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Matthew 5:48 *You Shall be Perfect*

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“Loving Father in Heaven, today we are grateful for the beautiful music we’ve had, we are grateful for Christmas in the Atrium, for this beautiful tree, and Jesus First Offering and all these things are meaningful to us and we appreciate it! But we’ve come here to hear from You Lord. And we are about to open Your Word. And we pray Heavenly Father for You to work in a mighty and powerful way. We ask that You would be the One to teach us through Your Word, and we thank You and we pray this in Jesus’ name, Amen.”

We were pastoring back in Indiana, had a couple of small churches there. And there was a lady that lived and attended one of the churches. She lived back there. She was from Europe originally, and she would go back and forth several times a year. And one time she came back with a gift for Karen. It was a beautiful gift, it was a puppet. It was one of those puppets that you can maneuver with strings. I think they are called, marionette? I am not sure, don’t quote me on it and you can correct me afterwards. I’ll appreciate it.

But this was very sophisticated one. We have a couple right now. I don’t know; they were a gift from our children, weren’t they? Yes, from Jeremy, and Karen has named them Pedro and Margareta. These are simple ones. They just have a simple cross-bar with four strings and the hand and the foot are connected on one side. So when you move it, it goes like this or it goes like this... And we like to take Pedro and Margareta and dance them around for Conner. It’s entertaining for him, and it’s entertaining for us too. They are fun to watch.

But this other puppet was very sophisticated. It had more strings and even where the eyelids could do things, and the mouth could open. And we, neither Karen nor I remember how it happened, but somehow those strings got all tangled up. And she was doing her best to try to untangle them and make this very complicated thing work. Well, there was a church member there who was totally convinced he could do it. He was one of these people who were totally convinced he could do most anything! Well somehow, he convinced Karen that he would be able to fix that puppet. When he brought it back, we don’t know if he cut the stings, what he did, but it was ruined. It could never be fixed again. And what we realized, or we received, is from the hands of an over-confident church member, the ruining of a beautiful gift; from the hands of an overconfident church member, the ruining of a beautiful gift. And that’s what I’d like to study with you today.

Please turn in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 5 verse 48. We are continuing series of our studies of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. We’ve come to a perplexing verse, a difficult verse. One that is hard to understand. It’s chapter 5 verse 48, it says: “Therefore you shall be perfect just as your Father in heaven is perfect.” Now people have used this text to explain a way, or to explain theology. And most people don’t even understand what it is talking about. And so it will be our purpose today to seek to understand what Jesus meant back then. If we can understand that, than we can make an application to today. It maybe that we will spend several weeks on this verse because the whole concept of sinless perfection, which is contrary to scriptures, has a

prevalence within certain peoples' hearts, and that's not scriptural, and it might be that we'll spend some time with it.

Here Jesus says, "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect." I'd like to note that some people have sought to soften the affect of that text by saying, "Well, humanity is perfect in its sphere, and God is perfect in His sphere." Well that's encouraging, but I've never met a perfect person, and I know I am not that person. And so, I don't know if that comforts me or not? What we need to do is understand it in its context. Let's go, same chapter to verse 20. Chapter 5, verse 20, Jesus says: "Well I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."

The scribes and the Pharisees had a belief system that they thought made them righteous. And Jesus says, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that, you can't even go to heaven." He will give six illustrations of how their concepts, teaching and practices are contrary to the actual Word of God. He talks about murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, retaliation, and loving other people. Well who are these Pharisees? What do they believe? They have one main question. We find that in Matthew chapter 19 verse 16. This is the question, this haunts them, this is what drives them. It says: "Now behold one came and said to Him..." the "Him" here is Jesus. "...Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" That was their one question. "What good thing shall I do that may have eternal life?"

They were dedicated to doing right so they could go to heaven. They were lovers and protectors of the Bible as the Word of God. They were careful keepers of God's law, in fact, so careful were they in keeping God's law that they had created laws about keeping God's laws. So they had kind of a halo around the Law of God itself. That's why we talk about six hundred plus laws regarding how to observe the Sabbath. They were so careful they would add laws to laws. There were missionary minded, in fact Jesus said, that they would scour the sea and the land looking for converts. They looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, and they were faithful givers of tithes and offerings. So they had some good qualities. They were, in Jesus' day, an elite core of highly dedicated men.

You see, back in Jesus' day, ladies, you could not be a Pharisee. You can be one today if you want to be, but you couldn't be one back then. There were six thousand of them in the days of Jesus. They are called, "The Separated Ones," that's what Pharisee means. And they thought themselves to be the holy ones, the true community of Israel. They began about a hundred and fifty years before Jesus was born, in the time, the inter-testament time period, known as the Mekabians. The Greeks were in the land at that time, and they had stopped the sacrificial system. And Judas Mekabi and his sons rose up and lead a revolt and a rebellion against the Greeks, and actually, ran them out of town. And it's during that time that this sect, this group of people came along and they said, "You know what, Israel was taken captive to Babylon because they didn't keep the law of God. We are not going to let that happen again."

So with this tremendous interest in holiness, they began. And they developed, until they had a very refined system of beliefs in the days of Jesus. They were striving to capture and preserve true holiness. They had a goal. Their goal was this -- that their holy lives would pave the way for the Christ to come. They felt that if enough people could be holy, then the Christ would appear in their day. They had one central problem, and that was their concept of sin. You see, if you don't understand what sin is, then your solution for the sin problem would be wrong.

If you understand what sin is, then your solution for the sin problem will, or could be right. They did not believe that sin was, well that a person had a sinful nature. They didn't believe that at all. They believed that sin was a specific act rather than a condition of the heart or mind. In fact, they believe that after Adam sinned, and Adam was told he couldn't be in the Garden of Eden anymore, they believe that nothing changed in Adam's heart at all. That Adam was the same Adam when he was in the garden that he was after he was kicked out of the garden.

They did not subscribe to what we call somebody having a sinful nature. They didn't believe that. They believed that men had impulses to evil, but those impulses could be controlled by the will. And that in particular could be controlled by studying the law and applying the law to your life. And so for them sin was an act. So if you didn't sin, if you didn't cave into that act, you didn't sin. And if you didn't sin, you were righteous. So righteousness to them was living without sin. Now they had perfected the ability to live according to the letter of the law. But, they missed the intent of the law which was a changed heart that loves God and loves other people.

Jesus addressed this in Luke chapter 18 when He told the story. Let's turn there in our Bibles. Luke chapter 18, Jesus tells a story. He is dealing with people who were Pharisees back in His day. In Luke 18 verse 9 we read this: "Also He," that's Jesus, "...spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others." There is the description of how Pharisees believed about themselves. They trusted in themselves that they were righteous. They believed they were righteous. They believed that they were no longer sinning. They were righteous. They were qualified to go to heaven because they were no longer sinning. The net result of that is they despised other people. It says, "...and despised others."

There is something about the belief system of the Pharisees that cause them to look down their nose at people who weren't trying as hard as them. They could always find in a crowd somebody they were better than, and that's what made them feel good. And so Jesus begins to tell this story to people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and they also despised other people. He says in verse 10: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other, a tax collector." Now these are two men that are on opposite polls when it comes to the beliefs of people in Jesus' day. You see, we look at the Pharisee and we say, "I don't want to be one" because we know the end of the story.

In Jesus day the Pharisees were national heroes. They were highly regarded, highly respected people. Folks decided many times not to become one because it was so strict and so hard, but they respected the people that were Pharisees. So when Jesus says, "Two men went up to pray,

one was a Pharisee..." they are thinking, "Ah, our national hero went up to pray" "...and a tax-collector." Now tax-collector was despised in the days of Jesus. These tax-collectors weren't like our IRS. They were hired servants of Rome. And the way that it worked is – they basically were extortioners. Rome would give somebody a geographical territory, and they would say, "We need x amount of money, anything you make over that, you get to keep. And we have the Roman soldiers to back you up." And so it became a very dirty practice if you will. They were squeezing every dime they could get out of other people. And so they were considered traders on one hand, and they were taking their money on the other hand. And they were not appreciated.

And so you have a hero, and you have somebody that's despised. They go to church. Jesus says in verse 11: "The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself. 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax-collector. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I possess.'" Five times in this prayer, the Pharisee says "I." What is fascinating to me is when Jesus tells the story, He says in verse 11: "The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself."

Some versions say, "He prayed to himself." The NIV says, "He prayed about himself." Whatever it is, it's not a prayer to God. There is no indication at all that he has any concept of the holiness of God, of the righteousness of God, and of his unworthiness to even be in His presence praying. No, none of that appears in there. He is just kind of basically thumping his chest saying, "God, look how wonderful I am." You know, "I don't do this, I don't do that, I am not like other people, I am a pretty good guy. I am a righteous individual. I am coming to Heaven someday, I have earned my way."

Well let's go on. Verse 13 Jesus says, "...and the tax-collector standing a far off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast saying, 'God be merciful to me, a sinner.'" In the New International Version it says, "God have mercy on me, a sinner." But note how it's written in the Amplified Version. "Oh God, be favorable, be gracious, be merciful to me, the especially wicked sinner that I am." "...the especially wicked sinner that I am." Now Jesus is going to tell this story with a strange ending to the ears of the people in His day. He says in verse 14: "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself, will be exalted." In the NIV it says, "...this one was justified before God."

Despite the Pharisee's perceived goodness, Jesus pronounced him to be lost, but the sinner was saved. Have you ever heard that the Pharisee's sin was the sin of goodness? Have you ever committed that sin, the sin of goodness? Well, here is what the problem was. Good people who do not know that they are not good people that was the problem of the Pharisees. It was human centered, and ultimately it became anti-Christ. In their efforts, in their desire to keep and protect the law, they actually crucified Jesus. It is rigid orthodoxy, but it is absolutely absent of love and compassion. Those are the Pharisees, and that is the background to our text.

Let's go to Matthew 5 verse 20. "Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you cannot enter into the Kingdom of Heaven." Jesus says in Matthew 5 verse 48: "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect." Now the Greek word here for "perfect" is used three times in all of the Gospels. It just so happens all three times are used by Matthew, two of them right here in this verse. "You shall be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect." It's used one more time in the book of Matthew. Look at Matthew 19 and we'll see that passage we started out with earlier. A young, rich man who is a Pharisee comes to Jesus in verse 16. Matthew 19 verse 16: "Now behold, one came and said to Him, 'good Teacher, what good things shall I do that I may have eternal life?'"

Now Jesus will respond, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but One, that is God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments." Jesus knows this person's heart. He knows where this conversation is going. He is going to meet him where he is at. "Keep the commandments." Ah, that is music to the ears of a Pharisee. Verses 18 and 19, "He said to Him, 'which ones?'" See he is engaged. He's got him. Jesus has this fellow on the hook if you will. Jesus said, "These," you know, "you shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, honor your father and mother, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

"Now the young man said to Him, 'all these things have I kept from my youth.'" "What do I still lack? Could there be anything else that I have to do in order to go to heaven?" And Jesus says this: "Yes." Verse 21: "If you want to be perfect..." catch that, "...if you want to be perfect, go sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come and follow Me." What Jesus is saying there is, "You think that you are keeping all the commandments, but it says; 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself.' How can you who have money not give to people who don't have money and say that you are loving your neighbor as yourself? How would you want them to treat you? You give everything to other people to alleviate their poverty, and we'll be talking about being perfect because we are talking about loving people."

Verse 22: "But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions." Now the story continues, this is really interesting, verses 23 and 24: "Jesus said to his disciples, 'assuredly I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again, I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.'" And that's one of those verses I like because I am not considered a rich man. But rich man, too bad for you. But in context we know, this man has wealth. It says it. But in principle what Jesus is teaching us is that anybody that feels self sufficient can't go to heaven.

Now, listen carefully to what I am going to say. Many of us have been taught that it's 'as hard as a camel going through the eye of a needle.' And we've been taught that the city gates back then had a regular door, and they had a smaller door called "the needle," and it was small. But if you pushed, prodded, poked, pulled, cursed, whatever you could, you could squeeze a camel through that small opening. You could get in there. That's not what Jesus is saying. In the

Greek, it means the 'sewing needle.' In another words, it is a phrase describing it's impossible. You can't. If you are self sufficient, you cannot go to heaven. End of story!

Now the disciples pick up on that, and they are going to ask Him a question. Look at verse 25: "When His disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed and said, 'Who then can be saved?' But Jesus looked at them and said to them: 'With man this is impossible, but with God, all things are possible.'" But what are we talking about? Let's go back to Matthew 5:48, look at it in its context, put these things together, and see what we can come up with. Matthew 5 verse 48: three times the word 'perfect' is used in the Gospels. "Therefore you shall be perfect just as your Father in heaven is perfect." Those are the two times, the other time is: "If you want to be perfect, sell everything you have, give it to the poor."

This is all in the context of loving. Jesus has just said, "You are to love like God loves. He sends His rain on the just and the unjust. He puts out the sun for the just and the unjust. God loves everybody, you are to love everybody." The context here is; we are to love the way God loved. That's perfection. In fact, I find it very interesting; please turn to Luke chapter 6. Luke tells the same story but he uses a different word to describe what Jesus meant. In Luke 6 verses 35 and 36 we see the same conversation taking place. It says, "But love your enemies, do good and lend hoping for nothing in return. And your reward will be great and you will be sons of the Highest. And He is kind to the unthankful and evil. Therefore, be merciful just as your Father also is merciful."

Instead of using the word 'perfect,' Luke uses the word, 'merciful.' "You shall be merciful just as your Father in heaven is merciful." In the Amplified version it says, "So be merciful, sympathetic, tender, responsive, and compassionate, even as your Father is all these." I'll tell you brothers and sisters, with men, it is impossible. But with God, all things are possible. You see, the Pharisee could never do this. The Pharisee could never love another person because the problem with the sinful nature which he didn't believe he had, is that the sinful nature does love, but loves its self. And that's it. The sinful nature is in love with its self. In fact, you might say the problem with sin is that it is love. It is love of self. And it takes supernatural Divine intervention to change that.

That's why Jesus says, "You have to be born again; you have to have a new heart, you have to be converted." That has to change. And the evidence to God that the change is taking place, listen to me carefully, is that you love God with all your mind, heart and soul, and your neighbor as yourself. Now I want to make an application that may be uncomfortable for some of you. But listen carefully. The problem with Pharisaic religion in Jesus' day is that it's come all the way down to us, to our day. It was a problem in the New Testament church. Paul was forever fighting the Pharisees who were trying to bring something on the top of a gift – a beautiful gift called *salvation in Jesus*. But in the hands of an overconfident church member, it becomes ruined. There is not a single thing that our denomination teaches or that our denomination practices that you need the Holy Spirit to do or to believe or to practice. Not one thing!

You can be an upstanding member of our denomination. You can be known for generous giving. You can be known for carefully living. You can be known for being upright and moral. You can even be honest. You can have all these qualities and characteristics and be just as lost as the man who was praying in the story that Jesus told. There is one thing, and one thing alone that determines whether or not you get to go to heaven. That is Jesus Christ in your heart. And the way that God knows if Jesus is in your heart, you will love God, and you will have love for other people. And that's what Jesus is saying when He says, "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect." It's to be perfect in love. Now right now, we don't have that to offer. Only God can offer that through us. In fact, with men it's impossible. But with God, all things are possible.

Let me describe for you a couple conditions you may be in. One, you may believe that you are at the point where you love God with all your mind, heart, and soul, and you love your neighbor as yourself. Well, who am I to argue with you? Praise God, I am glad you are there. Or you may be in a position where you can honestly say, you don't love God with all your mind, heart and soul. And you certainly don't love your neighbor as yourself. In fact, it's entirely less than that. Or, you may be somewhere in between where you have accepted Christ and you are trying to love God with all your mind, heart and soul. And you are trying to love your neighbor, but it's a continual struggle. And it's a battle. One of those three conditions describes where you are at.

I'll tell you right now, I don't believe any one person in this assembly is at the point where they can say they love God with all their mind, heart and soul and their neighbor as themselves. I don't believe any of us are there. But I believe a lot of us are right in the middle struggling, trying to get to that point. And I want to encourage you in your struggle. Hang on, keep the struggle going. You are already saved by Jesus. The struggle is just to try to please Him, not to be saved. So take the pressure off. We want to love as Jesus loved because Jesus is so neat. And if you haven't accepted Christ as your Savior, I don't care how unrighteous you are, I don't care how righteous you are, you are still lost.

We need Jesus as our Savior. We need Jesus to love through us. It's the only way. We cannot do it on our own. We can take a beautiful gift called *the eternal life in Christ*, and in the hands of overconfidence, we'll ruin it. So today, I want to know if there is anyone here who would like to say, "I want Jesus to be my Savior. I want by His grace to learn to love God with all my mind, heart, and soul, and I want to learn to love my neighbor as myself." If you would like to say that to God, I am going to ask you to stand. "Loving Father in heaven here we are. Take us as Yours. We are pitiful sinners, but we call upon Your mercy. And we thank You that when we humble ourselves before You, You lift us up. Please, come into our hearts. We pray in Jesus' name, - Amen."