
Be Holiness, Be Perfection, Be Mercy

**An article for the *Cathedral Times*
by the Very Rev. Sam Candler, *Dean of the Cathedral*
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In my Bible studies of the past month, three challenging verses have emerged. The first one is from the strident version of the gospel written by Saint Matthew. In his version of the sermon on the mount, Jesus succinctly sums up one section with, “Be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

In Saint Luke’s version of the same remarks, however, Jesus says, “Be merciful, just as your father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). Some people recognize an older passage behind Jesus’s words, the verse from the Old Testament law, Leviticus (19:2), which states, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.”

So, which is it? Are we to be holy, or perfect, or merciful?

Yes, I realize that the verses do not necessarily contradict each other. Nor do we necessarily need to choose among those three goals. Holiness, perfection, and mercy can all three be good things!

We often think of “perfection” as having got everything right. We scored a 100, a “perfect” score on the test. We think of being “perfect” as having followed directions to the T. So, we might think of “be perfect” as meaning “follow all the laws exactly!” But, I do not think “perfect” has to mean that. Jesus uses a word, in Matthew, that has a sense of goal; the word has the sense of an end, a telos. We can understand the verse as meaning, “Be perfect-ed,” as in “live steadily toward the goal.” This understanding is helpful to me.

Unfortunately, all three of these verses are often heard as commandments. But, I have another way of receiving them. This is because, in general, I grow weary of commandments, even the good ones. I grow weary, even bored, of being told what to do. And so many in the world – especially preachers! – think they are helping us by telling us what to do next. The secular world has picked up the habit. Do-good secularists, especially the self-righteous ones, seem to have inherited the practices of American puritanism: sending out no-compromise directions to everyone. “This is what to do. This is how to do it. Now do it.”

In contrast, I believe Jesus does not mean to show us how to “do.” Jesus is showing us how to “be.” Of course, I know that “doing” is good and necessary. But “being” might be even more good and necessary. In those three different verses above, from Leviticus, and then Matthew and then Luke, what if our God is talking about being, and not doing?

What if we focus simply on the word, “Be”? The idea is not to try to “do” holy things, or “do” things that might be counted perfect, or “do” merciful things. The idea is to “be holiness,” to “be perfection,” and to “be mercy.”

What if it is our whole state of being that God is interested in? In situations of judgement and conflict, what if it is a state of mercy, or presence of mercy, that is needed? Have we tried to “Be mercy” in those situations? “Be perfect” can mean “Be a sense of wholeness and completion, not needing anything else for your soul; count yourself perfected and whole in God right now.”

Finally, of course, “being holy” does not mean just doing holy things at all. There are plenty of people who look like they are doing “holy” things but who are not so holy. Being holy involves carrying a sense of mercy, and completion, and love, and justice, in our very presence.

When it was said that Jesus taught as someone with authority and not as one of the scribes, people meant that Jesus was not just giving directions and delivering information. Jesus carried those realities in his person; he was holiness, he was mercy, he was perfected-ness. Jesus was truth, he was justice. Finally, of course Jesus

was also love. In Jesus, our goal is not just to “do loving things;” in Jesus, our goal is to “be love.”

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

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