

One Sermon That Changed The World

Calling All Neurotics

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“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. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes 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 does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:17-20 ESV).

One well-used commentary on Matthew says these four verses I just read to you “provide the key” to interpreting the whole sermon on the mount. Not only that: these 4 verses provide the key to understanding what Jesus means by “entering the kingdom of heaven.” Not only that, these 4 verses provide the key to understanding what Matthew is doing in his entire gospel.¹ This is the thesis statement for Jesus and for Matthew and for the gospel. Jimmy Allen used to say “if you get Romans, God gets you” as a way to remember what Romans is all about. In a similar way, if you get these verses, you get the whole sermon.

If that’s true, then Jesus’ final line makes a neurotic like me very uncomfortable. “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven!” Do you remember your first image of God growing up? Can you picture him in your mind’s eye? How many of you are seeing a frowning giant ready to catch you at any misstep? Or perhaps you see a great unblinking eye, watching your every move? I hope that wasn’t the case, but if you’re anything like me, the God I grew up with always seemed to have a stern look on His face—terribly displeased with my performance. And this didn’t bode well for me. The reading of the Bible to which I was

¹ Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, The NIV Application Commentary.

introduced highlighted verses that emphasized obedience at every turn. When I read the verses assigned to me, what jumped off the page was a God who expected fine-detailed rule-keeping. I was quite sure that he kept a tally of church attendance, and—yes—Wednesday nights most definitely counted. The whole point of the whole ballgame was to be saved—and the way to get saved was this: God has a gauntlet set up—a long, hard, winding road with lots of very difficult hurdles, a detailed list of commands and duties, most of which will not be met, attempted by people most of whom wouldn't make it. What was God's role in all of this, I would ask? Oh, that's very important, you see: God, they would say, is why we even have the chance to run the gauntlet at all. Grace is God even giving us that 1% chance. Faith is the attitude that we are supposed to show as we start running, and our list of good deeds is what will determine if we make it through the pearly gates on judgment day. After all, "Man is justified by works," says James 2:24, "and not by faith only." Add in several robust descriptions of hell, complete with vivid illustrations, and, well, you have an explosive combination of memories that would affect any young, extra-sensitive neurotic with a penchant for perfectionism. It can easily create a nervous wreck. Sound familiar to anyone?

It's a view of religion not so different from what some people thought 2,000 years ago. They weren't reading the New Testament that way (it hadn't been written yet). They were reading the Old Testament that way. And for them, there was nothing more offensive than what they thought they heard coming out of the mouth of Jesus of Nazareth. Everybody knew forgiveness came at the end of a series of rituals involving priests and temples and sacrifices; but Jesus told a hurting man "Your sins are forgiven." Just like that. Everybody knew that there were laws set up—by God himself—that told insiders how to be insiders, explained why outsiders were outsiders, and told insiders how to keep themselves away from outsiders. And Jesus kept doing things and saying things that seemed to cross those picket lines. What would you say about Jesus of Nazareth if that's the world you came from—the way you read your Bible—and saw what he was doing? What *could* you say? I suppose you would say this man doesn't believe in the Law of God. In fact, he would love it if the law would just go away.

In these 4 verses, Jesus responds to that accusation--in shocking ways. He answers in a way that tells us if we keep thinking in the old check-list way of thinking, it will crush us. If we keep living in that old rule-oriented way of living, it will destroy us. But if we let his answer change how we think and how we live, it will liberate us, and we will feel re-born. Being born again is exactly what Jesus has in mind – he just calls it "entering the kingdom of heaven." So if "being more righteous than a pharisee" isn't a following a strict list of rules or commands, or completing a checklist, what does it mean? Here are four ways to be more righteous than a Pharisee without losing your mind. Are you ready?

FIRST, JESUS TAKES THE LAW SERIOUSLY

First, Jesus says he takes the law seriously. And so, we too must take the law seriously. “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets” says Jesus, “I have *not* come to abolish them.” In fact, if you recall our verse we read at the beginning, Jesus says, “until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law.” When it comes to the law, “whoever does them and teaches them,” says Jesus, “will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

It's important to hear Jesus the way his first audience would have heard him. The rhythm of Jesus' speech here matches the rhythm of how a person in Aramaic would speak at a funeral—it's the meter of strong emotion. Jesus took the law seriously, and we—if we want a righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees—we must take the law seriously. All of it. The smallest details of God's law really matter! And not just the law—the law AND the prophets. That is a first-century Jesus way of referring to your Old Testament. Before the first century ended, there arose a man in the early church named Marcion who said if we believe in Jesus then the entire Old Testament no longer matters! The irony is that this is what Jesus' enemies thought Jesus was saying, and Jesus replies, “don't hang that heresy on me!” But they did. And there are still Christians who get this wrong. Recently, a popular preacher told his church audience “Peter, James and Paul elected to unhitch the Christian faith from the Jewish Scriptures. And my friends, we must as well.” I don't think most of us were ever told that terrible lie that brazenly. No—we were told that “the Old Testament is still valuable (I mean, it was written for our learning). It's valuable because we like Bible trivia. But the Old Testament was nailed to the cross. It doesn't apply to us anymore, really; but we are still commanded to read it and stuff. I'm pretty sure there will be an entrance exam when we get to heaven, and we will have to list the Kings of Judah in order. Besides, what else are we going to fill the time with when we are teaching Christian soldiers on Sunday nights?”

The truth is that Peter, James, and Paul thought the Old Testament so important they appealed to it as a final authority in their teaching and preaching. They called it scripture for New Testament Christians. They said the law they found there was holy, righteous, and good. They said every word of the Old Testament was breathed by God and that it was profitable for Christian doctrine and training in right living. Do I need to remind you that it was the only “Bible” most of them ever had or knew! Jesus simply can't mean “I'm taking away Genesis through Malachi, it won't count anymore.” In fact, he says the opposite. “I did not come to abolish” the Law or the prophets.

SECOND, JESUS IS THE INTERPRETER OF THE LAW

But I am here, says Jesus, to tell you what they mean. You know, the Apostle Paul does something very strange in his letters. He says the Law of God matters. He says we can and should fulfill the law of Christ. Law? Yes. But circumcision, rules about food, and even Sabbath—well, those can go out the window if it comes between a Gentile and her God; no—those things don't matter, but the law of God sure does.

And don't you know the religious leaders of the day were scratching their heads? How can you throw out circumcision and sabbath but say the law matters? That IS the law! Where does Paul get the right to say this stuff? He gets it right here.

Jesus says, "I am the interpreter of the law." Driving all this tension in the text is a deep, underlying suspicion that Jesus is ignoring, despising, and rejecting the law of God. And Jesus says unequivocally, "Law? Yes! But your scribes and Pharisees *interpretation* of the law? Absolutely not." It's the "I" in "I say to you" that I want to zero in on. Jesus is declaring himself to be the interpreter of Israel's scriptures. Jesus will tell us what the law is—what the law means, what it has *always* meant. He will do this authoritatively. Above all other teachers. Jesus is *the* interpreter.²

Let us, Christians, right here and now humbly confess that there are texts in the Bible that scare us. Texts that trouble us. Texts that give us questions for which we have few if any answers. More than that, these texts sometimes give us a picture of God that is hard to deal with. Hard to live with. The struggle is real. But Jesus comes into the picture, and he says "I'm here to help you. Yes, I know there's hard stuff in there. I know that because I had a hand in writing those texts. But can I help you? Don't start with the hard stuff. Start with me." Start with Jesus and then read all of those difficult texts through the lens of Jesus. Jim McGuiggan once said "Jesus is not just the interpreter of Scripture; he's the interpreter of God!" The Gospel of John says exactly that. When a preacher really opens up a passage and explains it thoroughly, we call that "exegesis." Well John says that no one has ever seen God, but Jesus—the one who came from the Father, he "exegetes" God for us! Jesus isn't just the interpreter of Scripture. He's the interpreter of God. So reading all of the Bible through the lens of Jesus is reading what God *wants* through the lens of who God *is*!³

That's what Paul is doing later. That's what Jesus says to do. "I love the law—I *gave* the law. You've seen the paintings of Sinai—the hand reaching down to give the law to

² Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, The NIV Application Commentary.

³ See Jim McGuiggan, "Jesus Is The Interpreter," A Light in the Darkness Podcast Series, Episode 25. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cce-ytC46Sc&ab_channel=NathanGuy

Moses. Whose hand do you think that was? *I gave the law.*” “In fact”—Jesus says in Matthew—“I AM the law!” But take that seriously. *Law is not a list of rules or commandments.* Listen now—“the law” as Jesus saw it is not some list of rules or commandments. It *has* rules and commandments. But law *is not* rules and commandments. *Law is the wish of God.* Law tells us what God wants. And how do we know what God wants? Look to Jesus. See Jesus and you see what law was always intended to say.

THIRD, MY INTERPRETATION IS MORE

And so that leads to our third point: My interpretation, says Jesus, isn’t less...its more! “Not the smallest letter will pass from the law.” “Whoever breaks the least of these commandments will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus, again, is borrowing the language of the very teachers who are accusing him of heresy. The rabbis thought of “light” and “heavy” commandments. And Jesus says “I care about all of it. In fact, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” If we think like the scribes, this sounds scary and nearly impossible. Instead, we go to our master and say, “Master, interpret this for us, would you please?”

And if you do that, you’ll likely hear him say “it’s more than you think, but its better than you think, because it will change *the way* you think.” Do you remember Jesus’ first synagogue sermon? He told the crowd that it was time to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. Everybody loved that. Until he reminded them that in the Old Testament, on several occasions, “The year of the Lord’s favor” was good news for Gentiles, good news for outsiders. And when they heard that, they didn’t want to believe it. Because good news for outsiders meant bad news for insiders. No, not really. It may be bad news for an insider who doesn’t want to welcome outsiders. But it’s wonderful news if you are an outsider who wants to come in.

There are two places in Matthew’s Gospel where Jesus shows that a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees is more than we think, but better than we think, because it changes the way we think. The first is in Matthew 9:13. It’s right after Jesus calls Matthew to be a disciple (wouldn’t you know it)! Jesus is sitting at a table right next to tax collectors and Gentile outsiders (the text calls them ‘sinners’). And the Pharisees look up from their scrolls, with that little one-eye magnifying glass still sticking out of one eye, and they say, “how can you eat with tax collectors and sinners?” And Jesus says, “you got your scroll there? Your Bible? Your law? Oh, I love that law. Every smallest letter of it. But do me a favor—go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” Read more deeply, says Jesus. Read better. Read with a change of heart.

The second place is in Matthew 12:7. Jesus is walking through a grainfield on the sabbath, and his hungry disciples were eating from it. And Pharisees saw nothing but a rule violation. So, Jesus speaks and begins with these words: “Have you not read?” “Have you not read what David did?” or “Have you not read in the law itself?” I can prove to you that what I am doing is not unlawful from David or even from the law book. But I shouldn’t have to do that, said Jesus; for “if you had known what this means: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice,” you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.”

You want your righteousness to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees? Then read scripture through a Jesus lens. Start by reading it right!

So let’s break this down into our day to day for a minute. What does that statement look like in my life? Well it might mean that when keeping God’s law breaks your tradition, it’s your tradition that needs to change. Or when your reading of the law blinds you to the people for whom the law was meant to serve, it’s your reading of the law that needs to change. These people were so good at rule keeping, but so terrible at keeping the law! Because the law is not a set of rules. And it turns out, it never was.

Way back in Leviticus 19, Jesus said a whole list of things. Some of those things sound like good ideas for all time: don’t murder. Don’t steal. Don’t commit adultery. But then he said don’t sow your field with two different kinds of seed. And don’t wear a shirt made of two different kinds of cloth. If you are wearing a shirt right now that is 50% cotton, you are in trouble! Some good, well-meaning Christians through the centuries taught that we can tell the difference by separating the ceremonial law from the moral law. The moral stuff still applies, but the ceremony stuff doesn’t. That is helpful in some ways. But I think God has something deeper in mind here. Instead of asking “what parts of Leviticus 19 were ceremonial and thus don’t apply,” ask “what does a list this jumbled up trying to teach?” What kind of person would result from this list of rules and commandments? The answer is a person who knew what it meant to be separate; to be holy. If you practice being separate, being holy, in every area of your life (your neighbors stuff is theirs, not yours; your body belongs to your wife, no one else; and your field is entirely one crop, not two)—then you will begin to think instinctively that who you *are* is separate and holy. Understand this list of rules—really get to know what it means—and it will change you. It’s **who you are** that matters to me, says the Lord.

It was a Sadducee, a lawyer, who was trying to test Jesus, who said to him “Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?” and Jesus said, “I’ll tell you. I’ll take the bait. I’ll tell you. Love God with everything you’ve got. And love your neighbor like you love yourself. On these two depend all the Law—and the Prophets as well”

(Matthew 22). I'll do more than give you a list of rules—I'll summarize everything God has ever said. He said to love, and to be the kind of person who can't help but love, and love rightly. Are you prepared to do that?

Jesus is saying letting your righteousness “exceed that of the scribes” involves reading Scripture right, and knowing what it means. And in everyday parlance it means this: Righteousness is not a greater quantity of rules; it's a greater quality of spirit. A greater righteousness is not more neurotic focus on minutiae or a longer checklist; it's a changed heart. If the law is the wish and will of God, then the righteous doing of the law is becoming the person the law was always meant to form you into. When you do get it, and live it, your life will look like the kingdom of heaven on earth: giving God all he deserves and loving our neighbor like they have never been loved before.⁴

FOURTH, ALL THIS TAKES PLACE IN THE SECURITY OF GRACE

So, we come to the last point for this morning. Take the law seriously. Let Jesus interpret what it is, what it says, what it means. Expect more not less. But watch it now: “how will I know when I've done enough to count as righteous?” Hear his answer: *You already are.*

On this stage is a scale—representing the way we tend to think.⁵ On this side, let's place a dark weight representing our bad deeds. Think of some “big” sin in your life—the kind of thing about which you still feel guilty. On the other side, let's place some lighter weights representing our good deeds. Maybe we hold the door for someone at a restaurant, [place a bead]. Maybe we rake leaves, free of charge, on a Saturday [place two beads]. Maybe we volunteer for that all night church youth retreat [place lots of beads]. Overall, I've done more good things than bad things; so that is what makes me righteous. There is no doubt that Jesus wants us to do good things. The word “righteousness” does appear in the Bible sometimes to mean “right living” (1 John 3:7 NIV). Yes, the believer is called to holiness, and, in the Spirit, we are empowered for right living. That is right.

But what is so wrong with our “scale mentality”? I think it can best be seen from the second way “righteousness” is used in the Bible. Righteousness does not just mean “right living.” It can also be used to mean “right standing.” If you are in court, guilty

⁴ Rodney Reeves, *Matthew*, The Story of God Bible Commentary.

⁵ An illustration borrowed from Rick Atchley, “Get Off The Scales,” Richland Hills Church of Christ. http://www.wvjtdtoday.com/mgmorrow/audio/sermons/GetOffTheScales_Atchley_20050320_050723.mp3

of a crime, you can plead, you can beg, you can do lots of good things, but you are not in right standing with the court until you pay your fine. And that is where the problem lies. It's a twofold problem. For starters, we don't understand how heavy our sin actually is. Our sin is not an annoyance; it leads to separation from God. Our sin put Jesus Christ on the cross. Oh, our sin is heavy—heavy enough to bring Christ down. The second thing we don't understand is just how puny our good deeds actually are. Think of your best day—the one where you did the most good deeds—and hear is how Isaiah describes us: “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” (Isa 64:6). Jesus calls for a righteousness far greater than the Bible teachers themselves, and the Bible says “wait a minute! There is none righteous, no not one (Rom 3)! Do you know what that means? We stood in wrong standing with the court of heaven. Our penalty was too pricey for us to pay, and our offering could not even begin to cover the cost. The call to a greater righteousness is not a call to trying harder to pay your debt; it's a call to get off the scales. For now—apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the law and the prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. For God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (Rom 3; 2 Cor 5:21). Right standing cannot be found in a scale; it can only be found in the cross.

The last thing Jesus means when he calls for a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees is a righteousness that is graciously given by Christ, not one earned by doing it right.

To young Timothy, Paul said, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one who is *already* approved.” And here in Matthew 5, we who are sitting at Jesus' feet were *already* called “disciples” way back in verse 1, *before the Sermon on the Mount even started*. Do you know what that means? These are not instructions on how to make God love you, or how to get into his good graces. He already loves you. And He already chose you. He always has, from the foundations of the world. The story always starts with grace.

So, when you read the Sermon the Mount, start with grace. Did you know that just before the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus went in to all the regions, healing all the diseases of all the people. He came to us and healed us before he ever asked a single thing from us. Grace comes *before* the demand. This is always the way of Jesus, who gave up his place to serve before calling us to serve and gave his own life before asking for mine. If Christ calls us to something today, it is only in response to the gift given to us yesterday.⁶ Love and grace come first. As Daniel Doriani reminds us,

⁶ See Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: Crossroad/Herder & Herder, 1999), p. 29.

Matthew shows that Jesus was willing to pay for the sins of both moral and immoral people, people who work hard at obedience and people who do not work at all. He gave himself for disciples who could not even pray with him for an hour, even his hour of greatest need.”⁷

This is why it hurts my heart when I hear someone read the Sermon the mount and begin to sweat bullets thinking they haven't done enough, and will never do enough to get into heaven or make God smile. Get off the scales! No, you haven't done enough to earn right standing, and you never will. But the good news is that Jesus has done enough, and he is at work in you and me. *The Sermon, like the gospel, is not first of all about what we should do. It's first of all about what God is already doing.* God who is invading our lives, filling us with his presence, empowering us to live the life he prepares for us, to walk in valley and paths where He leads us, and to join us to a community of peace and goodwill where we find help and partnership in this new life. It is a story about God. It's all a story of grace. And that simple truth was too much to grasp for a scribe or a Pharisee. It was beyond them. So go beyond them...to Jesus Christ.

The Sermon on the Mount begins with “blessing.” And when we find out what this means, even these words are a “blessing” to you and me. According to the Mishnah, the Rabbis called the law of Moses our “yoke” (that heavy wooden beam that hung over the necks of two oxen to keep them pulling in a straight line). The law is our yoke, said the rabbis; learn from it—and when you've kept all of the laws, God will give you Sabbath rest. Is it any wonder that it's in Matthew's gospel—and in Matthew's alone—that Jesus looks at us and says “take MY yoke upon you, and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and you shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy....and my burden is light” (Matt 11:28-31).

⁷ Daniel M. Doriani, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Character of a Disciple* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), p. 12.