

**“Original Sin, Original Virtue”**  
**Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Matthew 5:38-48**  
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Paradise. That's what it was in the beginning. That's where we were in the beginning. Or that's what many legends tell us. In the Hebrew Scriptures it's called the Garden of Eden. In the stories about paradise it is seen as a garden with flowers and trees bearing fruit, fruit that never goes bad, animals that are peaceful and the friends of humans, rivers of calm cool water, weather that is never too hot or too cold. Some religions view this as a place where we came from in the time of our innocence, others view it as a place we go to after we die, and some see it as both. No one knows where it is, or was, of course. In the ancient world it was viewed as someplace far to the north, or to the east, or someplace far across the sea. So compelling was this image of Paradise that in his diary of 1498, Christopher Columbus was convinced that the new land he had sailed to was an earthly paradise, the fringes of the long-lost garden of Eden. It wasn't of course, and we've explored this world enough to know that there is no longer such a place here on earth. Was there ever? Who knows? Will there be one someday? Again who knows? Somewhere within us are perhaps the intimations of paradise. Sitting on a beach as the warm water washes in around your toes as the sun goes down and you think to yourself, “heaven must be like this.” As a well-loved dog looks into your eyes and you can almost tell what she's thinking but you also get the sense that she knows what you're thinking, and the thought comes, “Eden must have been like this.” When all the house is quiet, everyone is in their places and you are lying warm in your bed next to the person you love most in the world. When you sit down at a holiday table and are surrounded by family and friends and there is not an empty seat nor an empty spot on the table and you think, “this is what it's supposed to be like.” Maybe somewhere in there is a memory of a time in Paradise, or perhaps it's a hope for Paradise still to come that's not here yet.

Well, what happened? Why aren't we there? Well according to the ancient traditions, we've been banned from Paradise because we sinned. In the way the Hebrew Scriptures tell the story, we were

tempted to do something forbidden even though God said not to, but we did it anyway, because we wanted to be like God. Those are the words of the serpent that come to us in Genesis, tempting us to eat of the fruit, “for God knows that when you eat it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God.” To be like God. That's the original sin, the sin that got us tossed out of Paradise, the sin that we keep committing—we keep deciding that we know better than God, our pride sets us up on the throne of our hearts. We are going to live our way, my way, I'm going to be the master of my own fate, I'm going to be like God.

The original sin. To be like God. Well, if that's true, what are these two passages about? The Leviticus passage that Sandy read for us says, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” And in Matthew, Jesus says, “be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Wait a minute. We're *supposed* to be like God? Holy or perfect because God is that way? Wasn't the original sin trying to be like God? How can these passages tell us to try to be like God? In Leviticus the passage give us a lot of ethical standards: do not steal, provide for the poor and the refugee, don't hate, don't take vengeance, take care of those with disabilities. And each time the passage says, I am the Lord, it means that we're supposed to do these things because we are trying to be like God. And in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us to go the second mile, turn the other cheek, give to those who beg from you, love your enemies. And why should we do these things? Because we're trying to be like God. How does this make sense?

The original sin is when we try to be like God. We try to take God's place. We try to be like God, instead of God. But the original vulture, if you will, is when we try to be like God because of God. It is the imitation of God, the imitation of Christ, not his replacement. It is recognizing the image of God within each person, within ourselves and growing into that image. Let me be clear that this is a result of God's grace not a precursor of grace. The words of Moses come to the people of Israel after they have been freed from slavery in Egypt, they have already been saved. The words of Jesus are given to the disciples, those who already follow him. It's not “act this way and you can be saved,” it's “act this

way because you are saved.” But can we do this? Can we be holy? Can we be perfect?

When Jesus teaches us in the Sermon on the Mount, he is showing us what can be, what should be, but also what is not yet. This is what we are working toward. This is what it will look like when we become more and more like Christ. St. Paul talks about this as growing up into the fullness of Christ. In the late Middle Ages Thomas a Kempis called this “the imitation of Christ.” St. Augustine believed that the imitation of Christ as the fundamental purpose of the Christian life and as a remedy for the sin of Adam. We are to become like God—because of God, not instead of God.

So what does this mean for us? What do we do in order to become more like Christ? The things that Jesus asks us to do seem a little crazy—turn the other cheek, go the second mile, give to everyone? Perhaps the key is when he commands us to love and pray for our enemies. We already know that we are to love our neighbors. This makes the circle even greater. Everyone we come in contact with should be seen as someone who is there for us to love, to pray for, to work for the best. That means being concerned about the welfare of the people around us, but even those that we don't like, even those who don't like us. Maybe especially those who don't like us. What's the loving thing to do? Isn't that the question we should ask? What's the loving thing to do for that brother whom we don't get along with? What about the homeless guy on the street? What about the one whose politics make us see red? What about the foreigner? How do we as the Church of Jesus Christ act lovingly toward them? How do we love like Jesus does, even if, like Jesus, loving might be at the risk of our lives? Barbara Essex says, “Today we are caught in the tension between human nature and being Children of God. To be perfect is not to add pressure to already overwhelmed lives; instead it is to assure us that we are not alone in the world and that God continues to work in and through us. Perfection is less about getting things right and more about loving as God loves, and Jesus is God's concrete example of that love.”<sup>1</sup>

To love as God loves. To be like God. To be perfect as God is perfect.

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1 Essex, Barbara J. *Feasting on the Word. Year A, vol. 1.* p. 384.

Perfection in this sense is not being without fault. It is growing into Christian maturity, it is letting God love through us.