

God's Grace

Sixth Sunday After Epiphany
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Chesterfield, VA

O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you: Mercifully accept our prayers; and because in our weakness we can do nothing good without you, give us the help of your grace, that in keeping your commandments we may please you both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 (NRSV)

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. ¹⁶ If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. ¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸ I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰ loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Matthew 5:21-37 (NRSV)

[Jesus said,] "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' ²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to

judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. ²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell. ³¹ "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' ³² But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. ³³ "Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one."

I'd like to begin this morning by calling our attention to the collect for today. It makes two statements that some of us might have a problem with. First, it tells God that **"in our weakness we can do nothing good without you."** And second, in it we ask the Lord to **"give us the help of your grace, that in keeping your commandments we may please you both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord."** So the logic of the collect is that

since without him we can't do what God wants, we have to ask Jesus to help us to do it.

Some of us might have trouble with this first statement. The American culture we live in celebrates independence and self-sufficiency. We are socialized to take responsibility for ourselves and make our own way. Some of us might be just a little offended at being told that we are weak and that **“we can do nothing good without”** God. We might think, “Gee, it makes me sound so *needy* and *pathetic*.”

Well, on a human scale, we're not so really needy. We live in a middle-class American suburb in the 21st century. Most of us are educated and have good jobs and nice children. Compared to most people in the world today, we are well off. On a human scale.

But how about in our relationship with God? Specifically, how does our ability to do good stack up against God's? In both our Old Testament reading and our gospel reading today God is telling us to obey his commandments. That's doing good. Deuteronomy 30:15-20 speaks of loving God by keeping his commands, which is how we are faithful to him. This is implied in vv. 17-20, where he warns against bowing down to and serving other gods. The implication here is that God's people find themselves frequently attracted to worship and pursue gods other than the God of Israel, the One True God. Why? Because of their weakness. That's not doing good.

This is the third Sunday we've heard Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Today is from chapter 5, where he deepens the Old Testament prohibitions against murder, adultery, divorce, and swearing oaths. He says these laws apply not just to our outward behavior, but to our interior motives and attitudes. In the rest of the chapter Jesus says that far from retaliating against people who hurt us, we should not resist them. Instead of the natural thing, loving our neighbors and hating our enemies, we are to love our enemies. Matthew 5 ends with this appalling command: **“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”** I don't know about you, but I'm not perfect. I'm far from it. And yet Jesus calls us to perfection. God wants us to be just as righteous, just as pure as he is.

There were theologians in the early Church who believed that God couldn't command us to do things that were impossible, and that Christians could live sinless lives. In other words, they didn't see humankind as weak. But that was condemned as a heresy in the 5th century. The true biblical teaching is what we prayed in our collect—that we are incapable of doing good—of keeping God's commandments--without his grace.

I used the words “on a human scale” to describe how we might see our relationship with God in contrast to the way God sees it. It's also how we might see the things we do in contrast to the way God sees them. Let's use an example, say going to visit a fellow parishioner in the hospital. We'd all agree

that's a good thing from God's point of view. He wants us love one another. He wants us to visit and comfort the sick and pray for their healing. But when we examine our motives—would they be purely love of God and love of neighbor? Might it be that we go to visit this person because it makes us feel good about ourselves? Or because we think our spouse or our friend expects us to? Or because we're curious about their condition? Might it be that it makes us feel virtuous that we've missed part of the Super Bowl to visit them?

All these are perfectly natural motives, but they're not God's motives. God's motives are to see his kingdom increased and his name glorified—that is, that people understand his love for human beings as exemplified in their love for each other. So on a human scale our visit to our fellow parishioner is good, but from God's perspective it's a tossed salad of mixed motives, some of which are self-centered. In other words, even at our best, we're not perfect in obeying God's commandments. And yet Jesus calls us to **“be perfect . . . as your heavenly Father is perfect.”**

Jesus doesn't say this to us to make us feel bad about ourselves. It's not to make us afraid of his judgment on our imperfection, our sin. Rather, this is God's way of calling our attention to his own love and greatness and perfection. One response to God commanding us to be perfect is to say, “What? Nobody's perfect!” That's true—with one notable exception. Only Jesus is perfect.

On our own we can't fully and perfectly obey God in this life. On our own we can't escape God's judgment. But the good news is that God's grace in Jesus makes us perfect in God's eyes. God's grace is his love and favor towards us that we can't earn and don't deserve. And he makes it freely available to us in his Son Jesus. When we put our faith in Jesus God sees us through Jesus' perfection.

We see ourselves on a human scale. The idea that God should favor people who sin against him contradicts the way we do things. God's grace has no parallel in human life. For example, suppose Jesus called some of his disciples together and told them, "Guys, I'm going to bring another disciple on board." When they ask him who it is, he says, "Matthew, the tax collector." "Matthew?! NOT HIM!" they say. "He's a crook! He's collaborating with the Romans! He's getting rich by overtaxing his own people! You can't be serious!"

To any self-respecting Jew in Jesus' time a tax collector was an outcast for all the reasons I've put into the disciples' mouths. But Jesus called Matthew anyway because God is perfect in grace. Matthew wasn't keeping God's commandment in the law because he couldn't. His offenses were more visible than ours. But he was made perfect through his relationship with Jesus, and so are we. Paul puts it this way in his letter to the Romans: **"But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is**

attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.” (Romans 3:21-25a)

God gives us Jesus’ own righteousness when we put our faith in Jesus’ gift of himself on the cross. It’s as though the judge has found us guilty, pushed back from his bench, taken off his robes, stepped into place beside us, and offered to take our sentence for us. It’s a gift. What we do is receive his gift by faith. And in gratitude we visit our sick fellow parishioners, feed the homeless, and do all the good things that God has prepared for us to walk in.

So let’s pray our collect for today together. As we do, open your heart to receive God’s gift of himself in Jesus and ask for his power to accomplish all he has for you to do. Let us pray:

O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you: Mercifully accept our prayers; and because in our weakness we can do nothing good without you, give us the help of your grace, that in keeping your commandments we may please you both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.