

The King's Sermon

A Deeper Kind of Righteousness (Matthew 5:13-20)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on May 14, 2017

Introduction

- ❖ We've been going through the Sermon on the Mount, taking our time week by week through each of the Beatitudes. **We wanted to give adequate time to unpacking who a Christian is before we talk about what a Christian does.** And the Beatitudes are all about who a Christian is. They describe the character of a Christian – of every Christian. We've said that the Beatitudes are **not a checklist** of things you do need to enter the kingdom of heaven, but they're more like **a guest list** describing who has already been invited and brought into the kingdom by grace. So we've said they're diagnostic in nature.
 - ▶ **How you react to the Beatitudes tells you who you are and where you are in relation to the kingdom.** If these qualities described here are unattractive and undesirable to you – then you're not yet a Christian and not yet in the kingdom.
 - But if the Beatitudes are beautiful to you, if you desire these qualities and you want them to be expressed to an even greater degree in your life as you seek God through repentance and faith, then it tells you that Jesus is your King and yours is the kingdom.

- ❖ But before you quickly conclude that a Christian is what you are and this is describing you, remember last week we looked at the last beatitude, which described **a Christian as an object of persecution.** *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* (v10) So if you belong to the kingdom, expect persecution.
 - ▶ **And the reason why entering the kingdom invites persecution from the general public is because the kingdom life (the Christian life) is inherently public.** That's the flow of thought from v12 to v13. Jesus warns of persecution to come, and then says in v13 that it's still because of who you are – you are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world (vv13-14). You're intended by God to serve the public.

- ❖ **Salt is of no use if it remains in the shaker. A lamp is of no use if it remains hidden under a basket.** The Christian life is not meant to be private, where we're huddle away safely in our saltshakers. Rather God intends for us to be sprinkled and spread in abundance throughout this world. We're supposed to shine brightly, shedding our light on all that they might see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven. **That kind of life – that serves the good of others and gives glory to God – is what the Bible calls a righteous life.**
 - ▶ Living a righteous life is what this Sermon on the Mount is all about. Vv3-15 describes who a Christian is. **And then in v16 and on Jesus describes what a Christian does – namely a Christian lives a righteous life, before the general public, in obedience to God's Word.** And people will see that and either give God praise (v16) or give you persecution (vv10-12).

- ❖ *So let me ask, do you see yourself in these verses? Are you being described here? Is your life a righteous life?* This morning our focus is on vv13-20, which describe for us the nature of the righteous life. We're going to see that 1) the righteous life stands in contrast with the world, 2) the righteous life stands in harmony with the Law, 3) the righteous life stands in opposition to self-righteousness.

The Righteous Life Stands in Contrast with the World

- ❖ The first thing we see in vv13-16 is that the righteous life that God intends for us is a life that stands in contrast with the world. **That's why Jesus says Christians have to stay salty.** Look back at v13, "*But if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.*"
 - ▶ The point is if salt loses its saltiness, it's no good for anything. **Salt only works if it stands out; if it has a distinct taste; if it's salty.** Otherwise it's useless. So the point is, in this world, God intends for Christians to stick out, to stand out by living a different kind of life.

- ❖ Now think about what salt is used for. In our day, salt is merely there for the taste, for seasoning. But in antiquity – where they were no refrigerators – the only way to preserve meat and slow the rate of decay was to rub salt into it. **Salt was mainly used as a preservative.** To keep meat from rotting.
 - ▶ That's the imagery Jesus is applying. By calling Christians "*salt of the earth*", he's saying the earth – not the physical earth but unregenerate society, the fallen world outside of Christ – is rotting in a moral and spiritual sense. **So the reason Jesus doesn't just take us away to be with him in heaven the minute we're saved is because he so loves the world that he salts the world with Christians that we might function to slow down the rate of decay.** We're a preservative.

- ❖ The second metaphor of Christians being the light of the world communicates the same. The world is a dark place. And in the Bible, light symbolizes purity in contrast to filth, truth in contrast to error, and knowledge in contrast to ignorance. So Jesus is implying that the world is filled with filth, error, and ignorance. **But because he so loves the world, he wants his followers to shine and infiltrate the darkness with purity, truth, and knowledge.**

- ❖ And that'll certainly take the form of words. You speak light. You shine the gospel by teaching it and preaching it. But even so, remember, these metaphors are more centrally focused on the identity and character of the Christian. It's about who you are. **So before speaking, teaching, or preaching – it's about being.**
 - ▶ Just be salt, be light, be a Christian. And by your very presence in the world – in the classroom, in the workplace, in the neighborhood – **by being who you are in Christ you'll function as a preservative as well as a seasoning.** You'll prevent moral decay, and you'll bring out greater taste and goodness from those around you.

- ❖ That's what salt does. **But to make any difference, to be of good use, we have to be distinct.** We have to live a righteous life that stands out in contrast with the world. If your life has no distinctiveness to it, if it doesn't taste any different than the rest of the world, then you're doing no good to the world and giving no glory to God.
 - ▶ **If your coworkers or classmates can't tell that you're a Christian – if they're literally surprised when they find out you are one – that's troubling.** That means you've lost your saltiness or you've hidden your light.

- ❖ Now I'm not saying you have to go and place Bible verses all around your office or wear t-shirts to school with Christian messages on it. Of course, there's nothing wrong with that, but I'm talking about something much more subtle but much more impactful.
 - ▶ Think about your workplace or classroom and all the pressure and competitiveness that you and your non-Christian peers have to deal with. **I'm saying the way you, as a Christian, handle those same pressures should have a distinctiveness to it.** The way you navigate ethical dilemmas, the way you respond to office/classroom gossip, the way you deal with a rude supervisor or mean teacher – should be different and that difference is going to make a impact on the people around you.

- ❖ Now as we were warned in the last beatitude, your very presence will impact some people negatively, and they'll respond with persecution. But in v16 we're promised that others will be impacted positively, and they'll respond by giving glory to your Father in heaven.
 - ▶ So ask yourself this question: Does my life carry a distinctiveness to it? **Am I living out a Christian life that stands in contrast with the world around me?** Or have I lost my saltiness? Have I hidden the light of Christ in me? Perhaps you need to repent to God for conforming too much to this world and not sticking out enough.

- ❖ But there's another question. **Some of you are living salty lives, but you're not making much of any impact on the world around you because you're not rubbed in.** If you want to preserve a slab of meat, you don't sprinkle a little salt on top. You take a whole handful and rub it in deep. Salt has to penetrate into the meat if it's going to make a difference.
 - ▶ **So let me ask, are you rubbed in deep into the world or just lightly sprinkled on top?** We have plenty of reasons to be concerned with the moral decay taking place in our country, in our culture, in our city. But don't blame the culture if it's gone sour. Don't blame the world if it's rotting. **You don't blame unsalted meat for going bad.** What do you expect if there's no salt rubbed into it?

- ❖ If there's blame, it falls squarely on us. **I think the problem the Church has created for itself is that we often keep Christians so busy with church activities, that there ends up being very little time and opportunity for us to be rubbed into the world.**
 - ▶ Because I'm a pastor I know it might sound strange for me to say this. But if you find that you're not very rubbed into your workplace, campus, or neighborhood, then **maybe you need to cut back on some Christian activities.** Some of you are involved in multiple fellowships. You attend multiple bible studies. You go to this church because it offers this activity, but then that church because it offers another.

- ❖ Now if you can somehow manage all that and still be rubbed in deep among non-Christians, then praise God. But more likely than not, some of you need to cut back your activities and get rubbed in deeper into the world.
 - ▶ But don't just do it individually. **One grain of salt is salty but by itself it won't preserve or season the meat.** You need a whole handful of salt. We need a whole bunch of Christians to step out of this building and get rubbed into the world together.

The Righteous Life Stands in Harmony with the Law

- ❖ That's the righteous life – a life that stands out in contrast with the world and becomes the stench of death to some but a fragrance of life to others (cf. 2 Cor. 2:15-16). A righteous life triggers very stark reactions. It was the same for our Lord.
 - ▶ People didn't persecute Jesus because he was a nice, moral teacher, and that's not why others followed him. He was the righteous Son of God Incarnate and his contemporaries either fell at his feet in worship or tried to throw stones at him. **No one was apathetic towards Jesus – because righteousness demands a reaction.**

- ❖ And apparently those who reacted badly (the scribes and Pharisees) were accusing Jesus of teaching and modeling a righteous life that subverts the Law and Prophets, the OT. It was probably sparked by the many occasions where he would heal on the Sabbath, which his opponents interpreted as a breaking of the Sabbath.
 - ▶ So the question is this: **Is the righteous life that Jesus is teaching – that stands in contrast with the world – is it in harmony with the Law?** Or in disharmony? Is it in conflict with God's revealed Word?
 - This leads to our second point. In vv17-19, Jesus says that the righteous life (kingdom life) stands in harmony with the law. Let me read v17, *“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 here directly answers the charge of subverting or negating the Law and Prophets. He says he has no intention of abolishing anything written in the OT. Look at v18, *“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.”*
 - ▶ The “*iota*” he's referring to is the *yodh* – the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet. And the “*dot*” is referring to a minor stroke that distinguishes some Hebrew letters from others that look similar. **So Jesus is making a categorical statement that every single word in Scripture (right down to the letter) is authoritative and binding – until heaven and earth pass away, until all is accomplished.**

- ❖ **But if that's what Jesus believed, how do you explain the way he treated the OT food laws and cleanliness laws?** Leviticus has a chapter on which foods are clean or unclean (Lev. 11). There are chapters on what kind of skin disorders or bodily discharges make you unclean (Lev. 13, 15), and whether or not a mold found in your house will make your whole household unclean (Lev. 14). **There are so many rules on cleanliness!**
 - ▶ But then in the Gospels, we see Jesus declaring all foods clean (Mk. 7:19). And he touches lepers with skin diseases (Mt. 8:3) and women with discharges of blood (Mt. 9:20) and instead of becoming unclean himself – he claims to have cleaned them!
 - So if Jesus's followers are no longer bound by kosher laws and they're supposed to draw near and touch those whom society (and Leviticus!) deems unclean – **how is Jesus *not* abolishing at least some parts of the Law?**

- ❖ It's a good question and a relevant one. **Because there are calls today for Christians to ignore certain parts of the OT, especially where it touches on issues related to sexual morality.** So it's vitally important for us to understand what Jesus meant when he said he did not come to abolish or negate a single passage or verse or word or even letter in Scripture.
- ❖ The key word is "*fulfill*". Look back at v17, "*I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.*" Now by saying he fulfilled the Law, it would be a wrong impression to imagine something deficient in the Law. As if there were holes and Jesus came to fill them up with his teaching. No, he wasn't trying to perfect a somehow imperfect Law (Rom. 7:12).
 - ▶ **So instead of imagining him filling up supposed deficiencies, picture Jesus filling out the Mosaic Law.** In the Sermon on the Mount, he's filling out what was not understood about the Law – **what was always inherent in the Law but obscured by layers of human interpretations that missed the point.** You'll see this when we study the rest of chapter 5. You'll see six different cases where Jesus fills out what's in the Mosaic Law but missing in the interpretation of the scribes and Pharisees.
 - So Jesus's claim is that everything he teaches is in perfect accord with the Law. That's why in v18 he affirms the permanence of everything in it.
- ❖ But that still doesn't answer the question about the food and cleanliness laws. **Jesus clearly taught that his disciples don't have to keep kosher, and his apostles clearly taught in their letters that we don't have to keep circumcision or sacrifices or special feasts or temple worship.** Yet all of those things are mandated in the Law.
 - ▶ And it's not like Jesus is just giving us a fuller understanding of the food laws. He actually says his followers don't need to keep them anymore. You can set them aside. So how is that *not* abolishing?
- ❖ **I think when it comes to these ceremonial aspects of the law, we have to understand Jesus fulfilling them in the sense that these laws were intended to communicate a message that finds its ultimate fulfillment in Christ** (cf. 2 Cor. 1:20).
 - ▶ Think about the message Leviticus sends when it says you can only approach God and come near to worship if you avoid eating certain things, touching certain things, or wearing certain things – or else you're ceremonially unclean. **The message it's sending is that we are constantly unclean and unable to approach God without some form of purification.**
 - The whole temple system with all its rules and regulations of how you approach God, who can approach God, when you can approach God, what you bring to approach God – all of that serves to reenforce the holiness of God and the unholiness (uncleanliness) of man.
- ❖ But then Jesus arrives. And begins teaching that what truly makes us unclean is not from what we eat or touch but from what's already in our hearts. It's called sin. **All the OT emphasis on physical uncleanliness is just one big object lesson on the spiritual uncleanliness in our hearts due to the contamination of sin.**

- ❖ But that's why he came. Jesus came to deal with human sin and thereby fulfill the Law. He did it through his perfect obedience to the Law as one born under the Law. **And then on the cross, he fulfilled all the penal requirements of the Law.**
 - ▶ That's the wonder of the gospel! That God doesn't forgive our sins by simply deciding to no longer punish sin but by punishing sin in the body of the Sinless Savior. **Through his blood, Jesus fulfilled the Law's demands.** So that now through his blood we can be washed, cleansed, and purified of sin for good.

- ❖ And we're told in the Gospels that the very moment Jesus died for our sins, the temple shook and the veil was torn. God was making an emphatic statement declaring that all the food laws have been fulfilled. All the cleanliness laws have been fulfilled. The entire OT sacrificial system has been fulfilled. **They were all pointing to Jesus and our need for him to make us clean and make us able to approach a holy God.**
 - ▶ And now that Jesus has come and his work is finished, you can set aside those laws and commands. Not because God's mind changed about them but because Jesus fulfilled the very purpose of them.

- ❖ **But don't fall into the error of thinking the Law in general is no longer binding for Christians.** Some wrongly assume that – because Jesus fulfilled the Law of God for us – it means we're no longer bound by it.
 - ▶ That's a mistake. **Christians are still under the Law.** Not as a means of salvation (it was never meant for that in first place). We're under the Law in that the Law is a rule of life for Christians. And we believe the Holy Spirit has written the Law on our hearts, so that we actually *want* to keep it. And he gives us the actual *power* to keep it.

- ❖ Obedience to the Law matters. How else do you explain the transition from v18 to v19? The Law doesn't change, "*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.*"
 - ▶ Some commandments of the Law are weightier than others. That's implied by his phrase "*the least of these commandments*". **But Jesus's point is that all the commandments must be equally regarded and obeyed.** He came to fulfill the Law and to enable us to keep it. Not cancel it or water it down.

- ❖ This is why I'm disturbed by those who call themselves **Red Letter Christians** (referring to the words of Jesus printed in red in some Bibles). They'll give greater weight and authority to the words of Christ in the Gospels than to the epistles of Paul or John.
 - ▶ And they'll water down certain teachings of Paul or John or Moses, and they'll justify their disobedience by pointing out that Jesus never mentioned the issue. The argument is if the issue is that important and binding for us today, then Jesus would've said so. But the irony is that he did – here in v19. **He's saying don't you dare try to ignore or water down any command you find in the Word, or else you'll be considered the least in the kingdom of heaven.** That's a warning I hope we all take seriously.

The Righteous Life Stands in Opposition to Self-Righteousness

- ❖ Now when we get to v20, Jesus goes further still. Not only is he saying that greatness in the kingdom corresponds to a righteousness that consists of conformity to the Law. **He goes on to warn that entry into the kingdom is not possible unless you have a righteousness that is better than that of the scribes and Pharisees.** "*For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*"
 - ▶ This is our third and final point: The righteous life that Jesus is describing – that stands in contrast with the world but in harmony with the law – this kingdom life stands in opposition to self-righteousness. That’s the kind of righteousness the scribes and Pharisees have.

- ❖ So how does Jesus expect us to exceed it? How do you exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees? To his audience that day, I bet those words were so deflating. **In their day, the scribes and Pharisees were the most pious, most righteous people in town.**
 - ▶ They were so meticulous when it came to the Law. They identified 613 commands in the OT – 365 negative commands and 248 positive laws. The scribes and Pharisees were so careful to keep each and every one of them. So imagine how discouraging it was to hear Jesus say that your righteousness has to exceed theirs.

- ❖ **But that's where it's important to understand that Christian righteousness exceeds pharisaic righteousness *in kind* and not degree.** Jesus is not saying the Christian enters the kingdom of heaven because she managed to keep 240 of the positive laws while the scribes and Pharisees only managed 230. No, the Christian’s righteousness is greater in kind. It’s a different kind of righteousness – **a deeper kind of righteousness that goes beyond surface behaviors deep down to the motivations of the heart.**
 - ▶ The scribes and Pharisees failed to go deep enough. **They focused on the behavioral level but ignored the heart.** And so in the end, all they’re trying to satisfy is their own consciences and standards – instead of trying to satisfy God and meet his standards that reach the heart. So theirs is a self-righteousness.

- ❖ **The scribes and Pharisees were the ones trying to “relax” certain commands in the Law by making them easier to obey.** Out of the six cases that Jesus addresses in rest of chapter 5, four of them deal with biblical commandments and two with biblical permissions. You’ve got the four commandments: **1)** do not murder (v21), **2)** do not commit adultery (v27), **3)** do not swear falsely (v33), and **4)** love your neighbor (v43). Then you’ve got two passages dealing with: **5)** the permissiveness of divorce (v31) and **6)** the permissiveness of retribution (v38).
 - ▶ **John Stott makes the astute observation that the scribes and Pharisees were essentially trying to restrict the biblical commandments while expanding the biblical permissions.** They were trying to make “*the law’s demands less demanding and the law’s permissions more permissive*”.¹

¹ John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (IVP: 1978), 79.

- ❖ So the commandments regarding **murder** and **adultery** were restricted to just the behavior itself. They restricted **sworn oaths** to only the ones that invoked the name of God, and they restricted the command to **love your neighbor** to only those who look like you, talk like you, and think like you – those of the same race or religion.
 - ▶ And at the same time, the scribe and Pharisees expanded the biblical permission for **divorce** to include just about any cause that annoyed a husband. And they expanded the permissions for **retribution** to accommodate the most bitter motivations for personal revenge.

- ❖ **All of this makes the Law of God that much easier to keep**, which makes it that much easier to compare yourself to even bigger sinners, which makes you feel that much better about yourself, and then it's that much easier to excuse your sin – your failure to keep these less serious commandments in the Law.
 - ▶ “I may tend to gossip every now and then but at least I don't physically hurt my enemies like some people.” “I may indulge in shows with graphic nudity but at least I don't look at pornography like some people.” “I may look at pornography but at least I don't commit adultery like some people.”

- ❖ **Do you see how easy it is to relax the commandments of God, foolishly resting on a pharisaic self-righteousness to enter the kingdom of heaven?** Your righteousness has to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees or you're not in the kingdom.
 - ▶ And obviously the point is not for you to try to be better than the scribes and Pharisees. To try to behave more righteously, so that you can look down on them as less righteous. No, that's not exceeding the Pharisees. That's joining them.

- ❖ Friends, the way you exceed their righteousness is by exceeding their brokenness and humility. **When you read v20, it's meant to break every ounce of pride in you and leave you feeling desperate and looking outside yourself for a righteousness you know you can't achieve on your own.**
 - ▶ Just like with all the Law and Prophets, v20 is meant to drive you to Jesus. **What Jesus offers is not a righteousness that you achieve but a righteousness that you freely receive.** And he freely pours out his Spirit in you, who regenerates you, who gives you a new birth and a new heart – a heart of love and obedience that starts off deep and works its way out, expressing itself in your everyday behavior conforming to the law of God.

- ❖ That's the righteous life that Jesus came to bring. That's the righteous life he made possible through laying down his own. ***So do you love Jesus from the heart? Do you seek to obey his every law and command from the heart?*** Blessed are you if you do, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.