

This morning we're continuing our series in the Gospel of Matthew and the last two weeks we've been looking at the most famous sermon ever preached—the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus began that sermon by spelling out those upside-down values of the kingdom of heaven, like blessed are the poor in spirit, and blessed are those who mourn.

Last week we looked at Jesus' relationship to the OT Scriptures, what he called "the law and the prophets." He declared his absolute commitment to the teaching of the OT, going so far as to say he was the fulfillment of all that the law and the prophets were about.

Then he sort of dropped a bomb. He said, "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." No doubt that stunned his disciples. The Pharisees and teachers of the law set the righteousness bar really, really high. They didn't have just 10 commandments; they had 613 of them you had to keep. One of the commandments was to keep the Sabbath holy, which meant not to work on Saturdays. But the Pharisees created 39 separate categories of what constituted work, and within those 39 there are many sub-categories, like, how many steps you can take and how many letters you can write on the Sabbath.

But Jesus says your righteousness must surpass theirs. Then he went on and gave six examples of what he meant by that. Last week we looked at the first example—the one that prohibits murder. Jesus said, you think murder is all about killing someone. But if you simply harbor anger and resentment towards someone, you're guilty of murder.

And he didn't stop there. He went on and gave five more examples that show he was setting the bar higher than anyone could imagine. In these five examples, Jesus dealt with some challenging and delicate topics: adultery and divorce, honesty and truthfulness, retaliation and how to respond to our enemies. But, again, in each case, he set the bar higher than we ever imagined.

It's hard not to look at this and say Jesus has set an impossible standard for us to live up to. Imagine if someone told you today: You must shoot three's better than Steph Curry. You must be more innovative than Steve Jobs. You must be more intelligent than Stephen Hawking. You must be more loving and compassionate than Mother Theresa.

To make matters worse, when he's all done with these examples, he just kind of throws this out: "*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (v. 48). Are you kidding me, Jesus? How can you say that? And that's basically the point of this whole section: Don't be like the Pharisees; be like God. But what kind of teacher sets an impossible standard for his students? Why would he do that?

Today, as we look at these five examples, I want to answer that question: Why does Jesus set the bar so high? What's he trying to accomplish? There's nothing like being defeated before you even start. What are we supposed to learn from this?

### **Jesus is Exposing the Hypocrisy of the Religious Leaders**

One of the things Jesus is doing is exposing the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. Before each example he uses the same formula. He starts out, "You have heard that it was said..." and then he quotes an OT law. That's followed by a contrasting statement: "But I say to you..." and he goes on to give the true intent of that law. He's not changing the law or undermining the law as it was written, but he's giving the true intent or the true spirit of it, which the religious leaders neglected.

#### **Adultery and divorce**

**"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. If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.**

**"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 sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery." (Matt. 5:27-32)**

Let's take the first two examples together: adultery and divorce. It makes sense these two examples would be sequenced together. Here's some background on this, starting with divorce. According to Deuteronomy 24:1 divorce was permissible if a man found something indecent in his wife. Giving her a certificate of divorce was a way of protecting her because that would mean she was free to remarry. But that word indecent, meaning adultery, became an excuse for a husband to get rid of his wife for almost any reason at all. There was even a Jewish tradition

saying a man could divorce his wife if she burned his toast in the morning! And the Pharisees were notorious for this. They'd quote Deuteronomy to justify easy divorce so they could trade in their wife for a newer model. It sounds sick, and it is! The Pharisees would condemn pagans for their loose sexual morals but justify their own lustful behavior of moving from one wife to another.

As you can see here, Jesus will have none of that. So before he gets to the subject of divorce and a **wife's** adultery he speaks to men about **their** adultery. He says, "Listen, men, before you throw your wife out on the street and marry another, look in the mirror. Because if you gaze at a woman with lust in your heart you're guilty of adultery." Jesus turns the tables on the men of his culture, particularly the Pharisees. But, let's be honest, this speaks to men of all cultures! Maybe you've been married for decades. You might take pride in the fact that you've never committed adultery, or have you? Bottom line: Jesus throws every man, and probably every woman, under the bus.

By the way, Jesus isn't condemning sex. Sex was God's idea. It's such a powerful, uniting force it was designed to be enjoyed only within the commitment of marriage. It's not sex he condemns, it's lust. We can commit adultery in our heart. And he's not talking about just looking; he's talking about lusting. We all know the difference!

And Jesus tells us what to do about it. He's not promoting self mutilation. He's not saying cut out your eyes and cut off your hands. He's saying deal ruthlessly with whatever is causing you to sin in this way. For most men, it starts with the eyes. So remove anything that might trip you up in terms of what you look at. That's why I don't have HBO and all that stuff on my TV. That's why my wife has access to my computer and wherever my eyes have gone. Or if your temptation comes through what you touch (your hands) or where you go (your feet), cut it off. Don't dabble with it; deal with it. Don't touch; don't go! If I had time I'd talk about problems of pornography, social media, romantic novels, objectifying women, etc.

What Jesus says about divorce and remarriage also sounds extreme to us today. This is difficult to talk about. Divorce has impacted many of us in this room. You may have been raised in a home of divorced parents. You may be divorced yourself. We all need God's grace as we face the unique pain that comes from divorce.

I don't have time to go into all the Bible teaches about divorce and remarriage; we'll do that when we get to Matthew 19. We also have a White Paper on our website that can answer most of your questions on this topic. But suffice to say for now our Lord wants us to protect the sanctity and the covenant of marriage. There's only one thing that can break that bond—adultery. And that's a concession, not a commandment. I know couples who've weathered the storm of infidelity in their marriage. It's not easy.

It takes a lot of hard work and a lot of grace. It's not always possible, but it's not always impossible either.

But notice Jesus is pointing his finger again at the Pharisees. He's says, "When you self-righteously send your wife away with a certificate of divorce, you're causing HER to commit adultery, as well as the man she marries. **THAT'S ON YOU!**" Do you see how Jesus is exposing the hypocrisy and the legalism of the religious leaders?

### Oaths

**"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.' But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."** (verses 33-37)

We see it also in the commandment about breaking oaths. The OT law isn't against vows or oaths (Numbers 30:2). But what the Pharisees did with that was devise a number of "escape clauses" to get them out of their oaths. They said if you don't use God's name in an oath then you're not obligated to keep it. So if you swore by heaven or earth or Jerusalem or even your own head you could break that oath.

So Joey says to Tommy, "Hey, you need to pay me back by Tuesday. You swore you would." But Tommy replies, "No I didn't. I didn't say, 'I swear to God.' I only said, 'Cross my heart and hope to die.'" That's the game the Pharisees played. Once again, Jesus gets to the heart of the matter and says it's all about truthfulness and integrity. You shouldn't have to swear at all. All you should have to say is yes or no. Mean what you say and say what you mean. Your word should be enough.

### Retaliation

**"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. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."** (verses 38-42)

Next he talks about the famous law of retaliation. Jesus quotes from Exodus 21:24, **"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."** Do you know why that law was given? Not to promote private acts of personal revenge, which is how the Pharisees took it, but as a legal guide for the judges of Israel. The purpose was to lay the foundation for justice, limiting the punishment a wrongdoer got to the equivalent of what he did. So it both defined justice and restrained revenge. But the Pharisees applied this to justify personal acts of revenge.

By the way, do you know what the law **really** said about this. Leviticus 19:18 says, **"Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge**

*against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."*

With that in mind, Jesus says, "Don't insist on your rights. Even if you have legitimate reasons to get back at people, don't do it. Even to the point that you're willing to be insulted and imposed upon. Instead of payback, offer more. Don't be like the Pharisees, be like God." How did God's Son treat the people who beat and murdered him on the cross? "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

I think for now that's enough to show you Jesus is exposing the hypocrisy and the legalism of the religious leaders. This is the sin religious people, like you and me, can so easily fall into. Legalism adheres to the letter of the law but neglects the spirit and intent of the law. Legalism focuses on outward rules while Jesus focuses on the heart. Legalism is living your life by a code of rules you can keep and by which you can judge others who don't. And legalism focuses on the nit-picky, but ignores the weightier matters of the law like justice, mercy and love.

### **Jesus is Pointing to Perfect Love Which Fulfills the Law**

And this leads to the second reason Jesus sets the bar so high. All these examples are really pointing to one thing, and that's the law of love. At the end of all this, when Jesus says to be perfect as your Father is perfect, what's the perfection he's talking about? Is it some kind of strict and religious perfection only the super-spiritual can achieve? Is it something that can be measured by church attendance, tithing records, the length of your dress, and your avoidance of anything remotely associated with having fun?

**"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, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?" (verses 43-47)**

No! In verses 43-47 Jesus defines the perfection he's talking about. Do you see his logic? He shows how God the Father shows indiscriminate love by making the sun to rise on the righteous and the unrighteous. Theologians call this common grace. It's a term used to describe the goodness of God to all people, irregardless if they know him or not. We wonder, How can people who are totally depraved enjoy beauty, have a sense of right and wrong, perform acts of goodness, have a great marriage, know the pangs of a wounded conscience, or produce great works of art and literature? The answer is common grace. God is a God who lavishes his blessings on Muslims and Mormons, on the rich and the poor, on the gay and the straight, on our friends and our enemies. Jesus says when you do that, even towards those who persecute you, then you're acting like a child of your Father in heaven.

Then he adds, "Even the worst criminal loves his mother. Even an inner city gangbanger will take a bullet for his best friend. But if you want to be perfect like your heavenly Father, you'll love those who don't love you." This is the love of God, the love he had for us. **"...while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son"** (Rom. 5:10). That's the love we're to emulate—the love of the Father who sent his Son to die, not for his friends, but for his enemies. That's the love Jesus called us to embody.

Martin Luther King described it this way: "You love those you don't like. You love those whose ways are distasteful to you. You love every man because God loves him." King put this into practice in Birmingham, Alabama. The chief of police was a man named "Bull" Connor who instigated violence and oppression. King said of Connor, "I can't like Mr. Connor, but Jesus says, 'Love him,' and love is greater than like."

When you think of each of these examples, aren't they really all about love? Why these six among hundreds of others? Because there's one thing that binds them all together: love. They're all relational commands. If you murder someone or harbor anger towards them, you're not loving them. If you're lusting after a woman, that's a selfish desire; you're not loving her. If you divorce your spouse so you can enter into another relationship, that's not faithful and committed love. Why not forgive her and seek reconciliation? The law of love also tells you to keep your commitments. It's not loving to say you'll do one thing and do another. It's not loving to pay someone back every time they wrong you. Turn the other cheek. It sounds upside-down, but remember, Jesus came to establish an unlikely kingdom, and this kingdom is all about unlimited love.

### **Jesus Reveals How Short We All Fall and Lead Us to a Savior**

The third reason Jesus set an impossible standard is to humble us and reveal our need for a Savior. Remember how Jesus started the Sermon on the Mount? "Blessed are the poor in spirit." He's talking about those who come to God empty-handed, knowing they have nothing to offer. How can you read of this impossible standard and not be poor in spirit?

Remember the parable Jesus told of two men who went to the temple to pray? One was a Pharisee and prayed, **"God, I thank you I'm not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers... I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."** But the other guy was a tax-collector who couldn't even look up at to God and said, **"God, have mercy on me, a sinner"** (Luke 18:8-13). That's what it means to be poor in spirit. And could we be anything but that after seeing how high Jesus sets the bar? Let the holy heaviness of the law make you wholly humble before God.

Imagine a young, clean-cut kid. He's 18, gets good grades, obeys his parents, doesn't party, and calls his grandmother

once a week. This is a solid young man, the kind you want your daughter to marry. How would Jesus talk to this young man? Imagine it like this:

Jesus asks, "Have you murdered anyone?"

The young man answers, "No sir, of course not."

Jesus responds, "But have you ever lost your temper? Have you ever let a careless and hurtful word come out?"

"Yes, sir," the young man says.

Jesus says, "Okay, here's a 200 lb. weight. Hold this in your right hand.

"Ready for the next question? Here it is. Ever commit adultery?"

"No sir, I'm not even married," the boy responds.

"Oh no, let me clarify," Jesus said. "Ever let your eyes linger on a pretty girl; let your mind dwell on impure things?"

"Of course I have, sir."

"I thought so. Here's another 200 lb. weight. Put this in your left hand."

At this point, Jesus looks at the poor boy, sees how uncomfortable he is with all this weight, and says, "Shall I go on? I have a 500 lb. weight here that's all about loving your enemies." The boy says, "No sir, I can't bear any more weight. I get the point."

Do you get the point? But most of us really don't feel the weight of God's righteousness and perfection. So what we do is lower the bar and we think, "If I can just be a good person and try not to hurt anyone I should be okay. What more could God expect? I mean, nobody's perfect."

We're like the young man who came to Jesus, "*Good teacher,*" he asked, "*what must I do to inherit eternal life?*" Before Jesus went to God's law, he answered, "*Why do you call me good? No one is good—except God alone*" (Mark 10:17-18). Only God is good. We're okay with "God is good." We're not always okay with "ONLY God is good."

But the good news is when you get that, then you're prepared for the Gospel. Because the Gospel says three wonderful things about those who turn to God knowing they're not good.

First, it says God the Father loved us so much he sent his only Son to pay the price for our sins. God the Father is good, but he also loves those who aren't good. It's hard to fathom that. Why would he love us so? We don't really have an answer to that question. He just does. So he sent his Son on a rescue mission.

Second, the Gospel says when we put our trust in Jesus not only are we forgiven, but he actually gives us his righteousness. That's

right—we're not good, but he makes us good in his sight. He gives us his goodness and his righteousness as a gift; all we have to do is say yes to it. I want that. I need that. And once you have it you'll never be more pleasing and holy in his sight than you are right then. You can't do anything to add or subtract from that goodness and righteousness; that's his gift to you.

Third, the Gospel says God the Holy Spirit comes into your life and makes you a new person from the inside out. He actually gives you a new nature and produces righteousness within you. That means this incredibly high standard of righteousness Jesus describes here in this sermon is who you are. And the Christian life is a process of growing, not into who you want to be, but into who you are. So you're not trying to change from who you were into who you should be, but rather you're maturing into who you already are. You see, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus, and he makes his home in us and we have a new nature; we have **his** nature.

It's like the caterpillar. If we brought a caterpillar to a biologist and asked him to analyze it and describe its DNA, he'd say, "I know this looks like a caterpillar to you. But scientifically, according to his DNA, this is fully and completely a butterfly." So God wired into a creature looking nothing like a butterfly a perfectly complete butterfly identity. And because the caterpillar is a butterfly in essence, it will one day display the attributes of a butterfly. The caterpillar matures into what is already true about it. In the meantime, berating the caterpillar for not being more like a butterfly is futile. The caterpillar just needs to trust the process.

So it is with us through the Gospel. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of Jesus—God has given us his DNA, the DNA of his righteousness, the same righteousness we've been reading about this morning. Nothing you can do can alter that reality. You can rest in him. You can know he delights in you. You can trust he'll mature you into that butterfly in his own good time.

Jesus sets the bar high, higher than we ever imagined. He wants to expose our own hypocrisy and legalism and man-made righteousness. He wants us to see everything boils down to love. Are you growing in love? He wants to humble us and reveal our need for a Savior. His purpose isn't to condemn you but to prepare you for the Gospel; to show you how short you fall so you can come to him and receive not just forgiveness, but a new nature created in the likeness of him who alone is good.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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