Grace and peace to you from God Our Father and from our Perfect Savior and Perfect Lord, Jesus Christ, amen.

My dear friends, this is now the fourth week in a row of our cultural awareness briefing from Jesus on how to live in God’s World. It hasn’t gotten any easier and I have no simple answers for you today. All my cleverly thought out loopholes have been shot down. Last week I told story after story about integrity, or the lack thereof. This week I’d sure like to be able to tell at least one story of perfection and how God’s people actually lived up to this perfection demand of Jesus, but, sadly, I’m at a loss… I even tried to soften this demand for perfection by seeking alternate meanings for the Greek word *telios*. Unfortunately, it seems the translators got it pretty much right on this time. *Telios* does mean perfect or complete or fully mature. Living in God’s World, it seems, is much harder than any of us imagined. It might just be downright impossible.

So, today my challenge is to live what I talked about last week. Integrity first. While I’m tempted to make all kinds of excuses or find every loophole to water down these very hard, or impossible sayings of Jesus, my integrity says I’m obliged to give it to you straight. To let the wild, unfiltered Jesus come at you and then let the chips fall where they may. So here we go…

I’ll start with the easiest and work my way to the most impossible… Jesus starts out by advising us to resist the evildoer. I ask myself, self, what does that mean? After some thought, my self answered, well, that means when we see someone doing something evil, we resist following along and jumping on the bandwagon. How many of our mothers asked us the age-old question if so-and-so jumped of a bridge, would you do it too? Resisting the evildoer doesn’t seem so bad… in theory. If I push it though, we might get a little worried. For example, what do you think Jesus would say when we cover up our greed and inhospitality to our neighbor with sayings like, they are just too lazy to get a job and help themselves. If I give them money I’ll just be co-dependent and allow their lazy lifestyle to continue. Or I’m not going to give them anything because God helps those who help themselves… Or we need to help our own before we help them… You fill in the reason for jumping on the bandwagon of not feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those in prison… Maybe even this simple piece of advice from our Lord isn’t as easy to live up to as I thought…

Well, let’s move on and maybe we’ll find something we can actually do. Jesus goes on to say, “…if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you…” The more I thought about these sayings, the more depressed I got this week. As generous as I try to be, as generous as I know you all are, my mind couldn’t stop thinking about the man I met at the FISH pantry. He’s disabled and can hardly walk, let alone drive. He has no family in the area. His nearest relative is a brother who lives hours away. When he comes to the pantry he rides the Greenville transportation bus. I’ve known him for about three years at the pantry and up until about three or four months ago, he never asked me for anything. So, when he told me he was having trouble paying his bills and had no food, I approached the Sunday School to help. No surprise, they voted to help him, not once, but twice since Thanksgiving. I also pitched in once myself and even put money down in his name at the transportation company so he could get to the grocery store and to the FISH pantry. After I helped him the third time, he started calling every day asking for more help. When he called me like ten times before noon one day, I finally told him there would be no more monitory assistance. I offered to pick him up at his apartment and bring him to the FISH Pantry for food assistance, but he refused saying he didn’t want that kind of help and he hung up on me. I still feel badly, but I’m not sure how I could have handled him any differently at the time. I still pray for him every day and ask God to do what I was unable to for him. It's easy to say, well, I did all I could. Or, If I kept on giving he would keep on taking and eventually sucked me dry. The truth is I just got tired of helping the same person over and over and I got angry when he said he didn’t want the kind of food they give away at the FISH Pantry or the kind of help I was willing to offer.

As hard as I try, and my mere half-hearted attempts at follow what Jesus demands pale by comparison to the way most of you, but as hard as I try, I can’t even come close to living as I know God would have me live in His Perfect World. Today we are caught in the tension between human nature and being children of God. The more I kept meditating on these issues, I finally came to a bit of peace when I realized to be “perfect” is not meant to add pressure to our already overwhelmed lives. Instead, as we strive to become what we can never be, 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 kind of love. Here’s what I mean… I’m amazed by people’s capacity to do things that defy our natural instincts: the survivor of a violent crime who is able to forgive the tormenter; the “Rusty’s” and the “Vic’s” of the world who dedicate their lives to feeding the poor through organizations like the Choice FISH Pantry; the Mother Teresas of the world who give selfless service to outcasts; all nameless people who live modestly so they can contribute to the well-being of the less fortunate; and those who make a choice to commit random acts of kindness. We are surrounded by examples of unselfish love and caring; we need only look for them. God’s World is already active and moving toward *telios* or completion, fulfillment, maturity… perfection.

As we conclude hearing Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount today, Jesus lets us eavesdrop on his instructions to the disciples. I finally came full circle and actually believe we too are encouraged by these hard sayings of Jesus to live as sisters and brothers in God’s World. “Be perfect” isn’t an indictment; it is a promise. It’s a promise that carries the possibility that we may love the world as God has loved us—fully, richly, abundantly, and completely. As I wrote this sermon I was convicted of my inability to perfectly love the man I met at the FISH Pantry. I was convicted so hard I had to stop writing this sermon and I called him up just to say that I loved him and I was thinking about him and praying for him. He told me he had been able to move into a better apartment on the first floor and was getting along okay. I offered once again to take him to the pantry any time he needed a ride. He thanked me and we are now in a much better place, friendship wise, than when we last spoke a couple of weeks ago. He didn’t beg for money… this time, but if he does, I think I’ll be better able to handle his request the next time he does.

May you be able to work your way through the feelings of your inability to live up to the demands of Jesus’ perfection. If you take the time to ponder these hard, maybe even impossible sayings of Jesus, perhaps you’ll be able to see the promise and possibility of God’s World coming a little bit closer with every random act of kindness, every thoughtful word, every large and small gesture you make in the Name of Jesus. May God bless you with a friend like the one I made at the FISH pantry who challenges your notion of what it means to serve Jesus so you’ll be blessed by being able to love, as Jesus first loved you. Amen!