

Perfect Children

Posted on [March 4, 2017](#) by [J.N. Tilton](#)



The above image, photographed by the author, shows the dove of peace in the sights of a weapon. It was painted by Banksy in Bethlehem opposite the wall dividing Palestine from Israel.

Our examination of the origin of Jesus’ unusual turn of phrase, “son of peace” (see “[Whole Stones That Make Peace](#)”), has acquainted us with the various nuances of the Hebrew root ש-ל-מ (*sh-l-m*): peacefulness, wholeness, completeness, friendliness—all these are encompassed by the Hebrew root that is most familiar to us in the word *shālōm*. That same essay also

acquainted us with the fondness that the ancient Jewish sages had for toying with the different meanings of this root in order to draw out more clearly the ethical implications of biblical verses. Finally, that essay taught us that Jesus, too, shared this fondness for wordplay that was so much enjoyed by the rabbinic sages. Our awareness of these facts may afford a new insight into one of the most troubling verses in the New Testament.



Printable Version

According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus demanded of his disciples that they must “be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). Such an impossible demand, if taken literally, suggests either that Jesus’ expectations of his followers were unrealistic, and that he did not have a proper respect for human limitations, or that Jesus knew that his demands were impossible, and his intention all along was to demoralize his followers so that they would stop pursuing a righteousness of their own and turn to God for forgiveness and salvation. Either of these approaches to the Sermon on the Mount, and to Jesus’ ethical standards more generally, however, leads to the dangerous conclusion of letting us off the hook. Either we can’t or we don’t have to follow Jesus’ ethical teachings or live up to his moral standards. Since these responses to Jesus’ demand for perfection have the effect of neutralizing his ethics, we had better reexamine the verse in which the demand for perfection is made to see whether there is a more wholesome solution that does not undermine Jesus’ message.

The best way to begin is by contextualizing Jesus’ demand for perfection. Matthew 5:48 is the conclusion of a section pertaining to the Father-child relationship between God and Jesus’ followers:

You have heard that it was said, “Love your friend and hate your enemy,” yet I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. That is how you may become sons of your Father in heaven, who causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good and who sends rain upon the righteous and the wicked.

For if you love those who love you, what wage have you earned? Are not even the toll collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what gain have you made? Do not even the Gentiles do that?

Be perfect, therefore, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Perfection, according to Jesus, is an attribute of the heavenly Father that his daughters and sons can share when we show love to our enemies. Perfection is attained when the children imitate God’s character and his liberal behavior toward all human beings. We, his children, are to forgive those who are in our debt and to intercede on behalf of those who have done us wrong in imitation of our heavenly Father who sends his blessings indiscriminately upon his friends and his enemies alike. This is what Jesus calls being “perfect.”

Some time ago, Menahem Kister, a professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, pointed out that there is a strong similarity between Jesus’ command to be perfect and one of the Beatitudes with which the Sermon on the Mount is introduced:

Matthew 5:9	Matthew 5:44-48
Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons of God.	Love your enemies.... That is how become sons of your Father in heaven, who causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good and who sends rain upon the righteous and the wicked.... Be perfect, therefore, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.

The beatitude is really a highly condensed version of Jesus’ teaching on love

for one's enemies, which he elaborates later in the Sermon on the Mount. A detail that makes both of these passages stand out in contrast to much of the rest of the New Testament is that they speak about the divine sonship, not of Jesus, but of all those who engage in peacemaking or loving one's enemies. Peacemaking through doing good to one's enemies is what identifies a person as a daughter or son of God.

In his article, Kister also drew attention to certain ancient Jewish traditions that characterize God as a king of peace, noting the similarity these traditions bear to what we find in these two passages from the Sermon on the Mount. The first is an allegorical interpretation of a verse in the Song of Songs:

Go out and look, O daughters of Zion, upon king Solomon [שְׁלֹמֹה; *sh^elomoh*] [Song 3:11]...[that is, look] upon the king who created his creatures whole [שְׁלֵמוֹת; *sh^elēmōt*]: he created the sun and the moon in their fullness, the stars and the constellations in their fullness. Bar Qapra said, “Adam and Eve were created like those twenty years old [i.e., at the peak of perfection—JNT].” [Another interpretation of] *upon king sh^elomoh*: upon the king to whom peace [שְׁלֹמָה; *shālōm*] belongs. Another interpretation of *upon king sh^elomoh*: upon the king who causes peace to exist [הִשְׁלִימָה; *hishlim*] between his creatures.... (Song Rab. 3:11 §1)

Because theirs was an allegorical interpretation, the sages assumed that the king truly spoken of in Song 3:11 is the God of Israel. Thus, “Solomon” was interpreted not as a name, but on the basis of the Hebrew root ש-ל-מ (*sh-l-m*), from which King Solomon's name (*sh^elomoh* in Hebrew) is derived. Accordingly, God is described as the king who created all things whole or complete or in a state of perfection. He is the king to whom peace is ascribed. And he is the king who makes peace between all his creatures.

A second rabbinic midrash, also on Song of Songs, elaborates on God's

peacefulness or friendliness toward his creation:

Song of Songs which belongs to Solomon [שְׁלֹמֹה; *sh^elomoh*] [Song 1:1]. Who spoke [the words of this book]? The one to whom peace [שְׁלֹמֶה; *shālōm*] belongs and who deals peacefully [שְׁלֹמֶה; *shālōm*] with all his creatures. The sun shines upon the righteous and on the wicked, and he makes peace [שְׁלֹמֶה; *shālōm*] between his angels...and there is peace between them and each loves the other. (Song Zuta 1:1)

Both Jesus, in his teaching on love for enemies, and the sages, in their characterization of God as the king of peace, refer to God's willingness to cause the sun to give light to the wicked as well as the righteous. Although the rabbinic [midrash](#) was written down much later than the New Testament, it is highly improbable that the Jewish sages borrowed this idea from Christian sources. It is far more likely that both Jesus and the rabbinic sages drew on a shared tradition that predated both of them. If that is the case, then the rabbinic traditions cited above may provide a clue as to the original vocabulary behind the Greek translation of Jesus' command to "be perfect" in the Sermon on the Mount.

The rabbinic parallel describes God's sending his blessing of sunshine upon the deserving and undeserving alike as an act of שְׁלֹמֶה (*sh-l-m*), while Matt. 5:48 defines this same activity as an example of being τέλειος (*teleios*). This point of contact, together with the semantic overlap between the root *sh-l-m* and the adjective *teleios*, which, in addition to "perfect," can also mean "whole" or "complete," strongly suggests that *sh-l-m* is what stood behind *teleios* in the original Hebrew form of Jesus' saying. Supporting this conclusion even further is the parallelism between the beatitude on peacemaking and Jesus' teaching on love for one's enemies. Both sayings would then refer to being known as sons (and daughters) of God, by making peace (*shālōm*; Matt. 5:9) or by being peaceable (*sh^elēmim*; Matt. 5:48).

If we are correct in detecting the Hebrew root *sh-l-m* behind *teleios* in the Greek text of Matt. 5:48, then “be perfect” fails to capture the intention of Jesus’ instruction. Instead of demanding perfection from his followers, Jesus required his followers to strive to be at peace with all their fellow human beings and with all their fellow creatures in the world.

Jesus’ demand for the pursuit of peace was spoken into a moment in history when violent forces demanding liberty were bubbling up from under the violent oppression of the imperial machine that demanded absolute submission to Rome. In such a moment, Jesus called upon his followers to imitate the character of their heavenly Father, who does good to those in the right as well as to those in the wrong. As so many other nonviolent leaders have realized, fighting fire with fire only causes the blaze to consume more lives and makes the achievement of justice, peace, and reconciliation in the future that much harder to attain. Rather than descending to the level of the enemy and resorting to their methods, Jesus realized that his followers must ascend to the level of our heavenly Father and imitate his. Only in this way can the lasting redemption that comes from the Spirit be realized. And when that happens the peacemakers will be known as God’s perfect children indeed.



Click [here](#) to return to the [Whole Stones](#) blog.

Further Reading

Menahem Kister, “Words and Formulae in the Gospels in the Light of Hebrew and Aramaic Sources,” in *The Sermon on the Mount and its Jewish Setting* (Cahiers de la Revue Biblique 60; ed. Hans-Jürgen Becker and Serge Ruzer; Paris: J. Gabalda, 2005), 115-147.