

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
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Walking in the Way of Love

It all seems so easy, if we listen to our Psalm today, “Happy are they whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord! Happy are they who observe his decrees and seek him with all their hearts! Who never do any wrong, but always walk in his ways.” So... there you have it. All you need to do to be happy is be blameless, walk in the law of the Lord, observe his decrees, and never do any wrong. Now you know what you’ve been doing wrong all these years.

As if that weren’t a hard enough standard to live up to, Jesus puts a finer point on it. “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ 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.”

We all want to be good. We all want to be the best we can be. When we do something wrong, we may feel guilty, or we may feel *really* guilty. We also know that there are people who don’t feel guilty. They do as they please, and don’t worry about the consequences. Some of us are experts at rationalization, always making excuses for what we have done or said wrong. It’s not my fault. I didn’t mean for that to happen. I had no choice. Most of us seem to have an intuitive sense of right and wrong, and when things are out of balance, we want them to be put back in balance. That’s why we have a criminal justice system, to try and reset the scales back to zero. We have no illusions that even an excellent law enforcement and legal system is perfect, but we must try to keep things even.

That's what the Old Testament law was all about, trying to keep things even between us and God, and between us and each other. It's not that God really expected us to be perfect. It's just that there had to be a system both for defining the good and incentivizing us to move towards it, and for dealing with the inevitable straying from the straight and narrow. Then Jesus comes along and redefines what it means to keep the law by saying that getting angry is just as bad as murder, that looking at someone with lust is just as bad as committing adultery, and that not swearing falsely isn't good enough one must not swear at all. Is Jesus really telling us that we should be lopping off the body parts that cause us to sin, or is he trying to make a different point?

To answer that question, we must first take a closer look at what was enshrined in the Old Testament law. Was it just a set of rules, a list of dos and don'ts, proscribed boundaries that were not to be crossed? You may eat of the fruit of any tree in the garden except the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Or was the law about more than simple dos and don'ts? Was it perhaps about a relationship?

God loves humanity. God can hardly do otherwise, since God is love. Since God is love—pure love, selfless love—only love can approach God. Anything else would be repelled like two magnets turned round the wrong way. Don't think too hard about that analogy, because with magnets opposites attract, and with God like attracts like, or rather Love attracts love. The point is that if it is not love, it cannot be in relationship with God. But of course we are free. It wouldn't be love if we were not free not to love. So there is the dilemma of human nature: we must be free to choose in order truly to love God in return, and yet if we choose anything other than love we cannot be in relationship with God. God's very perfection makes a relationship with God virtually impossible. I think that was the point of the law. It's wasn't about being

perfect. It was about being more perfect, more like God, in a proper relationship with God. It was about giving us guidance, inspiring us, providing content to the invitation to love. You ask: what is love? The law tells you what love is and how to love.

Then came Jesus, not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it, to perfect it, to give it fuller, deeper content. He began by making a simple point: if you think you can please God by trying to be perfect, you will miserably fail. Even if you can avoid doing the wrong thing, you can't avoid thinking it. You can't avoid killing your neighbor in your heart. You can't avoid committing adultery in your fantasies. You can't avoid lying to yourself with rationalizations. You can't avoid choosing the wrong over the right, even if it is only in your daydreams. "That's why I'm here," Jesus tells us. "I fulfill what you cannot."

God is love, and Jesus is God's son. Jesus is love with legs. He walks with us and he talks with us, most of all he loves us, even more than we are capable of loving ourselves, certainly more than we are capable of loving him in return. Love isn't about perfection. It's about striving. Love wills the good, and strives for the good. It challenges us, draws us out of ourselves, and our own concerns, making the other our concern. The ultimate effect of love is to remove our self from the center of our own world and replace it with another. In as much as we can love God, we place God, and God's concerns, in the center of our being. We know God's concerns because God gave us the law. We know God's concerns because God gave us Jesus. You ask: what is love? Jesus tells us and shows us what love is and how to love. On the cross, Jesus emptied himself and put us and our concerns at the center of his being. On the cross, Jesus fulfilled all of love's demands.

So, can we be perfect? No. Do we have to be? No. But we do need to love, with all our being, with all our heart, with all our time, with all our strength, with all our money, with all our

imperfection. Love is not about perfection; it is about striving. When we strive to be like God, and we strive to love like Jesus, we discover that at the very heart of God is a love so powerful that it can take our striving, which is always falling short, and it can perfect it and make it reach to eternity.

Now let's go back to our Psalm, that statement of the requirement to be perfect in order to be happy. This time when you hear any reference to the law, think love, and when you think love, think Jesus as the perfect expression of love and our love as striving for Jesus. "Happy are they whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord! Happy are they who observe his decrees and seek him with all their hearts! Who never do any wrong, but always walk in his ways."

Amen.