



Christian Perfection
Acts 3:12-19; Psalm 4; 1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei

According to a survey by the American Jewish Committee, a nonpartisan advocacy organization, nearly half of Americans don't know what the word "anti-Semitism" means. But nearly half of Americans overall say they have seen antagonism against Jews either online or in person during the past five years, suggesting that respondents may be familiar with the reality of anti-Jewish bigotry but unfamiliar with the term "anti-Semitism." One Jew in four has been targeted with an anti-Semitic attack in person over the past five years. During the same period, nearly one in four have experienced anti-Semitism online. The poll found that about a quarter of Jews avoid publicly wearing things that identify them as Jewish and that the same percentage avoid identifying as Jews online.¹

Anti-Semitism is prejudice and discrimination against Jews, a hostility that dates to ancient times. The rise of Christianity greatly increased hatred of Jews. They became seen as a people who rejected Jesus and were responsible for his crucifixion.² As Christians, we live under the burden of a sad and violent history of anti-Semitism, in the sobering shadow of the Holocaust.

In light of the surge of anti-Semitism, it is paramount that we are clear about what we read in the Bible. Jews as a people are not responsible for the death of Jesus. The Jewish leadership and the Roman occupying force were, each for their own reasons: the former because they saw Jesus as a threat to their elite status and their manipulation of religion, and the latter because they were in the business of squashing insurrections and controlling their understanding of peace. The Jewish leadership was viewed with contempt by much of the Jewish community of their time for their support to the Roman system of oppression. They are never to be identified with the Jewish people as a whole.

And yet, Peter does seem to do exactly that in the Acts of the Apostles. The passage we read today is part of the story of Peter and John going for prayer to the temple and healing a lame man. When a crowd gathers around them, he says, "You Israelite." It could more clearly be translated with: Come on, now, Israelites. You should know your Scriptures: the living God of our ancestors (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) has blessed the ministry of His servant, Jesus. But "you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life (or a clearer version might be, 'you killed the one who can lead you into true life')." (Acts 3:11-15)

Such strong language should be understood as an indication of the growing antagonism and mutual recrimination that developed in the latter part of the first century between church and synagogue. Families that embraced the new movement of Christianity were forced out of the

¹ <https://www.jta.org/2020/10/26/united-states/almost-all-american-jews-say-anti-semitism-is-a-problem-according-to-a-new-poll-half-of-americans-dont-know-what-it-means>

² <https://www.adl.org/anti-semitism>



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synagogue losing their community connections and social protection from the Romans. But Biblical references to the term “the Jews” should never be understood as a blanket condemnation of Jews.

What we see happening with Peter is Jews talking to Jews; it’s like he is urging his own people to open their eyes. He knows what it is like to be in the grip of sin and ignorance: Peter denied Jesus and fled during the crucifixion. He stands just as guilty as those to whom he is speaking. But he now understands and is able to tell others, not in a condemning manner but with care and concern, that through repentance they may obtain life.

I wonder what the Jews heard when Peter was accusing them. “Why,” one might have said, “I couldn’t have shouted to crucify Jesus: I was not even there.” Another could chime in: “Why are you looking at me? I didn’t drive the nails into his hands and feet.” But they did not react that way; it was common understanding that individual sin is collective sin: if one sinned, all sinned and one’s sin would be visited upon generations to come.³

In our individualistic society, it is hard for us to see the collective dimension of sin. We tend to see sin as a private matter between us and God. The truth is, we all have participated in the death of Jesus, even though we weren’t there. We all stand accused of betrayal, abandonment, and nailing him to the cross. As Isaiah said long time ago, “He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.” (Isaiah 53:5) Peter himself repeated the same insight: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.” (1 Peter 2:24)

Peter’s accusation is not against the Jews but against us all - when we remain silent in the face of abuse, when we resort to violent means, when we don't love ourselves, neighbor or enemy - we are complicit in the power of crucifixion. Collective sin bears collective responsibility and requires a collective response.

The Church has the charge to lead the world into repentance in the name of Jesus, the one who may bless us with true life. It isn’t too late! In the resurrection of Jesus, the living God, who insists on bringing life out of chaos and death, has declared that your worst sin (killing the Son of God, killing one another) will not have the final word. God offers a new invitation: come home!

Peter has done it. the other disciples have done it and all the disciples through the century have done it. The Bible talks of a great cloud of witnesses, people who, as Peter put it, have trusted the life affirming power of the name of Jesus and have accessed that life through repentance. A new

³ Exodus 20:5; 34:7; see Romans 5:12



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life has opened before them and the ministry of healing through forgiveness continues through them. I want to be part of that crowd. Wouldn't you?

In the 3rd chapter of his first letter, John tells us that the love of God defines the children of God. Through that love we are reconciled to God and made new. Not only that: the love that makes us children of God will allow us to see him when he returns. This knowledge informs and sustains us our hope. Therefore, John says, aim at becoming pure as he is pure.

Purity is about the personal and societal impact of sin (not seeing yourself or others as a child of God). In this regard purity has as much to do with the corruption and degradation of our institutions as it does with individual sin (deceiving oneself into believing and acting in a way that suggests you or anyone else is anything less than a beloved child of God). Too often we focus on individual purity and ignore the systemic, institutional, and ideological obscenities in our midst. Purity is necessary for coming to contact with God.

Just as Jesus saw himself and others as God's children, so we too must see ourselves and others as God's children. When we do not treat one another as children of God, we are deceiving ourselves and denying God's great gift of love (i.e., that we are created and called as children of God). Being a child of God is who we are: we can live into that reality or we can deceive ourselves and give into sin (denying God's gift of love and not living in the way of Love). Being a child of God means that you will live a particular way - the way of love.

Sin is acting out of motivation that is not of love. "Christian Perfection," is not about being mistake-free. It is about allowing the love of God to be the motivating factor in all we do.

While we are with Christ, it is impossible to sin, but we step out of relationship when we sin. Our life, perhaps even in a single day, is marked by this coming in and out of relationship with Jesus. Our Baptismal commitment to God and renunciation of the ways of the world allows us to go back again and again through remembrance and repentance. The joy and peace we experience when reconciled is the resurrection of the dead.

The grounding of who we are is in God's love as revealed through Jesus. Everything we do as a Church and as Christians, must be a reflection of that love. When we live in righteousness we live in Jesus and when we sin we are not abiding in Jesus. Righteousness means treating and loving ourselves and others as children of God.

We have a glimpse of what it is to live in perfect love. That glimpse is Jesus Christ. We are called to do the same. As people following Christ, we are called to live that perfect love as much as possible. We are called to be pure as Christ is pure. We are called to love as Christ loved, to forgive as Christ forgave, to invite as Christ invited. When we cease loving, we are no longer following Christ.



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God has had an eye on you from before the beginning. God loves you and will never stop loving you—even if you are not perfect. Actually, because you are not perfect. The perfection we seek is the willingness to repent, learn, and start over. God knows and loves you, period. You may not feel lovable, and the truth is that sometimes we aren't very loving to each other, or even to ourselves. But God sees through all that. There is nothing we can do to keep God away. Even when we step outside of the loving relationship with God, God pursues us, God is ready to forgive and give us peace. It's when we rejoice in that forgiveness that we are empowered to choose a different way of being in the world.

Let us not be deceived or discouraged. Live righteously. Love perfectly. Choose Jesus. Amen.