

"A Christian's Righteousness"

Sermon Series on *The Sermon on the Mount*

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(Mt. 5:17-48)

Introduction.

How many of you have ever taken dance lessons? Cyndy told me she wants us to take dance lessons when I retire. (So, y'all pray for me!) Actually, I'm very open to it, and I look forward to being Cyndy's dance partner.

A while ago friend of mine took dance lessons with his wife, and it was quite the learning experience. My friend didn't grow up dancing because it was against the rules in his church tradition. He grew up Baptist, and he also attended to a Christian college where they didn't allow dancing. (At that school they also didn't allow premarital sex because they were afraid it might lead to dancing.)

When my friend graduated from college, he moved to California, got married, and he became a Presbyterian. His wife told him she wanted them to take dance lessons, and he agreed. So they went to a dance studio, and the instructors gave them a book to study which had instructions and little diagrams of where to put your feet.

My friend took the book, and he studied the book, and he even got to the point where he could actually do the book to some extent. But if there was one quality his dancing lacked, it was grace. There was a certain mechanical, robotic quality to it, and he said, "When it comes to dancing, I *know* it like a Presbyterian, but I *do* it like a Baptist!"

Here's the connection. You can know how to live the Christian life, and you may even be able to live it out to a certain extent, but without grace there isn't much beauty or genuine goodness to it. It's mechanical, it's rigid, and it tends to be legalistic. Religion can have that effect on people if we're not careful. With all the best of intentions, earnest Christians can end up just being *rule-followers* rather than *Jesus-followers*, and they become joyless, fearful, and judgmental people.

Jesus knew all about this kind of problem, and He addressed it in the Sermon on the Mount. Let's take a look at what He said.

I. What is Righteousness?

So far in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has talked of a Christian's character in giving the Beatitudes, and He's also spoken about a Christian's influence in the metaphors of salt and light. Now Christ further explains how a believer's character and their influence should be expressed in a real life of righteousness. However, He challenged what the Pharisees and teachers of the Law of His day said righteousness was supposed to be all about, and He even radicalized the demands of the Law in saying that outward conformity isn't enough. What is required is actually a transformation of the heart.

Already Jesus has mentioned the word "righteousness" twice in His sermon in what the disciples should hunger and thirst for (v. 6) and in the reason for which they might have to suffer persecution (v. 10). **(S)** But now He makes a provocative statement and says something quite radical, *"I tell you the truth, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven"* (Mt. 5:20).

As the sermon progresses, we begin to realize that Jesus didn't expect His disciples to surpass the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law *at their own game*. Instead, Christ had a different idea in mind. He redefined righteousness, and He said wanted His followers to pursue a righteousness of the heart.

The Pharisees had a really high bar when it came to righteousness, but all of it was completely focused on externals. They fasted twice a week, they observed the Sabbath meticulously, and they even gave a tithe of the herbs in their gardens. They tried to codify how a person could be righteous in the eyes of God, and they prescribed proper behavior in minute detail for every conceivable situation.

For example, they set precise limits on the work you could do on the Sabbath (*shabbat*). The OT Law said you shouldn't work on the Sabbath, so they went so far as to codify how far you could walk (one thousand yards), how much you could write (one word), and how much food you could take out of storage (one gulp) and still not break the Sabbath. Walking, writing, and eating were all thought to be an expression of some kind of work, and they prohibited it on the Sabbath.

Jesus objected to this kind of legalism, and He said it missed the whole point of the OT Law. Christ said that God wasn't concerned with a legalistic observance. Instead, He wanted a transformation of the heart. That's what was most important. We see hints of God's passion for heart transformation over outward conformity to the Law throughout the OT.

For example, in Ezekiel 36 we read where God said, *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh"* (Ez.

36:26). In Jeremiah 31 the Lord said, *“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,’ declares the LORD. ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts”* (Jer. 31:33). And elsewhere in the book of Psalms David declared, *“You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise”* (Ps. 51:16-17).

What Jesus was saying here is that the heart and the mind affect the motives for one’s obedience, and the only way we can surpass the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees is by developing a heart for God. It’s an inward righteousness God is after, not legalistic obedience. And the only way that can happen is when God transforms your heart from the inside out.

II. The Wrong Kind of Righteousness.

This section in the Sermon on the Mount is called “the Antitheses” by biblical scholars because Jesus quotes what the religious leaders taught and then contrasts it with His emphasis on a righteousness of the heart (“You have heard it said to the people of old...But I say to you...”). There are several illustrations Jesus offers in chapter 5 which contrast the two kinds of righteousness He’s talking about, and they deal with anger, sex, truth-telling, and relational conflict. I wish we had the time to walk through each of these at length, but in the interest of time I can only provide you with an overview and the highlights of what Jesus said about each of them.

The first antithesis deals with anger. *“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell”* (Mt. 5:21-22).

Essentially, what Jesus is saying in these verses is that anger is dangerous because it tries to justify our poor treatment of another person. You and I may not have killed anyone literally, but we’ve all “murdered” someone’s reputation or we’ve deeply wounded their hearts with our words and actions. Anger is contempt that leaks out of us, and it bleeds over into the things we say and what we do.

There are many ways in which we convey our anger. How we look at someone, how we speak to them, sarcasm, sabotage, passive aggression, being dismissive – all these are expressions of a lack of love and a failure to will the good of another person. And Jesus said thinking and acting like that is wrong. Confession, repentance, and reconciliation is what Jesus urges us to pursue if we want to live a life pleasing to God, and He illustrates what it looks like to have a heart that is pervaded by love. This is the inside-out goodness the Pharisees knew nothing about.

The second antithesis deals with the matter of sex, and Jesus talked about adultery, lust, and divorce. (And He did it in just 5 verses!) *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Mt. 5:27-28).*

In this passage Jesus isn’t saying that sexual attraction is wrong or that God is down on sex. Quite the opposite. Our sexuality is part of who we are whether we’re married or single, and God is the one who created sexual desire. The problem is when we feed our desire for sexual gratification in a way that violates the sacredness of God’s gift of sex.

Sexual intimacy is God’s invention to unite two souls, and it’s the ultimate form of physical intimacy. Marriage is the public declaration of a permanent and exclusive commitment, so to be sexually intimate with a person to whom I’m not married is to make a promise with my body that I withhold in my will. It’s a setup for pain, and it’s going to damage my soul. That’s why it’s a sin.

And the only way to deal with this kind of temptation in the heart is to root it out and deal with it as ruthlessly as you possibly can – not in a literal sense but in your heart. In other words, if what you look at leads you into sin, pretend you have no eyes – don’t look at it. If what you touch leads you into sin, pretend you have no hands – don’t touch it. And if the places you go lead you into sin, pretend you have no feet – don’t go there. Jesus’ advice is very practical.

The third antithesis deals with the issue of keeping your word and telling the truth, and Jesus addresses the matter of the swearing and the making of oaths. A lot of people today not only have a sin problem; they have a “spin problem” too. Everywhere in our culture today, in the world of politics and in the media, fake news, fact checkers, and spin is such a problem that a few years ago the Word of the Year for the Oxford Dictionary was “post-truth.”

If we’re honest, we have to admit that from time to time all of us struggle to tell the truth, and we have a tendency to shade the truth, tell half the truth, and sometimes even outright lie in order to make ourselves look better than we are or to avoid the consequences of what really happened. As a result in order to make people believe we’re telling the truth, we might be tempted to say, “Cross my heart and hope to die.” We invoke an oath to add to the veracity of our statement. But when we do this it is proof that we tend to lie. In the ancient world people would say things like, “May God deal with me ever so severely if I’m not telling you the truth.” Today we might say, “I swear to God” or “I swear on a stack of Bibles.”

Jesus said we shouldn’t do that. Instead, He said if your heart is right and you let the light of God shine through you, then your “yes” will be “yes” and your “no” will be “no.” Telling the truth will become second nature to you because you’ve developed a desire to live an honest and straightforward life. And you become known as a person of integrity who keeps their word even when it’s hard, even when it hurts.

The final antithesis has to do with relational conflict. *“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on*

the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.... You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt. 5:38-39, 43-44).

All of us know what it feels like to be wronged, and we want to get even. And each of us also knows what it's like to have an enemy. We all have a "them" in our lives – people we don't respect, people we don't like, people who make us angry because of what they believe or how they act. Jesus calls us to a different way of living in dealing with the desire for revenge and the conflict we feel with people we consider enemies, and one of the most important things that Jesus wanted to instill in His disciples is an ethic of loving relationships.

If you refuse to repay evil with evil and instead respond in love, and if you love your enemies despite the way they treat you or how you feel about them, then you're displaying the characteristics of the kingdom of God and the upside-down inside-out reality of Jesus' transformation of your heart. Someday God will make all things right, and He'll hold everyone accountable for what they do and how they behave. But in this moment in which we live in such a broken and fallen world, each of us has an opportunity to live counter-culturally and follow the way of Jesus.

In one of his most moving sermons, Martin Luther King, Jr. talked about this very thing. The sermon is entitled *Loving Your Enemies*, and it was actually written from a jail cell in Georgia. In it Dr. King describes how hate multiplies hate in a descending spiral of violence, and it's just as harmful to the person who hates as it is to his victim. Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy to a friend. We never get rid of an enemy by meeting hate with hate. We will only get rid of an enemy by getting rid of the enmity we feel.

Do you know who had a lot of enemies? Jesus did. How did He deal with His enemies? He died for them. Scripture says, *"When they hurled insults at Jesus, He didn't retaliate. When He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to God who judges justly. He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness, and by His wounds we are healed" (1 Pt. 2:23-24).*

III. The Transformation of the Heart.

How can you and I live like this? What's the key to developing a righteousness of the heart Jesus talked about? I think the key lies in a spiritual transformation which only God can bring about. We can't do it on our own. We need divine intervention. But it's not a passive experience. You and I have to collaborate and cooperate with the Holy Spirit if we ever want to experience the kind of transformation Jesus talked about. God can't steer a parked car.

The revolution of Jesus is a revolution of character which changes people from the inside out through an ongoing personal relationship with Him and with other believers. The hidden dimension of each human life isn't visible to others, and it isn't even fully understood by

ourselves. Only God knows the depths of the human heart, and only He can bring about the transformation we need.

In his book *Renovation of the Heart* Dallas Willard said that genuine spiritual transformation into the goodness and power seen in Jesus is the goal of human life. But it lies beyond the reach of programs of inner transformation that draw merely on human effort and the human spirit. It takes the work of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual formation of the Christian refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner life of Jesus Himself. And the degree to which spiritual formation in Christ is successful, the outer life of the individual becomes a natural expression or outflow of the character and teachings of Jesus.¹

What Christ offers His disciples isn't merely self-improvement. It's radical transformation. It isn't simply an offer to make good people a little bit better or smoothing out the rough edges of their basically good lives and hearts. Rather, it's a matter of transforming sinners into saints and babes in Christ into mature disciples.

When I went away to college my freshman year, it was a chance to spread my wings and become my own person. I wasn't under the control of my parents any longer, and I wanted to throw off the shackles of what I perceived was a conventional upbringing and explore what college life had to offer. It wasn't long before I developed a very foul mouth, and I learned to curse because it made me feel tough and all grown up. And I also began to engage in activities I knew weren't part of the life God desired for me.

But then a student I met that first semester got me involved in a Bible study, and as I began to read Scripture I was convicted by the Holy Spirit about my newfound Bohemian lifestyle. And over the course of about three months my life completely changed and turned around 180 degrees. The things I was doing no longer held the attraction they once did for me, and I found that as I fell more and more in love with Jesus, I desired to live a life that was pleasing to Him. My heart was transformed. That's what happens to you when you're apprehended by God's grace. You begin to live a life of righteousness not because you have to but because you want to.

If you're a follower of Jesus, the aim isn't behavior modification but heart transformation. The aim is to allow God to change the flow of your thoughts and desires to such an extent that you become truthful, humble, generous, full of grace, and then your life begins to conform to one that pleases God.

Conclusion.

I don't know if Cyndy and I will be like Fred Astair and Ginger Rogers when we take dance lessons when I retire, but I do hope that as we follow Christ together in the years to come we will join in His dance of grace and experience a transformation of our hearts more and more on a daily basis. On one occasion Jesus said, *"To what then shall I compare the people of this*

generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance'" (Mt. 11:16-17a).

Friends, can you hear the music? That's Jesus on the flute. He's the great Pied Piper. That's Jesus calling you to a life of surpassing righteousness which is a life of joy in the outflow of the abundance of God's grace. Join in the dance, and do it today. It will change your life. Amen.

¹Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs: Nav Press, 2002), 21-22.