

Have you ever stopped to consider how confusing our language can be, especially to people who are learning it for the first time? Especially one example would be words that we use to mean two very different things. When we use the word "bark," for example, do we mean the covering on a tree or do we mean the sound that a dog makes? Or when we use the word "bat," are we talking about the stick that we use to hit a baseball or are we talking about the creature that flies at night? Or even a word like "pound," do we mean how much something weighs or do we mean what we do when we beat something? Of course, we understand what these words mean, and we always use them correctly, or at least use them correctly most of the time, because we understand and they are familiar to us in every way. But for someone who is learning the language for the first time, it's not so easy, because they're not always going to be able to distinguish between those two meanings as quickly as we do.

But Christians, there are some words in our language that also have two different meanings, but those meanings are so close to one another that we don't always distinguish between them. They tend to get muddled together in our heads. They become a little bit fuzzy, so that we're not exactly sure which one we mean when we use it. We always use the word correctly, of course, but it can lead us to misunderstand what someone else means when they use that word, even if we don't mean to do it.

One example of a word like this would be the word "perfect." We use the word perfect in a couple of different ways. On the one hand, perfect can mean doing something exactly, to do it without making any mistakes whatsoever. So we talk about things like having a perfect score, or we talk about having a perfect grade, and so forth. And when we use it in this sense, perfect means that I have met some kind of standard, that I have measured up, that I have done it exactly as it's supposed to be done. And so perfect refers to my actions in that case. It refers to what I am doing, and I have done it perfectly.

But on the other hand, perfect can also mean that something is complete, that something is finished, that I have brought it to completion. If I have added the finishing touches, now it is perfect. As long as it didn't have those things, as long as it was missing something, then it's imperfect. But as soon as I add it, now I have something perfect. So in that case, rather than pointing to what I am doing, perfect refers to the thing itself. I am perfect. I am complete.

Now, those two meanings, of course, are not all that far apart from one another, and for that reason we can use the word in both ways without really thinking about which one that we mean. And that can lead us to misunderstand something that should otherwise be clear. For example, Jesus says at the end of Matthew chapter 5, which is part of the section that are our Gospel reading for today comes from, in verse 48: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." So what does Jesus mean there? When Jesus says "you must be perfect," does he mean that you need to have a perfect score, that you need to measure up, that you need to do things exactly as they're supposed to be done? Is that what it means to be perfect? Or does he mean that you must be perfect because you are now complete, because you have become like something, you have become like the Father? How should we understand Jesus? Which one is it?

And maybe we think there isn't a lot of difference. After all, "perfect" is kind of a fuzzy word. But how we understand "perfect" here is going to change how we understand other things too.

Take the word "righteousness" from our reading for today. Jesus says in verse 20: "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." So what do we mean by righteous? What we think about "perfect" is going to change how we understand the word "righteous." If being perfect means having that perfect score, if it means doing things exactly, then that's what righteousness means too. That I have to do everything exactly as it's supposed to be done. I have to measure up. I have to get that perfect score, and in that case I now become righteous. If the Law says "do not murder," as long as I haven't murdered anyone, as long as I haven't killed anyone without the authority to do so, then I am righteous, right? Because that's what we think perfect means. It means keeping it exactly, doing it exactly as it says.

But the trouble with that, Christians, is that leads us to think of the Law in terms of the letter, in terms of what it says exactly. And as long as I'm doing things by the letter, as long as I'm doing them exactly, then I am righteous. But that can lead us to a very strange situation where we can break the Law even as we try to keep it. So, for example, the scribes and the Pharisees, they're a good example of this. They absolutely tried to keep the Law perfectly. They wanted to keep it exactly, down to the letter, to do everything that God told them to do. And yet they missed the point of the Law in doing so. Take, for example, Matthew chapter 15. Jesus is talking to the scribes and the Pharisees about the Fourth Commandment: "Honor your father and your mother." And the scribes and the Pharisees certainly wanted to keep that commandment. They wanted to do exactly what God told them to do. But Jesus tells them, verses 5 and 6: "But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, "What you would have gained from me is given to God," he need not honor his father.' So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the Word of God." The scribes and the Pharisees thought they were still keeping the Law perfectly. They're doing exactly what it says. They are keeping it to the letter. They're taking that money which they should've given to their parents in their old age and they're giving it to God. Isn't that keeping the First Commandment? Aren't we supposed to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, and soul? Aren't we doing exactly what the Law wants us to do? So we are righteous and perfect! And yet that wasn't true. They had broken the Law. They had taken that money, and thinking they were serving God, had taken away from their parents instead. And so if we think of the Law in terms of perfect meaning keeping that perfect score, getting that perfect score, we're going to miss the point of the Law entirely.

But if perfect means being complete, if it means being finished, then righteousness also means being complete. To be righteous means to become like something, to have the finishing touches put on us, to become so like something that we become one with them. In other words, to be righteous means to be like the Father. When we are like him, then we are perfect. When we are like him, then we are complete. Righteousness means having the mind of God in all things. And when we think of it in this way, Christians, then we begin to look at the Law in terms of its purpose. We think about what it means to act like God in whatever situation we find ourselves. I am righteous because I have been made like God!

And that helps us to understand everything else that Jesus is telling us in our reading for today. Because God gives us a clear command in the Fifth Commandment: "You shall not murder." But this commandment is not just about not killing someone without the authority to do so. This commandment also shows us something about who God is. Because God does not bring down his judgment upon us without any reason. God's wrath is always just. His judgments are always

right. If he is angry with us, it is because of our sins. But God is also merciful, far more than we can possibly understand. God's mercies are new every morning, and his faithfulness never comes to an end. And God is so very patient with us, Christians! He is so patient with us because he does not immediately give us the judgment that we deserve, because he wants us to turn from our wicked ways and to live. He wants us to come back to him. And God is so willing to be reconciled with us, to be one with us, that he gave us his only Son, Jesus Christ, while we were still sinners. That's how much God loves us! And so being like God, then, is not just about not murdering someone. Being like God means showing patience, showing mercy to one another, to be so willing to be reconciled with each other that we go to extraordinary lengths to do it! That is having the mind of God, Christians. In that way, we are perfect just as our heavenly Father is perfect.

So how then do we become perfect? What makes us complete? What makes us like God? The power of the Holy Spirit, who has changed us to be like Christ. This is what Paul shows us in our Epistle reading from Romans chapter 6 when he tells us that we have died with Christ through Baptism. We have been united with him in everything. In fact, we have been so closely united with him, we become so much like him, that we have died with him spiritually. And having died, we are no longer under the power of sin. As Paul says in verse 7: "For one who has died has been set free from sin." Sin no longer has dominion over us. But more than this, Christians, just as Jesus rose to new life, so also we have risen with him. God is raising us up. God is making us a new creation, making us like himself. And so in that way, we are being made perfect. We are being made like God in everything, so that we now have the mind of Christ. And we will be perfect, fully complete, fully finished in the day when we see Jesus face to face. Just as John says, 1 John 3: "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared, but we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."

So Christians, have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus: walk in the ways of God. Seek to be like him in everything that you say and do, because God is at work in you, Christians, making you more and more like himself, until that day when you will be like him perfectly forever. Seek him, Christians. Seek the mind of Christ, and God will make you like his Son forever.

Let us pray. O mighty and living Holy Spirit, come to us today and make us like Jesus in all things, so that we may walk in righteousness before you forever; for you live and reign with the Father and the Son, one God, now and forever. Amen.