

SERMON: I CAN'T!

Matthew 5:17-20

I remember it like it was yesterday. I was in the 8th grade. I peaked in the 8th grade, so it is all still so clear to me.

It was 8th grade junior high school football. When I think back on it, nothing could have been more miserable. Practicing football in South Texas where it was 85-90 degrees until the middle of November. On a football field baked dry and hardened by the sun, full of grass burrs. It was not pleasant.

Our coach was just back from Viet Nam. Whatever post war trauma he had, he took out on us. He would test us every Friday. We had to pass his test to stay on the team. 7 laps around the football field in 12 minutes. That's a mile and $\frac{3}{4}$. After the laps, we then had to do 30 sit ups, 30 chin ups, 30 push ups.

It was my turn to go. I ran the laps. This was a long time ago. I could run those seven laps in 12

minutes back then. Nowadays I can't drive seven laps in 12 minutes, forget running.

On this particular Friday, I ran the laps and did ok. I had completed the 30 chin ups and the 30 sit ups. Then, though exhausted, I completed 30 push ups.

“Stelter,” coach yelled, “give me ten more.” What a great sense of humor he had.

Ten more push ups? Maybe one or two I could give him. Maybe five more if the planets were aligned, but ten? With a groan, I did my best but could not muster ten more. I had to admit, “I can't, coach.”

“Can't?” has asked. “Can't? Can't never could do nothing,” he yelled at me.

Can't never could do nothing? At that moment, I could no more do ten additional push ups than I could climb Mt. Everest. I can't.

If we listen carefully to the words of Jesus in today's Gospel lesson

and apply them to ourselves and what is expected of us, each of us would probably honestly have to say, “I can’t” when Jesus says our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.

The Pharisees prided themselves on strict adherence to the law of Moses, the 613 regulations of Israel’s law code. How could the disciples and the common people in the crowd who were listening to Jesus as he preached be expected to live holier lives than the Pharisees? How can we today, when human nature has not changed one bit? 613 laws? We can hardly keep Ten Commandments.

To honestly address this problem of such high, unrealistic holy expectations is to reflect on how we would answer this command of Jesus. I would have to admit deep down, “Lord, I can’t.”

I can’t lead a life that is without fault. I can’t stop sinning. I can’t be perfect, even with my best intention. All I can do is place myself at God’s mercy.

For the evil we have done, for the good we have failed to do, we deserve to be cut from God's team. But because Jesus came to fulfill the law on our behalf, God offers the gift of righteousness.

We are not made members of God's team by a test where we have to earn our keep through our performance of push ups and sit ups and pull ups and running. We are made team members through faith. And we don't do a thing to earn a spot on God's team.

Yes, on that Friday in junior high school, it was hard for me to admit, "I can't." Since then, I have learned to be able to admit my failings and shortcomings. In admitting my own weaknesses, I am free to ask for help from others and, more importantly, help from God.

To be able to admit you can't is the first step in needing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. You'll never know He's all you need until you know He's all you've got!

When I was in seminary in Chicago, some of us started a weekly Bible study with Southside gang bangers. It was a rough crowd. One night as I was waking in the one of the gang districts, around 75th Street, I bumped into a gang member who was in our Bible study. I asked him, “How are things going with God?”

The gang member replied, “Great. I’m really trying to cut down on shooting people?” Now, what should I have done? Should I have pointed out to this young man that cutting down on shooting people is not acceptable and that, if he was really going to be a good Christian, he needed to stop shooting people, period. Or should I have affirmed this real genuine step he was taking toward God?

On that street corner, we celebrated the growth he was showing. Celebrate the growth, always.

You attend church on Sunday, weary from a week of failure and

what does the pastor say? Try harder, run faster, give more, serve more, be more, do more.

We are making a terrible mistake. We should not be yelling for you to run faster and do more. What we ought to be yelling to is “You are doing great. Keep trying. The fact that you are trying is not only commendable, it is heroic.”

It is time for the church to quit emphasizing what people are not doing and start encouraging and praising what people are doing.

Let's stop judging and dishing out unwanted sanctimonious advice. Instead, let us start a process of celebrating each person's move toward God, no matter how small or insignificant that move may be. Celebrate the growth.

Our culture bombards us with our inadequacies. We are told in a million different ways that we are too heavy, too ugly, too klutzy, too unorganized, too ignorant, too incompetent, too uncool, etc. etc. etc.

Then we come to church and we are told we're too worldly, too unspiritual, too sinful, too apathetic, too selfish, too lazy, too ungiving, etc. etc. etc.

The value system of our culture has become baptized by our religion.

The Bible says the world will know we are disciples by our love for one another. Shouldn't that mean they will know we are disciples by the shocking habit we Christians have of encouraging, building up, affirming and celebrating one another? That is a habit that runs totally counter to every other institution in our society by which we are constantly criticized, evaluated, pressurized and forced to compete and perform. Celebrate the growth.

Let's look forward to being here together. Let's be encouraged, even in our failures. This, of all places, is the place of encouragement, of affirmation, of love and support rather than just another place in our culture where

you can have your self-esteem destroyed. This is the grace place.

I don't know about you, but I'm running as fast as I can. I'm tired of being told to run faster.

Instead, let's hear someone tell us: "Come unto me all you that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly of heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."