

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." - Matthew 5:48

A month ago my mother-in-law sent my wife and me a gift to brighten up our home during this endless winter. I have to confess that when my wife first showed the gift to me, I had no idea what it was – I thought maybe it was a strange looking onion or some kind of vegetable I'd never seen before. After she stopped laughing, she told me that it was definitely not an onion or any other kind of vegetable. "It's a flower bulb," she said. "With a little water and sunlight, this will grow into a beautiful flower. And it will do that year after year."

Now I'm sure the gardeners reading this are probably chuckling at this story because this is really common sense to you; I'm sure you would never have confused a bulb for an onion. But you have to understand that where I come from in Texas it's so dry that gardening is mostly limited to trying to keep all of your grass from turning to hay in the summertime. We're not able to do much with flowers or anything that requires more than the tiniest amount of water. And so I'd actually never seen a flower bulb before and didn't really know what one was – so please forgive my amazement.

I stared intently at that bulb - it looked ugly and strange and lumpy and very dead - how was anything ever going to grow from that? I was not convinced that with just a little light and water, it would grow into a beautiful flowering plant.

But regardless, we set it up in a jar with some stones and water at the bottom near a big window in our kitchen. And after a few short days I noticed little green shoots sprouting from the top. They gradually grew taller and I started to notice little roots underneath. And then finally I saw a bud at the top that eventually opened into a beautiful white flower. It had happened after, all – something beautiful grew from that ugly, dead-looking lump of a bulb – and I had a new appreciation for bulbs.

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

When I hear those words from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, I just can't get that bulb in our kitchen out of my mind. Because when Jesus tells us to "be perfect...as your heavenly Father is perfect," he uses the word "perfect" in a way that's different from how we're used to thinking about it. We think of being perfect as always getting everything right, never making a mistake, but any early reader who read Jesus' words in the original Greek of the gospel of Matthew would have thought of something more than this.

The Greek word that is translated as "perfect" doesn't just mean "perfect" in the way that we usually think of it – it has a lot more to it than that. It includes the idea of fulfillment of what a person or thing was made for, the idea of living the kind of life, doing the kind of things, for which you as a human being were created.

That's why I thought of the bulb – because it shows that idea so clearly. That bulb was made for one thing and one thing only: to grow into a flowering plant. That's what defines it, that's what makes it a bulb. No matter how unlikely it seems, with a little water and sunshine it will grow into beautiful flowers. With the right conditions, it will be able to do the thing that defines it, the thing for which it was made – it will be able to flower. But without the right conditions? Well, it won't be able to do anything more than sit there looking like a lumpy, ugly onion. It won't be able to do that for which it was made.

When Jesus tells you and me to be perfect, he's telling us to live the kind of life that we as human beings were created for. He's not telling us to strain ourselves trying to measure up to some arbitrary standard – no, he's telling us that as humans God made us for a certain kind of life – just as God made bulbs for a certain kind of life – and we should live it. Living the

life, fulfilling the purpose, for which God made us – that is what it means to be perfect.

When God created you and me, God had a dream for what our lives would be like, just as God had a dream for what my flower bulb would grow into when God created it. Being perfect means living God's dream, because it's what we were made for. But even though it's what we were made for, living God's dream is anything but easy – as we see in the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere, God made us to live far differently than how we actually live. We can only live God's dream with God's help, and so we pray to God to help us live the lives for which God made us, lives in which we show God's amazing love to everyone we meet.

The good news for you and for me is that the way God wants us to live is also the way God made us to live, and so it's accompanied ultimately by a deep fulfillment and peace that come only through doing that for which we were made. May you taste that fulfillment and peace here and now as God strengthens you to live the life of love for which God created you, as God makes you perfect like your heavenly Father, as God helps you show God's love to everyone you meet.

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." AMEN.

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