

Sermon Title: Be Righteous
Biblical Text: Matthew 5:17-20
Teaching Series: Kingdom Being
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Matthew 5:17-20

"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."

As Christians it's common to wrestle with our relationship to the Law. That's what Jesus talks about next in his Sermon on the Mount. You see, God's free gifts of grace and forgiveness and love complicate our practical application of the Bible's moral teachings. This is certainly true when considering socially divisive issues like sex, gender, sexual orientation, abortion, racism, immigration, and so on. But it's just as true when thinking about the Scriptures' vision of our character—God's instructions about anger, humility, generosity, greed, and so on. We're not just talking about interpretation; *a passage's meaning*. We're talking about authority; *God's power in our lives*.

Are you with me?

In Jesus' day, people wrestled with all this too. The way Jesus speaks about the spiritual life, interacts with tradition, and the kinds of people he spends time with ... frustrates preconceived notions of holiness and obedience and worship. And so in our passage this morning, he assures his concerned contemporaries that he's not doing away with God's Law. While that may have calmed the nerves of Jesus' Jewish followers, it likely stirs up frustration in a city like Chicago. They valued tradition but many of us value moral freedom. They we're drawn to a religion centered on order and purity. We're drawn to a spirituality centered on love, not rules. That's what I'd like to talk about today. I want to talk about our relationship with God's Law or what Jesus calls *righteousness*.

Here's how we'll organize our time ...

- *Religious* righteousness
- *Modern* righteousness
- *Jesus'* righteousness

[Prayer]

Movement 1: Religious Righteousness (vv.17;18-19,

Hebrews 12:1)

Remember, Jesus is speaking with his disciples. He's just walked away from a crowd of curious listeners, sat on a hillside, and is speaking with those whom he is closest. His sermon is meant for them. Jesus is giving his people an interim vision

of the kingdom, that is his will and way as God or his rule and reign as King. It's Jesus' vision of how the power of his resurrection will take hold of their world between his first and second coming. Thus far in the sermon, Jesus has spoken about the *character* of his disciples in vv.1-12 and then about the *influence* of his disciples in vv.13-16 and now he's talking about the *righteousness* of his disciples.

From the way Jesus speaks, it seems that some people are concerned about his particular brand of righteousness; or at the very least Jesus understood that his vision of righteous living could be easily misunderstood. So he begins with a couple negative statement. Meet me in v.17. ***Read Matthew 5:17 ... 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.*** Notice, he says "***Do not think***" and "***I have not come***" ... in other words, it would be easy to think he's come to do away with the Law. *Why?* Well because he was welcoming and loving people who neither knew or followed the Law. In other words, Jesus is welcoming people in his kingdom whom the religious class deem unrighteous.

Let's see if we can get to the bottom of this tension ...

The Law and the Prophets is biblical short-hand. It's a way of speaking about the entirety of the Mosaic Law (the rules and regulations for God's people ushered in during the time of Moses). It's what today many of us call the Old Testament. So Jewish people in Jesus' day were holistically committed to obeying every letter of this law. Their lives centered and found meaning and definition through their compliance and submission to the Law. It's not too much to say that the Law was their identity. That reverence persists to this day in conservative Jewish communities. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains, "***The holiest object in Judaism is a***

book, the Scroll of the Law. The reverence we pay it is astonishing. We stand in its presence as if it were a king, dance with it as if it were a bride, and if, God forbid, it is desecrated or ruined beyond repair we bury it as if it were a relative who had died" (*The Power of Ideas*, 114). It's not too much to say that the Law isn't simply a text but an intricate part of the Jewish self-concept.

This is why the Pharisees and scribes and many Jewish people were having such a hard time with Jesus' teaching. Though it's easy to be critical of their religious righteousness, we would have likely looked up to them. In fact, there are many different kinds of people outside the Jewish tradition who love the Bible, embody an incredible faithfulness to God's Word, and show uncommon courage in their commitment to living with righteousness; nothing sways their commitment to righteousness. Perhaps you have a grandparent or friend who demonstrates such integrity and noble character. Or we might consider the story of Daniel in the Bible, he was so committed to living with righteousness through prayer that he's willing to risk death. Or like Esther, she too risked her life to honor the Lord and care for her people. The writer of Hebrews tells us we were supposed to look to this faithful zeal of others and allow it to encourage our souls. ***Read Hebrews 12:1 ... Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us ...*** You see, we are meant to follow the example of the righteous obedience of those around and before us. But our obedience is not our identity.

Religious righteousness is about obeying rules. And it's important to recognize that Jesus isn't against obeying the rules. That's what he's explaining. Jesus is all about obeying the rules. ***Read Matthew 5:18-19 ... 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. Jesus intended to observe and obey the Word of God. However, he was also diagnosing a prevailing problem. Often when we find our identity in obeying rules we neglect the purpose or meaning or heart behind a particular rule. We follow the rules not because we trust the giver of the Law, but rather because we want to be known and seen as one who follows the rules. In other words, there's a shadow side to religious righteousness: in obeying rules we often fail to embody love.

And when that happens, when we obey the rules to the neglect of love we get religious fundamentalism. We get churches and traditions that are more interested in condemning sins or banning books or excusing racism than loving our neighbors. We get people, including ourselves, who are drawn to holiness even if that means discarding mercy and ignoring the image of God in another human being. And as we'll see, Jesus was unwilling to divorce the two.

Movement 2: Modern Righteousness (vv.17; 23:27-28, Mark 10:17;21-22, ref John 8:11)

Jesus addresses this lack of love and integrity in religion's version of righteousness in Matthew 23. In a string of condemnations Jesus says, *Read Matthew 23:27-28 ...* *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but*

within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Jesus calls the religious elites *hypocrites* no less than seven times in this barrage. And yet, my guess is that they were more offended being described as "lawless." Think about it. For a people who define themselves by adherence to the Law, being called *lawless* was tantamount to saying, *you don't know who you are*. And yet, that's how severe Jesus understands the separation of doing works of righteousness (outward) and having a heart of righteousness (inward).

While Jesus seems intent on explaining that he does indeed obey the law and doesn't intend to abolish the law (or what we're calling ***religious*** righteousness), he also gives us this more robust vision of our relationship with the law (which we'll call ***modern*** righteousness). Look again at v.17. ***Read Matthew 5:17 ... 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.*** Jesus hasn't come to *abolish* the law. He's come to *fulfill* it. But, *what's that mean? What's that word fulfill mean?* Well, it's not simply about obeying the law. Nor is it about replacing the law. The word means to bring completion. In other words, the Law began something and now Jesus is bringing the Law's purpose to fulfillment. This is exactly what Jesus explains through six examples the rest of the chapter, which we'll look at in detail in the coming weeks. But a cursory glance will be helpful to understand what Jesus is getting at here ...

- Anger (vv.21-26). *You've heard it said ... but I say to you.*
- Lust (vv.27-30). *You've heard it said ... but I say to you.*
- Divorce (vv.31-32). *You've heard it said ... but I say to you*
- Oaths (vv.33-37). *You've heard it said ... but I say to you*
- Retaliation (vv.38-42). *You've heard it said ... but I say to you*

- Love (vv.43-48). *You've heard it said ... but I say to you*

In each case, Jesus highlights a particular law laid out in the Old Testament and then fulfills it bSpecifically, hehis own authority. He's reframing the Law around the heart. He's telling his disciples that the epicenter of their identity is not the law, but rather it's a matter of their heart. It's not about their relationship with rules but about their relationship with God. This is the lesson Jesus taught a wealthy spiritual seeker one day. The man came to Jesus and asked, ***Read Mark 10:17 ... "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*** Jesus told him, *you know the Law. Have you followed it?* The man says, *yup. Since I was a kid.* Here's how the writer Mark finishes the scene, ***Read Mark 10:21-22 ... And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.*** *What's the point?* Well, the man had obeyed the law but he had not embodied love. He was obeying all the rules, but did not recognize love when it was starring at him in the face.

Modern righteousness is about just that, embodying love. That's what fulfilling the law is all about. It's understanding and seeking the relationship and reason behind the rule, not simply checking off do's and don'ts. In fact, this is what we learned a couple months ago in Romans. Remember, Pauls says, ***Read Romans 13:10 ... Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.*** Jesus fulfills the Law first, not simply through compliance to the rules but through love. This is where many modern people begin with their own understanding of morality and righteousness. Author bell hooks explains, ***"The moment we choose to love, we begin to move against domination, against oppression. The moment***

we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others." You see, this impulse to love, to see beyond the letter of the law, is deeply human. It's designed within us to bring justice and liberation and wholeness.

But, like obeying the rules, a righteousness which only embodies love also has a shadow side. As much as an identity based solely on rules is incomplete, so too is an identity exclusive crafted by love. In the forthcoming list Jesus is taking the next step, but he's still grounded in the truth of the Law. In many of our modern expressions of righteousness we leave truth behind for the sake of freedom and expression. Unwittingly, though, the absence of universal truth limits love. When our love is not grounded in ultimate reality it shrinks into the eye of the beholder. You see, love is not the *abolishment* of truth. Love is the *fulfillment* of truth.

Author Rebecca McLaughlin sees a righteousness which embraces truth and love as, "*the first tremors of the earthquake of God's love that will remake the world when Jesus returns*" (*The Secular Creed*, 41). Remember in John 8, when a woman is about to be stone for committing adultery? Jesus steps in and love her, by protecting her from her manipulative accusers. But then he invites her to a life more grounded in his truth. He says, go and sin no more (see John 8:11). That's neither *religious* nor *modern* righteousness. That's *Jesus'* righteousness.

Movement 3: Jesus' Righteousness (v.20, 2 Corinthians

5:21)

There's a bit of irony in Jesus' conclusion'. He tells us we have to be better than the Pharisees and scribes to be part of the kingdom. Look at it with me. *Read Matthew 5:20 ... For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and*

Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Keep in mind, Jesus wants his disciples to understand the kingdom and live out the ethics of that kingdom. Neglecting the law means being "least" in the kingdom and applying righteousness is about being "great" in the kingdom. But this system of hierarchy Jesus is espousing, is deeply nuanced. You see, we might suppose the Pharisees would be least, *right*? After all, they are the religiously righteous people who have neglected love. But in fact, Jesus says our righteousness must surpass theirs. He's hold them up as a lofty target. *What could possibly surpasses such moral conformity?*

What have we learned? Well, obeying the law does not replace love. Love does not replace obeying the law. We're commanded to love. And love for God is expressed through obeying his Word. In other words, grace no more replaces the Law than legalism fulfills the Law. . You see, the law was never meant to be strictly guidance for life and being free from moral stains. God's law has always been about our relationship with God and our worship of God. This is the righteous that exceeds the scribes and Pharisees. This is the righteousness that enters the kingdom.

Religious righteousness misses the relationship.

Modern righteousness misses the worship.

The righteousness which Jesus is articulating in the Sermon on the Mount is based upon a relationship with the Heavenly Father which results in humble worship which expresses itself through obedience.

Jesus' righteousness is about fulfilling the law. You see, the law was never meant to be strictly guidance for life and being cleansed from moral stains. God's law has always been about our relationship with God and our worship of God. This is the

righteous that exceeds the scribes and Pharisees. This is the righteousness that enters the kingdom. And this righteousness is only possible because in Christ when our whole self, our whole identity—heart, mind, body, and spirit—has been transformed. Or we might say this righteousness is only a reality for us because through his death and resurrection Jesus has given us his righteousness. That's the way the Apostle Paul puts it to Corinth. *Read 2 Corinthians 5:21 ... For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* Righteousness then is not a character quality or reward for moral perfection. Righteousness is a person. Jesus *is* our righteousness. Therefore the manner by which we become and embody righteous is not by obeying the law or even loving God and others. Rather Jesus' righteousness is received through faith, and is embodied in a love which manifests in obedience.

The Heidelberg Catechism is a series of theological questions and answers drafted in the mid-sixteenth-century in Heidelberg, Germany. The 61st question and answer deals with Jesus' righteousness imputed to us through faith.

- *Q. Why do you say that through faith alone you are righteous?*
- *A. Not because I please God by the worthiness of my faith. It is because only Christ's satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness make me righteous before God, and because I can accept this righteousness and make it mine in no other way than through faith.*

Walking through Jesus' forthcoming instruction about fulfilling the law we see that ...

- Jesus is the only one who not only never murders, nor does he hate ... but always loves.
- Jesus is the only one who not only never commits adultery, nor does he lust ... but always dignifies.
- Jesus is the only one who not only never wiggles out of marriage, nor does he divorce ... but is always faithful.
- Jesus is the only one who not only never breaks his word, nor does he swear ... but is always truthful.
- Jesus is the only one who not only never retaliates, nor returns evil for evil ... but is always humble.
- Jesus is the only one who not only never hates his enemy, but loves them and prays for them.

Jesus is righteous.

Jesus fulfills the law.

Jesus makes us righteous.

Your righteousness isn't about where you find your rules.

Your righteousness is about where you find your identity.

Are you prone to obey the letter of the law to the neglect of loving your neighbor as yourself? Do you live with a religious righteousness? Or do you embody what you deem to be loving regardless of God's clear instruction and truth? Is it a modern righteousness for you? Being a Christian in Chicago means you will face the pressure from both sides, all the time. In our church and groups and Christian friendships we're often pressured to obey the law. To be defined by holiness. In our work and social lives we're pressured to embody love. To be defined by

acceptance. But you see, neither fully captures Jesus' vision of righteousness. Yet in him, we neither over look nor are we defined by the law ... we fulfill the law. In him, he puts to death self-righteous. In him, he puts to death people pleasing. In him, he puts to death entitlement. In him, he puts to death fear of people. In him, he makes us righteous. We can learn to bless our neighbors and honor our Lord. When religion and the modern world pressures you to choose, Jesus empowers us to find this third way of the kingdom.