

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Perfect Season: Helicopter Christians”

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Genesis 3:1-7

Matthew 5:38-48

Helicopter parents. We all know them, right? They are those parents who hover over their children, the whooshing blades of their over-involvement cutting away at their child’s emerging independence.

Psychologist and parenting expert Wendy Mogel says, “College deans have nicknames for today’s incoming students. They call them ‘teacups’ and ‘crispiers.’ The teacups have been so managed, overprotected and supported by their parental handlers that they lack the basic life skills needed to survive away from home. The crispiers are so exhausted from grade grubbing and worrying about what is going to be on the next test that they are burned out.”

Hundreds of books, studies, workshops, and blogposts have been devoted to combating this parental urge to hyperparent the children of this generation, and yet it continues, and even seems to get worse.

At the heart of this need to over-parent is a drive for absolute perfection. A perfect storm of marketing and media, technology tethers and shifting cultural norms have convinced us that perfection is not only possible but necessary for our children’s happiness, success, and overall well-being.

Perhaps somewhere under the surface we sense this is a complete falsehood, but it’s challenging to turn those suspicions into outright doubt that exposes the truth that we are really destroying our children in our efforts to perfect them.

Believe it or not, we are not the first people to struggle with this tension.

In the first century, the very real threat of Jewish life and culture being assimilated into Roman society caused some factions of the religious leaders to emphasize strict adherence to the Law of Moses both in temple observance and in domestic affairs. They looked to observance of the Law as a way to achieve the righteousness necessary to please God enough to gain freedom from their oppressors. This might sound like a crazy idea to us, but the Old Testament is filled with examples of the Israelites turning back to God, following God’s Law, and receiving God’s favor and rescue. This was a long-standing pattern in the relationship between God and Israel. Some religious leaders became like helicopter parents, driving the Jewish people toward righteous perfection, hovering over their personal and public affairs, even at times bragging about their high standards.

Now, there were others in Jewish society who favored relaxing the observance of the Law in order to help the Jewish people survive and even thrive under Roman occupation. As the saying goes, “when in Rome, do as the Romans do.” They wanted to remove the barriers to advancement within Roman society while maintaining their Jewish faith and identity. Their helicopter parenting came in the form of excuses and accommodation, protecting the people from the reality of their differentness and the challenges their identity presented in their

current situation. Their aim was to be the perfect Roman citizen while maintaining their religious self-esteem, acceptable to everyone, comfortable and happy.

Then along comes Jesus, and in typical Jesus style, he teaches a third way that pleases no one.

To the Law keepers, he says, “what you’re doing still isn’t good enough.” Jesus says that our righteousness must exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees if we wish to enter the kingdom of heaven. The passage we read today is part of a longer series of teachings involving this “you have heard it said...but I say” pattern. The law says “you shall not murder,” but Jesus says that anger, insult, and name-calling all come with judgment as well. The law says “you shall not commit adultery,” but Jesus says that lustful desires should be taken just as seriously as lustful actions. The law allows for divorce and oath-making and retaliation, but Jesus offers a more challenging interpretation that restricts easily walking away from a commitment, and emphasizes straight talk, peaceful resistance, and impossible generosity. Jesus even dares to teach us how to love, shaming his audience into holding themselves up to a higher standard than the Gentiles and tax-collectors they disdain. He says they must love not only their friends and neighbors, but their enemies as well.

This is clearly not a welcome teaching to those who hoped to relax religious observance and blend into Roman society. In an honor/shame society like the Roman Empire, insult and argument were the tools of advancement. Family was important, but pleasure-seeking was prominent and, for the most part, perfectly acceptable. Swearing an oath was essential, and if one couldn’t retaliate an offense, that weakness would be exposed and exploited. Keeping your friends close but your enemies closer may have been a useful tactic, but actually loving your enemies would have been unthinkable.

Jesus closes all this teaching with the instruction to “be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

When I read this translation, I’m ready to throw out this whole section of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes we heard last week are great. There’s good stuff coming up about prayer and anxiety and the Golden Rule. But if what Jesus is saying here is that we are supposed to be as perfect as God - well, I just can’t get behind that.

Which is why I’m glad I was required to study Greek in seminary.

The word used here for “perfect” also means “complete or mature.” It is related to the word “telos,” which means final or ending, as in the end goal or final accomplishment of purpose. Grammatically, I get why this is always translated “perfect,” but it’s a really unhelpful translation. And I think it has contributed to helicopter Christianity.

Helicopter Christians, much like first-century Jews, can be divided into two groups with competing concerns but the same aim toward perfection.

The first group is concerned with upholding a distinct religious identity in a rapidly changing global and pluralistic culture. They drive one another to memorize and regularly reference scripture. They strive to fulfill Jesus’ call to avoid anger and name-calling by encouraging the display of “niceness.” They hold one another to a high standard of sexual purity and marital bliss. They push each other to give more – of their time, their money, and their lives – to the church.

And helicopter Christians in the South have a genius way of dealing with this “love your enemies” teaching. You have this person with whom you have an antagonistic relationship. Typically, this involves a power struggle within the life of the church. You can malign this person, demean them, undermine them, and all sorts of nasty things. But here’s the catch: before each negative comment about your opponent, you insert the phrase “bless her heart.” It’s brilliant. “You know, bless her heart, but Jane just really has no idea what she’s doing trying to run the church Rummage Sale. If she’d just let some new leadership take over, we could raise so much more money.” “Bless his heart” – yes, this works for men, too – “if George weren’t such a disorganized mess, maybe the church finances would be in better shape. I wish he’d just listen to me about how to put things in order.” This is loving your enemies – “bless their hearts.”

Spiritual perfection is the aim of these helicopter Christians, but it often results instead in spiritual burnout, those “krispies” described by Wendy Mogel.

The second group of helicopter Christians is concerned with making life easier for Christians today, making it less embarrassing to admit publicly that you are a follower of Christ. Avoiding anger and insult is about being a good citizen. Jesus’ teachings about lust and divorce are about healthy relationships. Civic peace is at the heart of turning the other cheek and loving our enemies. Now, we think about enemies like ISIS and Russian separatists. Maybe we’re willing to admit enmity against certain political parties or groups of people with opposing viewpoints. But we’re rarely willing to make our enemies personal, to admit that the relationships we have with people in our neighborhoods, families, and church could be defined with as strong a word as “enemy.”

And Jesus’ call to perfection? Of course, that’s impossible. Clearly, the deeper meaning Jesus is getting at here is that we should try hard and do our best. Everybody gets a medal.

Where does this kind of helicopter Christianity lead? To “teacup” Christians, whose faith has been so overprotected that when it is challenged, it easily cracks.

The real problem with helicopter parenting and helicopter Christianity is that they don’t accomplish their goal. Helicopter parenting tries to make children “perfect” within a socially-constructed and completely false definition of perfection. And it fails. It fries their self-esteem and prevents them from developing fully into mature, independent, unique and whole people. Children are encouraged to accomplish the goals parents set for them rather than accomplish their “telos,” their true purpose in life.

Helicopter Christianity constructs an equally false and damaging set of values and standards that lead to hypocrisy, judgment, defeat, or irrelevance. When we become helicopter Christians, we are aiming at exactly the wrong goal. We are trying to be perfect, like God, rather than aiming for the maturity, completeness, and wholeness that God embodies and that God has designed for us by creating us in God’s image.

What Jesus calls us to is spiritual maturity and achievement of our God-given purpose in life, which, according to the Westminster Catechism, is “to enjoy God and glorify God forever.” Try putting that down on your list of accomplishments on a college application or professional resume.

Our children don’t need perfect grades. They don’t need to be the star athlete. They don’t need to get a full ride to an Ivy League school. They don’t need to be recruited by multiple Fortune 500 companies before they graduate.

They also don't need to be shielded from the realities that work is hard, people can be mean, everyone will not like us or agree with us all the time, and not everyone gets a medal for participating and trying hard.

Likewise, as Christians, we aren't judged by how much of the Bible we know by heart, how nice we are to other people, how pure our desires and perfect our marriages seem, how extravagant our charity, or how much we "bless her heart."

At the same time, we are called to take the teachings of Jesus seriously, to recognize and confess the ways we fail to live in right relationship with God and with one another. We are actually called to be different, to be radically counter-cultural, and be deeply involved and immersed in this culture that is contrary to the Christian gospel. We must be realistic about the challenges of this way of life and the tension we will live in each day of this struggle.

There is an end goal, a "telos," toward which we are all striving. It is a life of wholeness, of the completeness of our God-given purpose. A life in which animosity is overcome with reconciliation, broken relationships are overcome with fidelity, broken promises are overcome with trust, retaliation is overcome with strength and humility, and hate is overcome with love. Not for the sake of perfection. But for the sake maturity of faith, of complete devotion to Jesus Christ, the One who lived and died and rose again to bring heaven to earth and give us abundant life in him. To whom be all glory, forever and ever. Amen.