I read an amazing story recently about Tattoo the Basset hound. There was nothing particularly outstanding about Tattoo. He’s your typical Basset hound. Floppy ears, stubby legs. One day, while his owner was walking Tattoo, a friend pulled over in his car to talk. The owner leaned into the car while Tattoo patiently waited. As the friend began to pull away, Tattoo’s leash got caught on the side-view mirror, and Tattoo’s walk suddenly turned into a run. The car got up to about 20 miles an hour before the driver realized that Tattoo was still attached. To this day, Tattoo has never asked to be taken on another walk.

Do you ever feel like Tattoo? Do you ever feel like your leash is caught on the side-view mirror of an accelerating car, like your life is gaining speed and you’re having trouble keeping up? Today we continue our Overwhelmed sermon series, in which we are looking at the ways our lives can get the best of us and what the Bible says we can do to tap the brake and catch our breath. I told the story a few weeks ago about the South American tribe that paused on a long hike so that their souls could catch up with them. Have we left our souls in the dust for the sake of getting things done?

This break-neck speed of life was not the future that was predicted back when technology was in its infancy. A 1960s article in Time magazine prognosticated about all the new-fangled devices that were being invented, like computers and electric razors, and the enormous impact they would have on our lives. Work weeks would be cut from 40 hours to 20, people would retire at age 50, and everyone would have so much extra time in their lives that they wouldn’t know what to do with it. How’s that working out for us?

Kids, there used to be a time when, if you wanted fast food (that name alone is telling), you had to park the car, go inside, and place your order. Now, you can use the drive-thru and eat your dinner in the car, like nature intended. And remember when life was so rough that you had one bottle for shampoo and another bottle for conditioner? Now, they’re combined into one, so you can avoid all that time-consuming rinsing. Thanks to inventions like these, we have so much more time on our hands, don’t we?

As the apostle Paul would say, “By no means!” That’s the paradox, right? Our lives are filled with time-saving devices, things like microwaves and self-propelled lawn mowers, and yet we constantly complain about not having enough time. So, the end result is that we live in a state of perpetual hurry. We are the kings and queens of doing more than one thing at a time. We call that multi-tasking, because the other thing takes too long to say. We shorten our sentences to LOL and OMG so as to avoid wasting time using a subject and a verb. We are Tattoo, struggling to keep pace with the warp speed of the lives we have created.

This hurried living is more than just a way of life or a necessary evil. Pastor John Ortberg calls it a sickness, the great enemy of spiritual life in our day. There are a few tell-tale symptoms of Hurry Sickness. When you’re approaching a red light, and there is one car in each lane, do you try to guess which one will go faster based on the make and model of the car, and then get behind that one? You might have Hurry Sickness. When you are checking out at the grocery, do you try to guess which lane will move faster based on the number of items each person has in their cart? And then, once you choose a lane, do you watch the other lanes to see if you would have moved faster or slower? You might have Hurry Sickness. Do you complain about how long
a red light is? Do you stare at the microwave, wondering if that burrito will EVER get done? You might have Hurry Sickness.

If you exhibit any of these symptoms, you may need a doctor. Not an internist or a surgeon, but the Great Physician. Hurry Sickness is a serious threat to our spiritual condition because it gradually erodes the groundedness of our faith. It eats away, one bite at a time, at our relationships with God and each other. Ortberg says, “The danger is not that we lose our faith. It is that we will become so distracted and rushed and preoccupied that we will settle for a mediocre version of it. We will just skim our lives instead of actually living them.” Do you ever feel like you’re just skimming your life instead of actually living it?

So here’s my question: Why? Why are we in such a hurry? What is the bottom line of all of this? What do we hope to gain? I’d say more time, but we all know better. I think the reason we are in a hurry is that we’ve bought into the illusion that if we can just get everything done, then we’ll have time to rest, relax, spend time with family. If we can get everything done, then life will be perfect.

We know people like that, don’t we? We see them on social media, folks who have clean houses, take relaxing vacations, exercise regularly, throw perfect birthday parties for their kids. We drool over their pictures and statuses and Pinterest boards because they have the life we want, they can somehow do all the things we have to do, but without running five minutes late and having a coffee stain on their shirt. We know perfection can be achieved if we just go a little faster, because we see it in others.

I saw a comic this week in which the wife says to her husband, “Derek, I don’t think we’re doing enough with our lives. When I look at everyone else’s Facebook and Twitter and Instagram pages, they’re full of people having fun all the time.” The husband says, “That’s how it looks, Kim, but it’s not real, it’s just marketing. Trust me, everyone else’s life is just as boring as ours.” I would amend that to say that everyone else’s life is just as imperfect as ours. There’s no such thing as perfection.

Then what are we to make of Jesus’s statement? “Be perfect, therefore, as your Father in heaven is perfect.” Oh, is that all we have to do? Well why didn’t you say so? If we interpret this passage as a call to keep trying harder, we’re missing Jesus’ point. My seminary professor told me, “Whenever the Bible says ‘therefore,’ you have to ask what it’s there for.” Jesus says, “Be perfect, therefore,” implying that what he’s said right before has a bearing on this call to be perfect.

Remember what he said? Love your enemies. Pray for them. Greet them. Go out of your way to interact with people different than you, to build relationships with people you wouldn’t otherwise spend time with. But that’s so hard! I barely have time to spend with the people I like, much less the people I don’t like, or don’t even know. But, if I’m going to believe Jesus, in doing so, he says we become perfect. Not by trying harder, but by relating better.

The idea that perfection comes through relationship-building is a real challenge to our hurriedness, because relationship-building takes time. I was in the drive-thru at Starbucks the other day (so I didn’t have to walk all the way inside), and my drink was taking a little longer than usual (almost as long as a red light in Lexington), so the barista leaned out the window and said, “So, what do you have going on today?” My first thought was, “None of your dang business! Just give me my Frappuccino!” But then I realized that this was a sliver of a moment to build a relationship, no matter how fleeting, with someone I didn’t know. We chatted a couple minutes, and I got my drink and drove away.
But the interaction stuck with me. “So, what do you have going on today?” A simple question, asked with innocent curiosity, which led to a most pleasant conversation that became one of the highlights of my day. I wonder how many opportunities I’ve missed to do that kind of relational work because I’ve been too focused on getting my stuff done. I wonder how many potential relationships I’ve sacrificed on the altar of expediency. It’s so much easier to objectify people and see them as a means to an end, because actually relating to them takes too much time.

The perfection Jesus invites us to seek has nothing to do with getting things right, or even getting things done. If we buy into that myth, then we might as well hitch our leash to a side-view mirror until we collapse from frustration and exhaustion. Why do we let the world make us think that perfection can be achieved through doing more stuff as quickly as possible? If you want to follow someone, you can’t go faster than the one who is leading. Jesus was never in a hurry. Why are we?

Listen to how the Bible translation the Message renders Jesus’ last line about perfection: “In a word, what I’m saying is, Grow up. You’re kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.” In this version, perfection is not about what you do, but how you live, how you live: generously and graciously toward others, just as God does the same for you.

We’ll always have the opportunity to be busy. And there will be times when our schedules force us to be in a hurry. That’s OK. That’s life. But don’t forget why you’re living it. It’s not to win a medal or cross the finish line first. God put us here to be in relationship with each other, and the more we do that, the more we begin to look like Christ. The more present you are with the person who is right in front of you – your spouse, your child, your friend, your barista, the person you don’t even know – the more present you are with them, the more perfect your life is at that moment. All the things on your to-do list can wait. They’ll still be there when you finish your conversation. But nothing is more important than the person standing right in front of you. Be present and you will be perfect. Perfection is not a destination we’ll reach when we finally get everything done; perfection is how we choose to live in every moment. If we live generously and graciously, then we are perfect, no matter how messy our house is.

There’s a world full of people out there that think God is vengeful, judgmental, exclusionary. They think God doesn’t love them, God can’t love someone like them. Some of them are people who know, but a lot of those people are nothing like us. Relating to them is going to take time, and there’s so much to do. Your chance to be perfect starts when you leave this sanctuary. So….what do you have going on today?