

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18
1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23
Matthew 5:38-48

The pressure to be perfect: Often we find ourselves face to face with it, whether it's from someone else or in ourselves. Perhaps you, or someone around you, is a perfectionist or an idealist at heart. I certainly have these inclinations. Often we have the opposite response though. We reject an ideal that is held before us. We may instinctively work toward the opposite.

Today, our readings imply that God pressures us to be perfect, too. The passage from *Matthew* ends when Jesus said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (*Mt. 5:48*) The *Leviticus* reading began with "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." (*Lev. 19:2*) Paul even offered a threat in his first letter to the Corinthians, after explaining that our bodies are as temples. "If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person." (*1 Cor. 3:17*)

It's so clear that we humans will fall short of all these expectations of perfection and holiness. Why is God asking, perhaps even demanding, that we be perfect? Is this something that needs to add to our already-high stress levels?



Even for the people of Israel, who they were was changed by their relationship with God. The Lord coached Moses about what to tell the people. “Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” (*Lev. 19:2*) It’s not that God demanded that Jews (or we) be a certain way, in order to appease his will. It’s not that God was obsessed with pride or narcissism, as many people are tempted to be.

God’s character, God’s holiness, God’s ways – God’s whole person – were all going to rub off on the people of Israel. It’s like what happened to Moses’ face, which shone after it beheld the glory of the face of God. All the laws that Israel received from God were grounded in God’s identity, and God’s relationship with the people. The Ten Commandments began with the statement of God’s identity. Similarly, each law in our reading today ends with “I am the Lord your God.”

The laws that we hear today overlap quite a bit with the Ten Commandments. We hear laws about Jews’ relationship to the land, and many of them about their relationships with other people. In that, it’s clear that God’s covenant with them shifts the landscape of their lives. God’s relationship with them changes how they consider their relationships with the world. Their bodies were marked by the covenant with God (in circumcision), and in their worship/rituals. But even the shape of their daily interactions changes with these laws. The tasks and monotony and ministry of their daily lives were made holy or sacred.



Paul's first letter to the Corinthians discussed similar themes, but to a very different group of people. Many, many years later, the Corinthians were not Jewish at all. They were Gentiles who were disciples of Christ. Paul was writing because their church was not in good shape. Different cliques were battling for power and control. They were judgmental about other Christians, who were in a different place in their spiritual growth. At the same time, some were clearly acting immorally.

Paul reminded them of who they were, despite the division and ethical problems of their congregation, as a whole. He spoke of himself as a "skilled master builder" who "laid a foundation" in their community. (*1 Cor. 3:10*) He was clear that the foundation which grounded them was Jesus Christ. Amid the mess, he recalled their story, their purpose for existing as a church, and the foundation of who they were as Christians.

Based on the firm foundation of Christ Jesus, Paul tried to point them in the right direction again. He wrote, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (*1 Cor. 3:16*) Paul named what we believe, as baptized members of Christ, and children of God. On the days of our baptisms, God gave us the gift of the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives. That huge gift of God, of God being with us for all of our days, is not just something that is in our heads or our hearts. God dwells within all of who we are, in our bodies, and actions, in our thoughts and prayers, relationships and our time alone.



God's choice to love us, and to be with us, is life-changing for us. By God's presence in our beings and our lives, we are blessed. And it's not just our prayers and our worship. We are blessed by God's presence in us and in our lives in our sleeping, and in our waking. When are at school, and when we are at work. When we are at peace with others, and when we are arguing. When we are angry and happy, depressed and excited. When we're ignoring God, and when we're deeply aware of God.

We now belong to Christ. Our bodies and our souls have been drawn into Christ's kingdom here on earth. In water and the Word, we have been recruited to do God's work in the world. And God helps make it all possible. It is possible for us to be beacons of Christ's light to the world, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. With God, all things are possible.



So I suppose that the answer is yes. God is asking big things of us. God asks us not to bear a grudge and to "love your neighbor as yourself." (*Lev. 19:18*) Jesus sets before us incredible goals: nonviolent responses to personal violence against us; generosity without question or holding back; love for our deepest enemies.

God asks great things. But God also gives us the biggest gift that we could possibly receive: The power and the will and the presence of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Each of us is marked by this incredible presence and action of God in our lives. It's not enough to make us Jesus himself. But it

is enough to bless our normal, broken lives with far more possibility than we could imagine. God's forgiveness and love dwell in us, making us little Christs, lights for God in our world.

“Be perfect.” (*Mt. 5:48*) Well... okay. We probably won't be perfect. Today Jesus and Paul and Moses are all cheering us on. Guiding us to respond to God's wonderful gifts, especially the gift of Godself, active in our lives. They are encouraging us to fully live our faith and love for our God... who is indeed perfect.