

Be holy like God!

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by [Mary M. McGlone Spirituality](#)

One day, God told Moses to assemble the entire community of Israel for an important message. So Moses did as he was told and God said: “Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.”

What on earth did that mean? It seems redundant to call God holy; what else could God be? The people sought holiness by obeying God’s laws, but how could that make them holy like God? Did God obey the laws? God had no spouse or parent, nobody to whom to offer sacrifice, and all plants and animals belong to God, so neither stealing nor jealousy can apply. How does one live so as to be holy like God?

Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Leviticus 19:1-2,17-18, Psalm 103, 1 Corinthians 3:16-23, Matthew 5:38-48

Jesus issued essentially this same command at the end of today’s Gospel, except that Jesus used the word “perfect” instead of “holy.” It sounds like an impossible demand. How can we be like God?

The minute we ask that question, we hear an echo of the first chapter of Genesis: “God created humankind in the divine image.” We must have some potential! Perhaps our major problem has been with our definition of holiness or godly perfection.

If we work backward in today’s Gospel, we hear about God’s unprejudiced treatment of the just and the unjust, those well-known for their goodness and those known for anything but love of God or others. The measure of God’s holiness or perfection seems to be the way God sends sun and rain to everybody.

That must be what Jesus meant when he said: “Love your enemies that you may be children of your heavenly father.” And lest that be left simply as pious theory, he gave three practical, surprising and laughter-inducing examples of just what that looks like in practice.

Before we go to the examples, we need to explore the translation that says, “Offer no resistance to one who is evil.” When did Jesus let evil pass untrammelled?

A better translation of that statement is “Do not react with hostility to one who is evil.” That’s an entirely different thing from not resisting evil. So the practical question is how to resist without hostility.

Jesus suggests that when somebody slaps you, you should turn the other cheek. The play in this bit of wisdom comes with the carefully chosen word *slap*. Jesus didn’t say, “When your spouse beats you,” or “When the gang bullies you again.” Instead, he said,

“When somebody slaps you.” A slap is meant to demean rather than to draw blood. A slap doesn’t invite a fistfight; it’s a putdown, a power play in the social hierarchy.

Note, too, that the slap Matthew portrays was backhanded (right hand to right cheek). Jesus was describing something intended to put the victim in his or her place rather than to incapacitate her or him. Turning the other cheek changed the game by having the victim say, “Hit me with integrity and then we’ll see.” Surely, a few of the audience gasped as they pictured a browbeaten servant finally standing up like that to an arrogant overlord.

So, too, with walking the extra mile. A Roman soldier could force a local resident to carry his pack, but for only 1 mile. The offer to go a second mile robbed the uniformed bully of the initiative and put him in danger of being reported for going beyond the limits. By now, Jesus’ audience was beginning to chuckle at the image of a Roman soldier pleading to get his pack back from a clever, audacious, pacifist rebel.

In the third example, the power imbalance was economic. A poor person had borrowed money and all he had as collateral was his tunic, the outer garment that also served as his blanket at night. If the lender wanted to refuse to return the tunic until the loan was paid, he could get a group of collaborators to make the judgment on his behalf. The poor debtor then had no recourse except to make a prophetic point of the absolutely unadorned fact that such a law left some naked while others ended up possessing a grimy inner garment — laundry they didn’t need and hardly wanted to touch.

What does God’s holiness look like? It looks like a never-ending outreach to rebellious humanity, an ongoing invitation to communion, the incarnation of love, no matter the cost. It looks like a person who approaches an oppressor with an attitude that says, “You — no, we can be better than that!” It looks like Oscar Romero and Dorothy Day, Mother Teresa, and the little kid who forgives his brother who tackled him, breaking his leg.

Moses said, “Be holy!” Jesus said, “Be perfect,” and with his stories he taught that it is not only possible, but a lot more fun than other options.

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