Practice Doesn’t Make Perfect, but Jesus Does

Matthew 5:21-48

By Kyle D. Rapinchuk

You have heard that it was said, “practice makes perfect,” but I say to you that “practice makes permanent.” If you are an athlete, you have probably heard at least one, if not both of these phrases. As children, we are often told that if we practice hard enough and long enough, then we will become perfect. Unfortunately, this is never the case. No matter how hard we work, there is some physical deficiency, mental lapse, or unexpected obstacle that derails our pursuit of perfection.

I remember in high school I would spend hours shooting free throws. I was never perfect, yet I began to come closer and closer. At one point, I could consistently make 90/100, sometimes making as many as 97. What I found was that, although I never achieved perfection, I was achieving permanence. Even as my mind would wander, my body had been trained to make the same motion, the same bounce of the ball, the same spin in my hand, the same bend of the knees, the same thrust of the arms, the same flick of the wrist, over and over again from practice until it became mindless. I no longer had to think about shooting a free throw, I could simply shoot because I had developed the habit over and over until it became second nature.

The opposite example is my golf game. I love golf, but since learning the game at the age of 12, I have only played a few times a year, rarely if ever practicing in between. This sporadic practice manifests itself in my time on the course. I will have occasional shots of brilliance, suggesting an ability to be a good golfer; yet I also have more than occasional shots of horror, often hitting trees, buildings, and cars that were foolishly parked near the course. The problem is not so much in my ability, as my good shots will show. The problem is in my lack of practice. I am simply unable to reproduce the same swing over and over again when called upon to do it. I have not, as I did with free throws, established permanence. I have not cultivated that skill through consistent practice that aims at perfection, even if I know I cannot achieve it.

As we look tonight at Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:21-48, I find that my life, and perhaps yours as well, has often times been like my golf game and not my free throws. Rather than practicing for perfection, I have been hoping that when called upon to act, I will simply be brilliant without having prepared for it. Jesus will demonstrate in these verses how that approach will not work.

Look at what Jesus tells his listeners. He will repeat the phrase over and over that I used earlier, “You have heard that it was said...But I say to you...” As we looked at last week, Jesus will use OT teachings as a foundation for his discussion in this section. Remember last week we looked at how our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees. That did not mean, however, better conformity to external rules. It meant a heart more conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. So Jesus continues that point with specific examples. He begins, “You have heard that it was said, you shall not murder, but I say to you that if you are angry with your brother
you will be liable to judgment.” This is most simply because anger manifests a lack of forgiveness which Jesus commands of his followers.

Next he discusses lust. He says, “You have heard that it was said you shall not commit adultery, but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” This is because lust manifests a lack of sexual purity, whether one is married or not. God created sex to be enjoyed in the marriage relationship, for several purposes, including unity and procreation. To lust after another is to seek the pleasure of sexual fulfillment outside of its intended context.

His third example is divorce. “You have heard that it was also said whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce, but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, and marries another commits adultery and makes her and anyone who marries her commit adultery.” This passage is often used as an exception for when believers can justify getting a divorce. But that is not Jesus’ primary point at all; rather, he asserts that marriage is not a civil institution that we can enter in and out of as a our desire for a person grows or subsides. Marriage is a God-created, God-given institution which acts as a covenant between a man and woman. It is a lifelong commitment that reflects the marriage between Christ and his church. We should not take entering into marriage lightly because there are few, if any, reasons for ending it.

His fourth example is the taking of oaths. “You have heard that it was said to those of old, you shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn. But I say to you, do not take an oath at all…” Some have taken this to mean that we can never take an oath, even in court. But it seems to be more a general principle rather than a prescriptive prohibition. The point is that we ought to be trustworthy individuals, so trustworthy in fact that people will take us at our word without the need for an oath.

His fifth example is retaliation. “You have heard that is was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil…” This passage closely relates to other NT passages that tell us to love our enemies, bless those who persecute us, and so on (Rom 12:14; 1 Pet 3:9). Vengeance is the Lord’s; He will repay. We are called to forgive, a point that the Lord’s prayer next week will make perfectly clear.

Finally, related to retaliation, Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” In light of what Jesus promised earlier in chapter 5, we know that we will be persecuted for the sake of righteousness. Jesus is telling his followers that when that persecution comes, that they should pray for those who are persecuting them. To love our friends and hate our enemies does not distinguish us at all from unbelievers, which is Jesus’ point in verses 46 and 47. What sets us apart as Jesus’ followers is that we love our enemies, which is why so much is promised for those who do this. Look at verse 45: we are to love our enemies so that we may be sons of our Father who is in heaven (again, think Lord’s prayer).
Our position as sons is seemingly contingent upon us being those who love our enemies. That is because loving our enemies shows that we follow Jesus, and following Jesus, being in Christ, is the way in which we enter into God’s family as His children.

We recognize, then, that Jesus’ demands go beyond the letter of the law. They deal with the spirit of the law, what it was intended to produce in us. The reminder not to be angry, not to lust, not to divorce, not to swear oaths, not to retaliate, and not to hate our enemies form the more stringent demands Jesus makes of his followers. And yet these can give us the wrong impression. To illustrate what I mean, I am going to illustrate—literally. G.K. Chesterton tells an interesting story in his essay, “A Piece of Chalk.” But before I get to his point, which will be my point tonight, I want to begin with a preliminary illustration. Notice this white sheet of paper. I am going to draw a picture of our recent snow day. Now, when it comes to drawing the snow, what should I do? Nothing? My paper is already white, so to draw snow I simply leave it white. My picture is complete. This illustration would reinforce the statement that many make that white is not a color, but the absence of color. But suppose now I am drawing on brown paper, as Chesterton was in his essay. How might I draw the snow? I would need white chalk. And this is precisely what struck Chesterton as important. He writes,

> One of the wise and awful truths which this brown-paper art reveals, is this, that white is a colour. It is not a mere absence of colour; it is a shining and affirmative thing, as fierce as red, as definite as black. When, so to speak, your pencil grows red-hot, it draws roses; when it grows white-hot, it draws stars.¹

Chesterton then takes this illustration and applies it to the realm of virtue, which is why it is so helpful for our purposes. He writes,

> And one of the two or three defiant verities [truths] of the best religious morality, of real Christianity, for example, is exactly this same thing; the chief assertion of religious morality is that white is a colour. Virtue is not the absence of vices or the avoidance of moral dangers; virtue is a vivid and separate thing, like pain or a particular smell. Mercy does not mean not being cruel or sparing people revenge or punishment; it means a plain and positive thing like the sun, which one has either seen or not seen.²

Jesus is not simply calling his followers to avoid certain sins, although this is certainly a large portion of his command. What Jesus is calling his disciples to do in Matthew 5 is to develop virtue, which is something “plain and positive.” Virtue is development of Christ-like character that arises from repeated conscious decisions to be like Christ and not the world. It means conformity to the heart of Christ, and not our sinful hearts. It means that we must constantly and consciously practice mercy, humility, love of enemies, prayerfulness, justice, and more. Like my golf game, these things will not simply happen on their own. Removing lust, just like

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²Ibid.
removing a bunker or a water hazard, will certainly help, but it will not fix my inconsistent swing. In golf, the more I improve my swing, the less the obstacles will be in play. Similarly, the more we conform our heart to Jesus' heart, the less we will struggle with anger, lust, and the need for revenge. Simply stated, the more that we consciously practice Christ-likeness, the more natural it becomes.

But this requires a choice—a difficult choice. We know from last week how this section ends, with verse 48: “Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect.” It requires perfection, and we cannot attain it. But there is hope. Jesus has lived the perfect life that we could not. He offers us his righteousness, his perfect obedience, in exchange for our unrighteousness and disobedience. But that means that we have to give up our own life. We must follow him. We must be crucified in Christ so that it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me. Notice what we sang in the last song, “Mighty to Save”: “I give my life to follow.” That is what we are called to do, here in verses 21-48, throughout the Sermon on the Mount, and really throughout the NT. We are called to give up our own life, our own desires, our own plans, and follow Jesus. When I close, we will sing two more songs. Listen to and meditate on the words as you sing them. In the song “Glory to God” you will sing the phrase “so let my whole life be a blazing offering.” Your life, your whole life, every last area of it, must be given to God as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to him, which is our spiritual worship (Rom 12:1-2). In the final song, “Forever Reign,” we will confess that Jesus Christ is good when there is nothing good in me. Jesus Christ is hope because he has covered all my sin. That is reason enough why our hearts will sing no other name but Jesus; that is why “Be Thou My Vision” says that our high king of heaven is our treasure. And so what does this look like in daily practice. It certainly looks like a prayer that God will give us clean hands and a pure heart that we might be faithful and not lift our souls, our hearts, our lives up to any other but Jesus Christ.

So my challenge for you tonight is three fold. 1) Do not see Jesus as simply the means to an end, namely heaven; see him as the greatest treasure. 2) Kill sin; remove anger and lust and more from your heart daily. Think of ways to remove these obstacles. 3) Replace those things with practice. Practice Christ-likeness. Practice virtue. Practice mercy, justice, and more. And the more you practice them, the more they will become second nature. The more you practice them, the more permanent they become. And don’t worry that practice makes permanent rather than perfect, because Jesus has already accomplished perfection on your behalf. Be perfect by being in Christ, but make it permanent through practice.