

SERIES: The Good News, as reported by Matthew

SERMON: **A Sermon for the Ages: What Does Acceptable Righteousness Look Like?**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 5:17-26

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In our journey through the Life of Christ from the Gospel of Matthew, we have arrived at the Sermon on the Mount. This discourse takes up three full chapters, Matthew 5-7, and opens with the Beatitudes, a description of the life of a true disciple that is radically opposed to our nature and our culture. Twice in our study of the Beatitudes last Sunday we came across the term “righteousness.” In verse 6 we read, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” And again in verse 10: “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

I’m sure we would all agree that if we are to hunger and thirst for something, we’d better understand what it is. And if we’re going to allow ourselves to be persecuted for something, we’d better know what it is. But my impression is that there is a lot of confusion concerning the meaning of righteousness. A simple definition that most would agree to might be “right living,” but what exactly constitutes right living? Some think it is defined by a list of things they refrain from doing. Others think it is defined by a lifestyle of meditation and self-denial. If you ask any three professing Christians to describe a righteous lifestyle, you will probably find four opinions.

I suspect Jesus’ disciples had puzzled looks on their faces as He completed the Beatitudes. Perhaps He took a little break in His teaching to allow the profound truth He was sharing to sink in, and during the pause someone asked Him, “What do you mean by righteousness? Our religious leaders talk a lot about it and they are constantly quoting from the Mosaic Law to show us how to live, but their answers don’t sound much like what You’re teaching. Should we just chuck the OT Law as taught by our clergy and live by these Beatitudes?”

If I am correct that Jesus’ disciples were thinking this way, His words beginning in verse 17 make a lot of sense as an answer to these questions:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:17-20).

The last thing Jesus wants is for anyone to interpret His teaching on righteousness as in any way discrediting the OT. He clearly states that He did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets

but to fulfill them. Furthermore, He goes on to promise that not the smallest letter or even a part of a letter (like the dot on an “I” or the crossing of a “t”) will disappear from the Law until everything spoken in it is accomplished. But then Jesus goes even further in affirming the OT, stating that greatness in the Kingdom will be measured by conformity to the Law in both action and teaching.

Yet it is clear that His understanding of righteousness differs diametrically from that of the Jewish religious teachers. His very next words are these: “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). This must have stunned His disciples, for the Pharisees and teachers of the Law were famous for their righteousness. But Jesus says, in effect, the Scriptures are right, but they are wrong.

The Pharisees were a religious party in Israel that majored in studying the OT with a fine-toothed comb, especially the Torah, the first five books of Moses. They memorized vast portions of it. They worked hard to keep themselves from contamination by the world. They sought to preserve truth by fighting the secularization of society. They were scrupulous about tithing. They eagerly evangelized in an effort to get new converts. In short the Pharisees were much like the fundamentalists of our day (the Sadducees, on the other hand, were much like the liberals of our day).

The Teachers of the Law were the scholars among the Pharisees, or as we might put it, the seminary professors. They devoted full time to the study of the Scriptures and came to be its primary interpreters and articulators. They were highly revered for their knowledge and skill in exegeting and teaching the Torah.

With that as background, I wonder if we shouldn’t paraphrase Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:20 for our culture this way:

“For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of some of the best-known pastors, the most brilliant seminary professors, and the most successful radio and TV preachers you know, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

I know there are noble exceptions to such a categorical critique of today’s clergy, but the simple fact is there are plenty of Scribes and Pharisees in the church today, even in evangelicalism. They are individuals who have a great concern for righteousness, as did the Pharisees of Jesus’ day, but what kind of righteousness? You noticed, didn’t you, that Jesus doesn’t question that the Pharisees and teachers of the law pursued righteousness? But it was an inadequate and unacceptable righteousness to God.

Well, what does *acceptable* righteousness look like? I want to suggest seven characteristics of acceptable righteousness this morning, i.e. the kind of righteousness that will enable a person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. There’s no particular significance to the fact that there are seven—that’s just how it turned out. Acceptable righteousness is a righteousness less concerned with talk than walk, more concerned with Scripture than tradition, focuses on the internal rather than

the external, focuses on essential issues rather than non-essential ones, refuses to make God's demands less demanding, refuses to make God's permissions more permissive, and is a righteousness that is credited to our accounts by God Himself.

1. Acceptable righteousness is less concerned with talk than walk.

There are many places in the NT where Jesus elaborates on the lifestyle and teaching of the scribes and Pharisees. One of the principal passages is Matthew 23. Consider verses 1-4:

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.

In other words, Jesus claims that for the most part the Pharisees have their theology pretty straight, but their lives are a mess, their attitudes are ungodly, their motives are suspect.

How often could that be said of us as evangelicals? We put a great deal of emphasis on sound doctrine and biblical theology, but to what extent do our lives accurately mirror the truth that we teach and preach?

2. Acceptable righteousness is more concerned with Scripture than tradition.

The Jewish scholars claimed to have an orthodox view of the Scriptures, but in point of fact they regularly gave more credence to their traditions than they did to the Word of God. That is very evident from a confrontation between them and Jesus in Matthew 15:1-9:

Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!"

Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,' he is not to 'honor his father' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.

You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."

The Pharisees had a strong tradition about washing their hands in a certain ritual manner before meals. This wasn't something required in the Mosaic Law, but they elevated it to the level of an essential. In an effort to point out their gross inconsistency Jesus takes a law that is clearly required in the Scripture and challenges them as to why they don't keep it—the law about

honoring one's father and mother, the Fifth of the Ten Commandments.

Now the Pharisees paid lip service to that law, as they did to the entire Torah, but they had sneaky ways of avoiding its application to their lives. For example, if his elderly parent knocked on the door and asked for financial help, a Pharisee would quickly say a silent prayer in which he would devote everything he owned to God. Then he would say to his elderly parent, "Mom, Dad, I would love to help you, but I recently committed all my earthly goods to God, and I cannot renege on that promise. Why don't you check with Catholic Social Services and see if they can help you?" This tradition of officially devoting one's possessions to the Lord was simply a ruse for the sake of greed. They were nullifying the word of God for the sake of their traditions.

Now I personally have a great respect for tradition—not so much for our recent traditions about appropriate attire for church and musical preferences and times for services, etc, but for the ancient theological traditions of the church. I told my LBI class last Sunday night,

If it's true, it's not new.

If it's new, it's not true.

I think it's extremely important that we study the viewpoints of the early church fathers (those who were closest to the Apostles) and the great Reformers, like Luther and Calvin. Our evangelical seminaries generally do a great job teaching systematic theology and biblical theology, but they often do a lousy job teaching historical theology, and therefore much of their teaching is not solidly rooted in the history of the Church. But whenever we put Tradition of any kind on a par with Scripture, or whenever we interpret the Scriptures by our Tradition, we are in danger of serious error.

I remind you of a very important fact: heresy was present *even* during the NT period while the Apostles were still alive. Paul warned several of his churches about heresies that were rampant in his churches. For example, in 1 Timothy 4:3 Paul speaks of some false teachers who "forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth."

So just because you can find a viewpoint in early church history does not automatically mean that it is true. However, if you can't find it there, that's pretty strong evidence that it is false. I don't believe God is revealing new truth to the Church today, though at times He allows us to recover old truth. Acceptable righteousness is more concerned with Scripture than tradition.

3. Acceptable righteousness focuses on the internal rather than the external.

This is the opposite of what the Pharisees and teachers of the Law routinely did. In Matthew 23:5-7 Jesus says of these same leaders,

"Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to

have men call them 'Rabbi.'"

Phylacteries are little boxes with the Ten Commandments written inside which to this day orthodox Jewish men strap to their foreheads when they go to the synagogue or to the Wailing Wall. The religious leaders would wear wide phylacteries, fancy ones that would draw attention. The reference to long tassels on their robes and their love of being greeted and called "rabbi" reminds me of frequent visits to Cardinal Glennon Hospital in St. Louis while I pastored there. It was not unusual to see the Monsignor walking the aisles of the hospital in his white robes, with a red sash and a large religious medallion hanging around his neck, being greeted by medical personnel and patients alike, "Good morning, Father." Some would even stop him and kiss his ring. (Frankly, it's not too different from the treatment Benny Hinn receives in his distinctive white suits).

In Matthew 23:25-28 Jesus speaks even more pointedly to this issue of external righteousness:

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

It is a huge temptation for all of us to be more concerned about the external than the internal. I was talking with my mother a week ago and she was reminiscing about the Methodist and Baptist churches she grew up in nearly 80 years ago in northern Minnesota. These were Bible-believing, Bible-preaching churches that conducted frequent revival meetings. She constantly heard about the evils of drinking and smoking and wearing makeup and card-playing—all things one might deem negative righteousness. But she says she doesn't remember ever hearing any teaching about positive righteousness, any exhortations to love the poor, or to clothe oneself with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, or to forgive those who have wronged us, or to be a peacemaker. She acknowledges that she may simply have missed it, but clearly the emphasis was on external righteousness.

I'm glad the evangelical church today has for the most part abandoned that kind of legalism from our fundamentalist past, but sometimes I fear we have failed to place a corresponding new emphasis on internal righteousness. It seems like we just don't talk much about righteousness at all.

4. Acceptable righteousness focuses on essential issues rather than non-essential ones.

Matthew 23:23, 24:

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.”

The visual images here are stunning. You can just see a Pharisee going into his spice rack and counting out the little dill seeds, making sure that every tenth one goes to synagogue’s kitchen! The other image of a person straining out a tiny insect and ingesting a huge ugly animal with a hump or two, a long neck, and bony knees is also shocking.

Please understand that God doesn’t want us to neglect minor issues, whether they are doctrinal or ethical. It is good for us to study the details of prophecy and to examine the arguments pro and con about infant baptism. But we must be careful not to major on minors. One of the early church fathers said, “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials liberty; in all things, charity.” The principal reason there are 33,800+ denominations today is that professing Christians have been majoring on minors for a long time. Acceptable righteousness gives attention to the weightier issues of life and doctrine.

The next two characteristics of acceptable righteousness go hand in hand. They are two sides of the same coin, and the Pharisees and Scribes were guilty of both sides. Whenever God laid down a restriction they tried to find loopholes, and whenever God offered a freedom they tried to expand it.

5. Acceptable righteousness refuses to make God’s demands less demanding.

Now let me pursue a rabbit train for a moment, which will lead us back to this point. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus uses a phrase which we will meet again and again over the next six weeks, namely, “You have heard that it was said, but I tell you” If your Bible is open you can see this clearly:

Verse 21: “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder,’ . . . but I tell you . . .”

Verse 27: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you . . .”

Verse 31: “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell you . . .”

Verse 33: “Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath.’ But I tell you . . .”

Verse 38: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you . . .”

Verse 43: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you . . .”

What’s going on here? At first glance it seems that each time Jesus is quoting the OT but then contrasting His own teaching to what is found there. Once again we are forced to ask, “Is He saying, ‘Put your OT aside, along with the scholars who interpret it for you, because I have a

new understanding of truth, a new ethical standard, and a new way to please God.”

I don't think so. I think we find a hint at His true meaning in verse 43: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies . . .” The first half of that quotation, “love your neighbor,” clearly comes from the OT, but the last half is found nowhere in the Scriptures. Jesus is contrasting His own views, not with the teaching of the OT but rather with a twisted interpretation of the OT. The Pharisees were constantly attempting to force the Scripture into a mold they could accept. And if that is what is happening in verse 43, I suggest to you that it is probably what is happening in all the other quotations as well.

Now in Matthew 5:21-26, the latter half of our Scripture text today, we have a clear example of an attempt to make God's demands less demanding. Verse 21 says, “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, (that's a direct quote from the 6th Commandment) and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.”

The Pharisees and scribes were looking only at the letter of the Law, the physical act of murder, and limiting their interpretation to that. But Jesus is saying in effect, “God had more in mind than just the physical act of murder; He intended the 6th Commandment as a prohibition of mental murder as well. It is also a prohibition of anger and insult, and even further, a command to pursue reconciliation and peace.”

Jesus is committed to restoring God's original intention. “Do not murder” was intended by God to speak to the human heart about attitudes so destructive that they eventually lead to the death of another individual. Murder, you know, almost never occurs if anger and insult don't come first.

Furthermore, if anger and insult are so serious and dangerous, then we must avoid them and take action as speedily as possible. That is the point of Jesus' two illustrations, one from the church and the other from the courts. The first illustration has to do with our worship in the church:

Matthew 5:23:

“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”

In effect Jesus is saying that not only does the Sixth Commandment forbid the wanton taking of human life; it actually demands that we seek reconciliation with those who have something against us. We don't even have to be angry at *them*; if they are angry at *us*, that's sufficient reason to stop us in our tracks on the way to the altar and try to resolve the issue.

Then Jesus offers another illustration in verses 25 and 26:

Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are

still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

In our litigious society this advice seems naive. The tendency today is that if someone is suing you, you just slap a greater lawsuit on them. But Jesus urges us instead to settle matters quickly, out of court, going the extra mile to resolve disputes. All of this, He claims, is inherent in the original intent of the Sixth Commandment, “You shall not murder.” But the Pharisees sought to make God’s demands less demanding by limiting that original intent.

Do we have Pharisees and teachers of the Law in the church today whose interpretations are making God’s demands less demanding? Let me just rush in where angels fear to tread and address the issue of the ordination of women to pastoral ministry. Church after church, denomination after denomination has caved into the demands of the culture to allow women to do anything a man is allowed to do. Some mainline denominations actually require their churches to ordain women elders even if no woman in the church is really interested in being an elder.

Now I suggest to you that there are some fairly clear passages of Scripture that restrict certain kinds of leadership in the church to men. I don’t particularly relish those passages; I doubt if I would have written them that way if it were left up to me. But just about the strongest argument I hear for *not* following God’s restrictions is that “it isn’t fair.” That’s not a very persuasive argument for contradicting the Scriptures, friends. If I chucked everything in the Bible that at one time or another didn’t seem fair to me, there wouldn’t be much left. Remember what Isaiah said in 55:8, 9:

*“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,”
declares the LORD.*

*“As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.”*

Acceptable righteousness refuses to make God’s demands less demanding.

6. Acceptable righteousness refuses to make God’s permissions more permissive.

Look down at verse 31. This will be our text for next Sunday, so let me just introduce it to you today: “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who married the divorced woman commits adultery.” In the book of Deuteronomy God, who designed for marriage to be permanent, gave permission for divorce under very limited circumstances because of the hardness of their hearts. He never encouraged divorce but allowed for it when “some indecency” was present, a reference to some sort of sexual unfaithfulness. But the Scribes and Pharisees interpreted “some indecency” in the widest possible sense, concluding that if the wife burned her husband’s toast he could get a divorce. God’s permissions were made more permissive.

Is this happening in the church today? Paul says to his colleague Timothy, “Have a little wine for your stomach’s sake.” Is that a permission for a Christian to drink a little wine for the sake of his health? Probably, and it’s interesting to me that medical science today has concluded that those who drink red wine with moderation will be more healthy than those who are teetotalers. But are Paul’s words granting permission for recreational drinking or consuming hard liquor? I don’t think so. That seems to me a clear case of making God’s permissions more permissive. Acceptable righteousness doesn’t do that.

7. Acceptable righteousness is credited to our accounts by God Himself.

Ultimately, friends, the kind of righteousness that Jesus asks for is so demanding that if we’re ever going to possess it He has to give it to us. It cannot be deserved or earned or accomplished, only accepted. God set the impossible standard and then Himself provided its fulfillment—in Christ.

The Apostle Paul says in Galatians 2:16, “A man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus.” The fact that righteousness comes by faith is made explicitly clear in Romans 4:3: “What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was *credited* to him as righteousness.’” And then he goes on to make it clear that Abraham was counted as a righteous man apart from his works, apart from religious ritual, and apart from Law. Later on in Galatians 2:21 he adds: “I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” But it couldn’t, so Christ’s death was necessary.

The best charge account I know anything about is the one God has established for those who put their faith in Jesus. We get to charge our sins to His account, and He credits His righteousness to our account. This wonderful transaction does not relieve us of the responsibility to live out the truths of God’s Word, to be obedient to His commandments, or to follow the ethical standards of the Sermon on the Mount. But when we have done our best and failed, we can lean on the wonderful fact that God’s credit is perfect, and the righteousness He gives us is fully acceptable righteousness.

How do you sign up for that charge account? You do it by placing your faith in Jesus Christ. He died for you and He offers complete forgiveness to those who trust Him. Won’t you do that today?