

Sermon by Bob Sessions
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On Perfectionism

If you are like me, you've been a good boy or girl who has pretty much followed our parent's guidance. Oh, we've strayed at times, haven't we? But in general we have tried to live up to their best expectations. And there is nothing wrong with that, is there?

Add to their examples the layers of social approbation from teachers, coaches, mentors and exemplars, and we all have a rich legacy of moral guidance. Then there's the church with its powerful teachings and saints. Who could go wrong?

Basically the same probably could be said of the people Jesus is trying to reach. They know what's right and wrong, and there are countless reminders in their lives about how to be a moral person. So why does Jesus need to tell one of his famous parables to help them figure out how to be a good person? What else do they need to know?

I think Jesus is trying to help them, and us, to be less perfect. Much has been said about the ego-centeredness of the pharisee who prays so all can witness his righteousness. This teaching is, in part, about how we

practice our spiritual and moral lives. We should be good not just because of the consequences, for ourselves as well as others, but because it's the right thing to do. And we certainly need to beware of the natural tendency of the ego to show off.

But I think there's even more we can learn by paying attention to this seemingly simple parable. For once we learn what is right and what is wrong, then the hard part begins.

We get our moral compasses not just from abstractions, but from our natural tendencies to observe others and compare ourselves to them. That's why our parents always warned us to surround ourselves with good people. But in our efforts to be like our models, we build a hierarchy of the less and more perfect. Which is why our tendency is both to put ourselves above some others (more perfect) and below still others (less perfect).

You can see this dynamic in bold by observing ourselves and others on social media. There our tendencies to amplify and exaggerate our strengths and weaknesses, our goodness and badness, are enhanced by the media and called forth by our "friends," who are our competitors. Much has been said about the pernicious effects of social media on young people whose egos are fragile and unformed; but I submit that you and I are

subject to the same dynamics. Perfectionism plays an outsized role in the artificial bubbles online.

And notice: this daily, even hourly or moment to moment comparative game is about the status of our fragile and pervasive egos. Clearly Jesus' parable today is an attempt to break this incessant judging in which we're trapped. But this parable, by itself, only gives us part of the solution: don't puff yourself up, and especially don't use your religious practices as tools for ego satisfaction.

(I probably need not mention the ways in which this dynamic has been a tool of churches to control people from the cradle to the grave. The message boils down to: "You and I are sinners and our only ticket to a happy afterlife is to do what the church dictates, including how to feel if we act rightly or wrongly.")

In Matthew 5:48 we are given a similar, but crucially different, message about being perfect. There Jesus says "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." This strategy avoids the comparison with other-people-games we just explored. The problem is, the new standard seems impossible: be perfect like God! But maybe that's the point. No effort on our part can attain this perfection or even a part of it. So it's not perfection in

our usual sense, that unending spiral of struggling to climb only to fall, to fail once more.

If there is effort we must make, it is to let go of our quest to be perfect. God loves us and our task is to learn to dwell in this love. Grace. And if we do, it's more like channeling than accomplishing something through our efforts. We get in our way.

Richard Rohr just spent a week trying to unravel the mysteries of perfectionism. His example, of course, is St. Francis, the patron saint of Rohr's order, the Franciscans. Rohr says: "As his life deepened in God, [Francis] made a constant effort to spend himself in love by giving himself to the other. He became bent over in love for every person, every creature, including tiny earthworms which he would pick up so that they would not be crushed underfoot. By following the poor and humble Christ, Francis was formed into a "brother minor." His followers said that he became "another Christ" because, like Christ, he was humble in love. Following the footprints of Jesus, Francis found the God of humble love not among the popular and the proud, the arrogant and the rich or those who "stand out" in society but among the ordinary, the forgotten, the poor and sick and the marginalized. The God of Francis, Celano wrote, was a God "who delights to be with *the simple* and those rejected by the world."

Rohr quotes Heather King in trying to explain the path of imperfection St. Francis explored: “We can try, at great personal sacrifice, to be perfectly righteous, a perfect friend, perfectly responsive, perfectly available, perfectly forgiving. But at the heart of our efforts must lie the knowledge that, by ourselves, we can do, heal, or correct nothing. The point is not to be perfect, but to “perfectly” leave Christ to do, heal, and correct in us what he wills.”

To be perfect, we must give up trying to be perfect, which is to live in liminality, that place of mystery where we are content to live in the margins where we are literally out of control because we have invited God into our hearts. Humble Love.