurie Myatt. We got married in Fullerton, so she applied to the Orange County clerk to get a copy of that certificate. She had to send a notarized request. A couple of weeks later she got a letter back informing her that they have no record of our marriage certificate. This was stunning, since we knew we got married and did so in Orange County. How could they not have a record of us? Then we noticed the certificate isn’t in the county where you got married, but the county where you applied for a license. I had a vague memory that we had actually applied in LA County. So Laurie sent another notarized request for a copy, this time to LA. A couple of weeks passed and then we got another letter telling us they had no record of our wedding. Now we were really stumped. Could we possibly not be officially married? That can’t be. We did get married. I was there. I remember it. I have pictures to prove it. Had something gone wrong with our marriage certificate? Have we just been living together all these years outside the bonds of holy matrimony? “Hey, did you hear about that pastor of the Anchor Church? He’s been living with a woman he’s not married to.” This was a tad worrisome. I was looking at the form letter they sent back to us trying to figure out what to do when I spotted the problem. They had misspelled Laurie’s maiden name. They were searching for our license using the wrong name! Laurie called them and explained the problem. The county employee she spoke with just said that we need to send yet another notarized request, this time to the state. Laurie explained, “No, the problem is that you

made an error. You misspelled my name. I would like you to correct your error.” That woman could not seem to comprehend that *they* had made a mistake. She was like a recorded message on a loop, saying over and over, “Send a request to the state.” It was frustrating. It was annoying. I found myself growing angry with this woman and the incompetence of her agency. Oops. I got angry. Jesus said, “Sorry, dude. You get a big fat F.”

Jesus moved from behavior to the state of our heart. Just having anger in our heart, we fail the test. That means we all fail. We do it on a consistent basis, and we can’t help ourselves. I don’t care how hard you try, you can’t keep yourself from feeling anger under sufficient provocation. Many teachers of this passage today go on to talk about controlling our anger. That’s not the point. Jesus wasn’t saying in his new system you just need to not let your behavior be affected by your anger. ***He’s saying you must not even feel anger!*** Just the arrival of that emotion causes us to fail in this new system. Your heart needs to be so different, so devoid of self-focus and obsession that it can’t even be provoked to anger!

That’s just the first example. He then proceeds to say that we shouldn’t even feel lust. That we love people from the heart even if they are mean and cruel towards us. He’s not saying we should act in loving ways towards people who are unloving, that we should exercise phenomenal control and choose to love undeserving people. He’s saying what should be in our hearts is so much love that it is our automatic response to everyone, no matter what they are like! At the end of a long discussion of this new system that looks not just at behavior, but right into our hearts, Jesus says, “Therefore, since this is about your heart, be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Be perfect the way God is perfect.

How is God perfect? Is it that he is really good at disciplining himself? Is it that he has these eruptions of anger, frustration, envy, and all the rest, but that he perfectly controls them? No, that’s not how God is perfect. The Bible says that God is good, and it means he is perfectly good. Psalm 92:15 says, “The Lord is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him.” The New Living translation says, “there is no evil in him.” That is the point. There is nothing in God with even a hint of evil. In 1 John 1:5 we see the same thing. “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.” 1 John 4:8 says God is love. Love pervades in everything God is and does. Everything is shaped and driven by his love. So everywhere in the character of God there is just goodness and love. He doesn’t have to choose to discipline himself to control some unkind, unjust or unloving impulse and not have it affect his actions. He has no such impulses. His impulses in everything at every moment are always good, loving, kind, holy. This is what it means when it says God is perfect.

Jesus said we are supposed to be perfect as God is perfect. We are to have hearts that beat only with love, kindness, goodness, justice and holiness. Those hearts will never be tainted by impatience, unkindness, anger selfishness, meanness, or lack of love. They will be truly good, with nothing but good, loving impulses. That will be true of them every moment of every day.

I recently had to undergo a colonoscopy because it was time for that “routine” health screening. I arrived as instructed 45 minutes before the scheduled test time (because heaven forbid that they would ever have to wait for a patient the way the patient often waits for them). After I checked in and filled out all the paperwork, a nurse took me into the area where they prepare the patients. It reminded me a little of an assembly line because they have all these beds lined up with patients in them waiting to be run through the rotor rooter system, each bed separated by some flimsy curtains. The nurse says, “Take off all your clothes except for your socks, and put on this gown with the ties toward the back.” I hate those gowns. Everybody hates those gowns. They don’t close in the back very effectively. And those ties give me fits. I simply don’t have the knack of tying things behind my back. Well the nurse solved that for me. She said, “Don’t tie the ties.” Oh, great. I just leave that thing flapping open. Here’s my chance to moon a whole room full of people. Anyway, after I got indecent the nurse came back and put an IV in and made sure everything was ready to go. Then she told me they’d come get me soon and moved on to the next unit in the assembly line. Because we were only separated by a flimsy curtain I could hear everything going on next door. She went through the exact same routine with the woman there. But when she was done with the next unit she said to that woman, “Would you like a magazine to read while you wait?” Do you know what my instantaneous reaction was? “Hey, she didn’t offer *me* a magazine. How come *I* don’t get a magazine? I’d like something to distract me while I lie here with my posterior regions hanging out, waiting to have a camera explore my inmost being, too.” That’s not horrible. It’s understandable. It isn’t totally evil. But it tells you my heart, without being prompted to do so, is always looking to take care of me. There is a primary, “What about Rick?” component to everything that happens in my heart. And that’s true of you, too. (Well, not “What about Rick?” but “What about me?”) My reaction wasn’t really about wanting to have a magazine to read. I suppose it might have been nice to have something to distract me and keep me from playing the worst-case scenario game, but my experience with magazines in medical facilities is that I would have had the unappealing choice between a *Sports Illustrated* from 2017, a *Golf Digest* from May of last year or the latest exciting issue of the *Journal of Proctology*. No, it wasn’t about wanting a magazine, it was about feeling like that other person was being treated better than me. In other words, she was being treated like she mattered more, and that is unacceptable, even abhorrent to the heart that is not perfect.

What didn’t happen was that my instantaneous reaction was, “I am so glad that nurse is looking out for that woman. I’m sure the poor lady is tense and just wants to get this over with, so I am happy the nurse is trying to make it better for her.” That would have been the reaction of a truly good, loving, compassionate, holy and unselfish heart. It would have been the reaction of a perfect heart. There could have been any number of reasons why that nurse offered the lady next door a magazine but didn’t offer me one. The most likely is that she figured I was Number One for the active runway, but that lady was going to be idling on the taxiway for quite some time so she needed something to keep her mind on. I chose not to let my immediate sense of injured feelings

dictate my actions. But the point is that immediate sense was still there, and with a perfect heart it wouldn't be.

What Jesus was doing was telling us what God desires, what he is aiming at in this new system. He is aiming at people who are truly transformed from the inside out. He is aiming at making us people who are like him, who have new hearts like his. He wants to make us people who are truly good right down to every atom of their being like he is. These are not going to simply be people who are more religious, who are more disciplined than other people, who grit their teeth and try harder to be better. That's because no amount of discipline and trying harder will ever transform our hearts like that. No amount of trying to do better, of trying to obey the rules, will ever change our hearts so they are totally good, unselfish, compassionate and loving. It cannot make our hearts so there is no darkness in them at all, not even a particle of evil in them.

I remember as a kid getting a paint-by-the-numbers kit. Did you ever do that? I will tell you that I have no artistic ability at all. I had to take an art class in junior high and it was a major ordeal. When I play Pictionary, I provide extreme amusement for others. They usually end up howling in laughter at my pathetic attempts to draw anything. Ah, but painting by the numbers was my salvation. The picture is already drawn by some gifted person. All you have to do is follow the rules, fill it in, with colors as instructed. Now, it will not surprise you to learn that my efforts were much worse than most people's, but even so you could kind of tell what the picture actually was.

But here's the thing. It did not look beautiful. You could see it for what it was, but it was pretty crude. And most of all, ***it was not art***. It wasn't something inspired and beautiful, something that could touch souls. That's what art is supposed to do. It is to evoke emotion in our souls, to draw something out of us.

God sent Jesus to create a new system that would be ***art***. It would create people who are beautiful, who are so good, so pure, so full of love right down at the core of their being, that they are like works of art that inspire and touch souls. People so full of God's goodness and love that they don't have to choose to do God's will, it just flows out of their beautiful hearts unbidden. To be like him just naturally comes out of their hearts.

Unfortunately, the tendency in the church throughout its history is to try paint-by-the-numbers living. It is to give rules, pound us with programs that emphasize discipline, to tell us to be better and try harder, thinking somehow to transform us from the outside in. It will never work. It can only produce paint-by-the-numbers people. ***It can never produce divine works of art.***

APPLICATION

This new system that Jesus brought is so radical, so alien, that it is difficult for us to keep in our heads. We have a default that goes incessantly back to paint-by-the-numbers living, and many of

us get only a brief whiff of the art of God, and then it is gone. Understand what Jesus is saying in this sermon. The paint-by-the-numbers system does not work, and it is not what God wants. He came to bring an entirely new plan. It is a plan to totally transform people's hearts, to make them a new kind of human being, to make their hearts so beautiful they are works of art. That is what he seeks to do in our lives. I wish it were instantaneous. It's not. God has chosen to make it a process, a slow gradual transformation.

How do we sign up? What do we have to do to have transformed hearts? What program must we follow? One thing is certain. It is not committing ourselves to be better and try harder. It is not having more strict rules. That's just more painting by the numbers. Jesus brought a different system, a divine system that involves the Great Transformer, the one who can truly change us. So here is what we can do.

BE OVERWHELMED BY GRACE

In John 6:28 people came to Jesus and asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Do you know what they are asking him? What are the things we have to try harder at to get better? In other words, how do we do a better job of painting by the numbers? Jesus answered in verse 29, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." You want in on this new system? Here's what you do: you believe in Jesus. You don't just start by believing in Jesus, the whole process of being transformed happens by *continuing* to believe in Jesus.

Every Christian knows that our new life with God begins with believing in Jesus. But what we sometimes lose sight of is what that means. It means that God has done something unimaginable. He sent his Son here to undergo a horror beyond comprehension in order to rescue us. Such a monumental undertaking tells you that without this inconceivable act, there was no hope for us.

When we understand that the only thing we have to recommend us to God is *his grace*, but that is more than enough, when we perceive how deep, how enormous, how profound, was the sacrifice God made on our behalf, it is overwhelming. *The love that drove that action, the love that pervades every moment of our lives because of it, is beyond stunning.* As we are overwhelmed by God's grace it humbles us, it fills us with gratitude and love for him. It changes our hearts! It makes us poor in spirit, which Jesus said is key to possessing the kingdom of God. It begins to transform our hearts, to make them soft, to fill them with joy, with peace, with love. The more we are possessed by God's grace, the more our hearts will be transformed.

I once found myself frustrated by a group of Christian leaders who, when I talked about being transformed by the grace of God, essentially said, "Yes, but what is your proposal for the method of how that transformation takes place? What do you think we should tell people to do?" I said, "The method is grace. You recognize how poor in spirit you are and you revel in God's grace to you. Anything else will end up being more rules." They didn't get it, and it felt like a big failure to me that I couldn't help them see it. But here it is: ***painting by the numbers, more discipline, more***

rules, might even make us behave better, but eventually makes us more religious, more rigid, less full of life and more proud, but it will never transform our hearts. Being overwhelmed by grace brings life, humility, joy and beauty to a heart. That is God's new system, and he told Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9, "My grace is sufficient, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

LIVE IN AWE OF GOD

Just being in awe of something has an effect on us. It touches our hearts, humbles us and fills us with gratitude. Each of us has things that create that sense of awe. I can think of three things in creation that cause me to be in awe. One is being outside on a clear night in a place that is away from all the light of the urban night sky. It is seeing that vast array of stars, even seeing a bit of the Milky Way strung across the sky. It is truly awesome. Don't you feel something when you look at that? I find myself feeling humble, kind of small, but also, somehow filled with gratitude.

Laurie and I have experienced on several occasions moments when we have been looking out on the ocean in the evening when there is a full moon. The moonlight reflecting on the water makes a path that is so beautiful I am unable to describe it and express it. It is awesome. It creates a sense of awe that goes right to the center of your soul. It makes you happy, thankful, joyful. It touches your heart.

Awe of God is like that. The more we are gripped by the vision of his kindness, his infinite love, his goodness, his glory, the more that awe changes our hearts. It causes them to want to respond to his glory and beauty. It fills them with humility and gratitude. It begins to make our hearts take on the shape of *his* heart. It transforms them into the kind of hearts that God is trying to create.

ASK FOR THE SPIRIT TO WORK

In the end, transforming a fallen human heart into a perfect heart is a miracle. I wish I could make it happen, for I want to be more of a work of divine art than I am. But this requires the work of the Spirit of God. It is something we cannot manufacture or control because it takes more power than any human being will ever have.

So this is where we bow before God, submit ourselves to him and ask him to do his work in our hearts. Only he can create in us a new heart, so we must ask him to do what only he can do.