

Did Jesus Really Say That?

“Be Perfect”

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This text is from a transcription of a recent sermon by Rev. Kevin Labby. It has been transcribed verbatim and edited by Copilot AI, along with additional review and editing by the theological staff at Third Millennium Ministries.

Would you turn in your Bibles to the Gospel of Matthew, chapter five, verses 43 through 48. This morning we continue our series Did Jesus Really Say That? — exploring those sayings of Jesus that strike our ears as strange or even hard. Today’s passage is one of those “hard sayings.”

Scripture Reading

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, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Here ends the reading of God’s Word. Let us pray.

Father, your Word is perfect, reviving and renewing hearts. By your Spirit, open our eyes and ears, soften our hearts, and shape us by what you have spoken. Amen.

The Struggle with Perfection

Do you ever wrestle with what some call “all-or-nothing” thinking? That mindset where, if you don’t nail something exactly right, it feels like complete failure?

I know that struggle. Teaching Scripture is one of my greatest joys, but if I miss a detail in a sermon or forget an illustration in Sunday school, I can replay it for hours afterward. If I'm not careful, I beat myself up, regretting missed opportunities — as though what God requires is a flawless performance.

Parents know this feeling too. Lying awake at night, replaying a sharp word spoken to a child, they overlook countless acts of devotion and kindness. Students know it as well — after late nights of study, flashcards, and review, still feeling they've fallen short of expectations.

This mindset can creep into how we view God. We imagine Him with folded arms, tilted head, and a look of disgust: "When will you ever get it right?" So when Jesus says, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect," it can sound unbearable — crushing, even.

But here's the good news: Jesus' words are not meant to drive us to despair. Properly understood, they drive us toward Him.

What Jesus Really Means

First, let's be clear: Jesus is making a demand. He is God, and He has every right to command His people.

Verses 43–44: "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."

Context matters. In Jesus' day, the Pharisees — popular among the people — were masters of outward religiosity. They spoke much of obedience, but in reality they substituted human traditions for God's law. They narrowed "neighbor" to mean "people like us" — those who looked, thought, and worshiped the same way. Everyone else was excluded. Some even added the distortion: "hate your enemy."

Jesus will not let them off so easily. He clarifies the true meaning of God's law:

Outward Expansion — Love is not limited to your circle. It extends to the driver who cuts you off, the politician you dislike, even the person who has harmed you. "Love your enemies." Everyone is an object of love.

Inward Depth — Love is not mere politeness. Jesus says, "Pray for those who persecute you." This is heart-level obedience. It means sincerely asking God to bless those who have wronged you.

And Jesus Himself modeled this. On the cross He prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” He loved His enemies.

The Transforming Power of Love

This kind of love changes people in ways that harsh words or violence never can. It softened the heart of the thief on the cross — who began the day cursing Jesus but ended it seeking forgiveness in His name.

That is the surprising hope hidden in this hard saying. Jesus’ call to perfection is not a crushing demand for flawless performance. It is a call to wholehearted love — outward and inward — patterned after the Father’s own perfect love.

So when Jesus says, “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect,” He is not setting before us an impossible burden. He is inviting us into the life of love that reflects God Himself. And that is not despairing news — it is the gospel’s surprising hope.

What changed him? It was the love of Christ. He saw how Jesus suffered, how He prayed for His enemies, cared for His mother, and even looked after those who had abandoned Him. That love transformed the centurion at the foot of the cross. When the earthquake shook the ground and the sky grew dark, this soldier—assigned to guard the crucifixion and ensure death was carried out—had listened all day as people hurled insults and mocked Jesus. Yet Jesus loved them and prayed for them. And the centurion declared, “Surely, this man is the Son of God.”

It changed the Apostle Paul too. Once, he hunted down Christians—men, women, and children—imprisoning them and coercing them to deny Christ. In Acts we read that he even presided over the murder of Stephen, the first Christian martyr and one of the church’s first deacons. Yet Paul would later remind us: “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” God’s undeserved kindness has a way of melting even the hardest hearts.

Jesus expects this same love of us, but He explains that this expectation reveals something about the Father. In Matthew 5:45–47 He says: “That you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.” In other words, notice how God loves and cares for the world. The sun shines on every garden. The rain falls on every farmer’s field. God blesses people daily—whether they believe in Him or not.

Theologians call this common grace. There is a particular grace given to God’s children—those redeemed, saved, and adopted into His family through justification by grace. They rightly call Him Father, and He calls them His

children. Yet even those outside of that covenant receive His kindness. The one who never prays breathes the same air, enjoys the same sunshine, and harvests from the same rain as the faithful servant of the Lord. God is gracious and loving, even to His enemies.

What does this tell us about God? His love is not transactional. It is not earned. It is undeserved, born of grace, protected by mercy. He withholds what we truly deserve in order to give what we do not deserve. As Paul says, “Don’t you know that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?”

When we love like this—mirroring God’s character toward the world, even toward our enemies—we begin to look again like true image bearers. In fact, we start to resemble our Heavenly Father. Paul exhorted the Ephesians: “Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ loved us.”

This is profoundly countercultural. In our world today, love is often withdrawn when we disagree or when we’ve been hurt. We love those who love us back, and dismiss those who don’t. But God calls us to something different: a love that spills over boundaries, a love that reflects His generous heart.

We must be careful, though. This is not the cheap imitation of love that avoids hard truths. Jesus loved everyone around Him, but He also spoke difficult truths. Faithful love speaks truth not to wound but to heal—not from vengeance or bitterness, but because truth is life-giving and in the best interest of those who hear it.

And then comes the verse that takes our breath away: “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). At first, it feels like an impossible weight. But here we must understand the word perfect. In Greek, it is *teleos*. While it can mean flawless, its primary sense is wholeness, completeness, maturity.

James writes that steadfast faith produces believers who are “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:4). Paul says the goal is to present everyone *teleos*—mature in Christ (Colossians 1:28). In 1 Corinthians 14:20, he exhorts believers to be infants in evil but *teleos*—mature—in their thinking. In every case, *teleos* points to a life fully integrated under God, undivided in devotion, growing into the fullness of His intent.

So yes, Jesus calls us to perfection—but not merely moral flawlessness. He calls us to wholeness: to reflect God’s character in every dimension of life, extending love as God does, to all people. This echoes the Old Testament command: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” Holiness means moral purity, yes, but also being set apart—distinct, wholly devoted to the Lord, different from the world’s ways.

This exposes our deficiencies, and that is precisely Jesus' intent. Not to drive us to despair, but to drive us to Him. For we rightly confess, "I don't have that." And Jesus answers, "I know."

Where we are deficient, He is sufficient. Where we wander, He remains true. At the end of His life, though worthy of reward, He did not ascend to a throne. He went to the cross. He went there because that is where we were headed—toward punishment we richly deserve. But Jesus took His righteous life to the cross, bore our sin, and died in our place.

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." What has this accomplished for us? Two profound realities, which I'll close with today.

First, we have been given a perfect position and standing in holiness.

You may say, "But I know I'm not perfect." And you're right—you're not. Yet Christ was perfect for you. At the cross, He canceled the debt of your sin and gifted you His righteous life, lived in your place as your substitute before the court of heaven. When you look to Christ, you are perfect positionally: all your sin canceled, all His righteousness credited to your account by grace through faith.

When God the Father sees you, He sees you as holy and blameless in His sight. As Hebrews 10:14 declares: "By a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified." That verse explains the mystery—by one offering, Christ has perfected you. It is finished. You are declared righteous when you turn to Him in faith, sincerely seeking forgiveness. In that moment, you receive pardon and the riches of His righteousness reckoned to your account. Positionally, you are perfected before God.

But notice the balance: Hebrews says He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. Positionally, you are holy. Practically, you are not yet there. God is moving you toward that holiness, teaching you what it looks like, so that you may lay hold of it and live it more and more. Will you achieve perfection in this life? No. But can you grow steadily in holiness? Yes—by God's grace and His Spirit. As Philippians 1:6 assures us: "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

Second, we are encouraged in the struggle of sanctification.

If you see imperfection in your life, don't fall into all-or-nothing thinking. Expect the struggle. Growth in grace and holiness is never effortless, but the very struggle is evidence of God's work in you.

I once met with someone who said, "Pastor Kevin, I'm really struggling as a Christian." I asked, "In what way?" They replied, "I'm struggling to obey the Lord."

The things I thought I'd be better at—I'm not yet better at." I asked, "Does it bother you?" "Yes, of course—that's why I'm here." "Does it move you to prayer?" "Yes."

And I said, "Then keep striving. Because the struggle itself is the sign that you already have perfection before the Father through Christ, and that God is progressively making that perfection more and more your lived experience as you grow in His grace."

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