
Is Perfection The Gold Medal?

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A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Epiphany 7A

Jesus said, "Be perfect, as your father in heaven is perfect."

-Matthew 5:48

"Be perfect," said Jesus!

And oh, how that command has confused and distracted us. The quest for perfection has driven several human beings to greatness, but the quest has driven many more to depression and suffering. It has ruined many a good person, hasn't it?

As I watched the Winter Olympics this past week, I learned at least one thing: winning an Olympic gold medal is not the only way to be perfect. Sadly, for many wanna-be Olympic athletes, it's either gold or nothing. If they can't have the gold, then they are not perfect.

Athletes in so many other venues have fallen for the same temptation. If you're not the starting quarterback, you're not perfect. If you're not a super bowl winner, you're not perfect. They keep telling the Atlanta Braves, "Hey, since you've won only one world series, you're not perfect."

It can be anything, can't it? The NCAA final four, the grand slam of tennis. The richest guy in the world. The Grammys. The Oscars. The best. The tiger mom. The perfect.

The perfect.

I saw something different this past week. I glimpsed perfection somewhere else. The perfect was Elana Meyers, our local Atlanta hero, from Douglas County, after she had just come in second in women's Olympic bobsledding. What a story. She did not win the Gold Medal. But, afterwards, here are some of the things she said:

"I fought every single second down the track and Lauryn really dug it out at the start," Meyers said after her fourth run. "We gave everything we had and left it all out there. That's really what it's about, it's about going out there and giving everything you can to fight for your country. We couldn't be happier with that, and hopefully America will forgive me for letting gold slip away." (from NPR blog, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/theedge>, by Bill Chappell, February 19, 2014, 4:53 pm).

And then she said,

"You know, um , I can't even ," Meyers started. "It's been a long four years, and there's been a lot of people behind me, and a lot of support. I've had all of Atlanta , all my friends and family have really stood by me." "This week was really hard, this Olympics was really hard, and Lauryn stood by me the whole way. I can't be happier for this moment, because it's incredible." (from Matt Pearl, *Tellingthestory* blog, *MY OLYMPICS JOURNEY: No shame in silver for Elana Meyers*,

February 20, 2014 - 4:21 am)

"I can't be happier for this moment," she said. That is perfection.

For most of the world, most of the time, we misinterpret perfection. We force some impossible goal upon ourselves; and then, when we begin to realize how un-achievable it is, we suffer.

Let's look at today's gospel. In the Gospel of Matthew, during his long and severe Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has prescribed almost impossible behavior. If your right eye offends you, pluck it out, he says. If someone strikes you on the cheek, turn the other cheek. If someone takes your coat, give them your cloak, too. If you are angry with someone, it's the same as murder.

We are incredulous, time after time, when we hear those words. No one, not even the greatest saint among us, has ever met those standards, day after day. Jesus has explored the depths of the law and the depths of human conscience; he knows what our thoughts and desires are. And he knows that no one fulfills all the law and the prophets. No one meets every jot and tittle of the law.

Then, at Matthew 5:48, he sums up his severity. "Be perfect," he says, "as your father in heaven is perfect."

Is this supposed to be the kind and gentle, ever-understanding Jesus? How could any one of us ever be perfect as our father in heaven is perfect? And what if perfection were indeed winning an Olympic Gold Medal, or the Super Bowl, or the World Series? There is simply no practical way that every single team can do that. There is no way every individual can be perfect at such contests.

So, what does Jesus mean when he says, "Be perfect"?

The answer has to do with the definition of perfection. I do not believe that Jesus defines perfection as the world does. For the world, perfection means we got it all exactly right. We scored one hundred per cent on the test. We met every standard. We won the gold, with no mistakes whatsoever. We had no blemishes or scuff marks or falls. No crashes or cracks. Maybe we all aspire to that sort of perfection, but every one of us should also realize that no one actually attains it.

And, friends, that is not what Jesus means by "perfection." Being perfect does not mean living a morally sinless, unstained, uncracked, unbroken life.

The word for "perfect" here in Matthew chapter five is the Greek word "teleios," which means "the goal, or "the end," or "completed." So, I believe that when Jesus says "Be perfect," what he really means, in our language, is "be perfected." He means for us to carry on, to persevere, to reach that point that God intends us for us, to reach that perfected end to our life journey. He means "Reach maturity. Be completed." Perfection means to be perfected.

Actually, his quotation sounds like something out of Leviticus 19:2, "Be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." But Jesus changes the word. Jesus says, in Matthew, "be perfected, as your father in heaven is perfected." Jesus is implying that to be holy, as Leviticus commanded us, actually means to be completed, to be perfected, to reach that perfected end of our soul's journey.

To be perfect, and to be holy, is to recognize that where you are, at this moment, is a gift; it is where God wants you to be. You are on a journey. Holiness is recognizing the grace of God right where you are, right now.

Being perfect, being holy, is understanding where God wants you to be right now, and, then, simply being there: being at peace with it, being holy in that moment. That is perfection. If there was someone keeping score, and you came in second, so be it. Happiness is knowing that's exactly where you should be, on your journey. Even if you came in last, so be it. To be holy is to be on your way, on your way, in your own time, in God's time, to your goal.

When the buzzer buzzes, when the bell rings, whatever bell it is, rejoice! Be right where God has you, at your own time.

Leonard Cohen, the master of wisdom literature, had it right when he said,

*"Ring the bells that still can ring,
forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack, a crack, in everything.
That's how the light gets in." (from "Anthem")*

Every offering, every contest, every performance, has a crack in it. Offer it. Give it up. Give it up for Elana Meyers, who realized that, and who did Atlanta and the United States proud. She couldn't be happier, she said. The right driver won. So what. That is who the right driver was that day.

We are all on a journey, and our journeys have twists and turns, some of which are far more dangerous than those on a bobsled course. Sometimes, we crash. Sometimes we crack up. We crack up, just as Elana Meyers did a few days before the final run. She got back on her sled that very same day.

There is a crack in everything. There is a crash in everything. That's how the light gets in. That's how we know that we are headed towards perfection.

Be perfected, said Jesus. Be on your way toward the goal. Reach the end. Strive for all that God wants you to be. But none of us there yet. *None* of us is there yet, even those of us who come in first in whatever contest we are in. We are on the journey, offering what we have on whatever day we need to. Our offerings, and our efforts, have cracks and crashes in them.

Perfection is realizing that every effort we make, every moment of our journey, has some holiness in it, too. God, present in our lives, is holiness.

"Be perfected," said Jesus, which means, "Be holy." Realize the presence of God in every twist and turn and crack and crash of your life. Realize the presence of God at every turn of the journey, and God will be with you, too, at the end, at the goal, when all will be perfected.

AMEN.

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