

Radical Righteousness

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[0 : 0 0] Now, last week we started a little series of three talks on Matthew chapter 5, general title of Christ's Radical Kingdom, and we looked last week at the Beatitudes, that's the best-known part of this Sermon on the Mount, and today we're going to go on with this and we're going to read Matthew chapter 5, verses 13 to 20, and you'll find that on page 810, so Matthew chapter 5, verses 13 to 20, and Jesus says, you are the salt of the earth, 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. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden, nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. 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. Truly I say unto 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 so, do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.

[1 : 4 7] 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.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord. And let's have a moment or two of prayer. God our Father, we thank you for this opportunity to meet again, to draw aside from the ordinary business of life, from the everyday and routine and the unexpected, and to listen to what you have to say to us.

These are timeless words, but also timely words, spoken to one group of people in one place many centuries ago, and yet speaking across the centuries and coming to us in our day with the same power, the same challenge.

And we pray indeed, Lord, that as we listen to the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, that we may indeed take them seriously, take them radically, and not try to water them down or to, in any way, evade their meaning and their power.

So we ask the Holy Spirit will take these words that he has inspired, apply them to our hearts and minds, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[3 : 1 7] Amen. In the long distant days ago, when I was a young English teacher, very often exercises will be returned to youngsters with the phrase, not good enough, written on them.

Indeed, some people here in earlier generations may have actually had that, and even ruder things written on their exercises. Nowadays, of course, you're not allowed to say that kind of thing.

It also has to be positive. Nowadays, probably the same kind of exercise would have something like, a lot of potential here. Now, when you think of it, both phrases have an element of truth in them.

By definition, any human effort is not good enough. And if you think that something is very, very good and doesn't need improved, then we're not likely to make any great efforts and therefore become complacent.

On the other hand, a great deal of potential can make us feel complacent, make us feel, oh, I'm rather good.

[4 : 23] I can do anything that's thrown at me. There is no doubt, however, that when we read the Sermon on the Mount and look at our own lives, the only phrase we can use about our lives is, not good enough.

And the other thing is, there is no potential at all to be better unless the Holy Spirit comes into our lives. And that's the important thing to remember about this radical kingdom of Jesus, this radical gospel.

First of all, it puts us in our place. It says you're not good enough. We're not going to make it. But on the other hand, it says there is a power by which we can make it and will make it.

That is the power of the Holy Spirit through transformed lives. We've got to keep that in mind when we're reading this. Otherwise, as I say, we're going to become totally discouraged. As I said last week, we're going to try and water down this sermon into some platitudes in what Jesus really meant.

You know, when you hear somebody saying that, you can always be suspicious because you can be pretty certain it's not what Jesus really meant, but what sounds more congenial.

[5 : 36] So here today we are looking at radical righteousness. Now, righteousness is one of the great biblical words in both Testaments. Righteousness is, first of all, God's own character of integrity and justice.

God is totally consistent. God is light in him. There is no darkness at all. There are no inconsistencies, nothing about him that is false or shoddy.

And also, by extension, the justice and righteousness he wants to see in people's lives and individuals and communities. And that's why he gave the law, Jesus refers here to the law, in order to show people what righteousness looked like.

Now, in the Beatitudes, basic attitudes have been established. And now, what does it look like if we live lives according to the Beatitudes?

And first of all, then, in verses, two main points. First of all, in verses 13 to 16, what righteousness looks like.

[6 : 51] How can people exercise influence in the world? Will we not simply be unnoticed and overwhelmed by evil? I think we must feel that very often.

The world goes along its merry way. Evil increases. We know the weakness and fickleness of our own hearts and our own pathetic efforts often at following Jesus.

And we feel there is no way we can make an impact. Now, Jesus says there are two particular ways. One negative, if you like, and one positive.

First, the negative one, if you like. Maybe negative is the wrong word, but you'll see what I mean in a moment. You are salt. But if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?

We have to act like salt. In other words, give a flavor to society. Society has gone bad. And Christian people need to give it a flavor. And there are two aspects of this, preserving from decay.

[7 : 59] Now, of course, salt used a great deal in earlier times before refrigeration to preserve meat from decay. And it's often alleged that curries, particularly the sauces on curries, were used to disguise the taste of decaying meat.

And whether that's true or not, I mean, that's certainly how salt and preservatives were used. And what Jesus is saying is, we need to be radical.

We need to slow that decay in society. And it's a Christian lifestyle that's in view. It's a Christian lifestyle that actually gives a flavor to society.

Now, of course, we can't do that unless we're in society. The Bible never encourages us to hide in pious ghettos, never meeting people who are not Christian, never involved in anything that's not specifically churchy.

We need to show a Christian lifestyle. That's why it's so important that we have Christian people in every part of society. Listen to some ministers.

[9 : 10] You would think that every Christian ought to be a minister. Well, if that were the case, where would we get the Christian teachers? Where would we get the Christian doctors? Where would we get the Christian lawyers? Where would we get the Christian cleaners, the Christian secretaries?

Every part of society. We need people who are going to be salt in society. And there are many areas of society where we desperately need Christians in the media, for example.

The areas where, you know, people listening to programs, internet, and so on. And by goodness me, there's so much decay on the internet. There needs to be salt in all these kinds of places.

And Christians need to model being good husbands, good wives, good fathers, good mothers, good children, good people, basically. To live in such a way as to say, look, there is a different way to live.

There is a different kingdom. Now, we know how hard that is. We know it's not easy and it won't just happen overnight. You see, salt bites and is bracing.

[10 : 20] He's not saying, he's not, Jesus is not asking for a kind of sugary niceness. A kind of insipid and colorless lifestyle where Christians have lost their flavor.

That's why many of these moralizing campaigns to change society simply collapse. Because they do not have the power of the spirit or biblical authority behind them.

They deal with symptoms. They don't deal with the root problem. And therefore, Jesus is saying, we need to be like salt. But salt can go bad.

Salt can lose its savor. And then, it's worthless. As if you like, the negative way in which we, as you see, negative is perhaps the wrong word.

Negative in the sense that it's almost a kind of standing protest. Although, protest is, once again, I don't want to press that too far. It is showing there is an alternative way to live.

[11 : 20] And then, the positive. We are called to be light. You are the light of the world. Now, Jesus in John's Gospel calls himself the light of the world.

And we need to remember that. We shine with reflected light. The light of Christ himself. And so often, you see large buildings, castles, cathedrals, and so on, floodlit.

Now, the point of floodlighting a great building is not to draw attention to the lighting. It's not to draw attention to the electricians. It's to draw attention to the building itself. And similarly, when Christians are called the light of the world, it's not to draw attention to us.

It's to draw attention to Christ, to the true light of the world. Many ancient towns were built of white limestone and would thus be very visible. A city set on a hill, as Jerusalem, of course, itself was set on several hills.

And probably behind this is the Old Testament prophecies of the nation's flooding to Zion, like in Isaiah 2, the mountain of the Lord shall rise in latter days, and people shall come flooding to it.

[12 : 38] So, in our Christian life, we need to shine. Now, this is visible. This is a visible demonstration. Now, if you read on in the sermon, chapter 6, verse 1 says, Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them.

Now, that, of course, is a very important balance. It's not to self-consciously, ostentatiously draw attention to ourselves. It's to point away from ourselves to Christ, showing the Father, showing the family likeness.

And, of course, the not, the phrase, we still use the word, hiding your light under a bushel, which is the old word used. In the older versions. And this, once again, is both attitudes and behavior.

Paul says, Don't be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds. And the light is Christ himself. Paul uses the metaphor of the gospel as a torch in a jar of clay, which, when it's broken, shows the light.

Probably referring to that great incident in the Old Testament, where Gideon's army had torches in jars of clay, which, when broken, confused and confounded, and discomfited the enemy.

[14 : 00] So, essentially, Jesus is saying, What does righteousness look like? It's like salt, and it's like light. We need to be in the world, not of the world.

We need to be living in the world, and showing an alternative lifestyle. The second part, verses 17 to 20, where does this righteousness come from?

And here, Jesus seems to change the subject. But what Jesus is doing here, is he is placing himself at the very center of his message.

You see, if we take verses 13 to 16 on their own, it can easily become pietistic and moralizing, and create a kind of unpleasant kind of self-righteousness.

Which, it has to be said, we haven't always managed to escape as Christians. A kind of condescending attitude. We're not like other people, and so on. So, Jesus is saying, In fact, this righteousness only comes from a living relationship with him.

[15 : 05] And a living relationship with him, that is revealed in the Bible itself. Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets.

The law and the prophets is a shorthand for the whole of the Old Testament. The law, particularly, of course, the first five books. The Pentateuch, the books of Moses, from which everything else flows.

So, basically, he is saying, If you are going to be salt and light, you need to reflect me. If you're going to reflect me, you need to know who I am.

And if you want to know who I am, you've got to read the Scriptures. Christ and the Bible. An old rhyme that says, So shut your Bibles up, and tell us how the Christ you speak about is living now.

Difficult to think of a more nonsensical statement. How on earth are we going to know who Christ is if we shut our Bibles up? Now, I know what's behind it.

[16 : 06] The idea of people with Bible in their heads, but not Christ in their heart. That's true enough. That is a danger. But, surely, the only way we will know Christ is by opening our Bibles up.

And Jesus says, The Scripture, I have come to fulfill them. In other words, don't say we can do without the Old Testament, because you can't.

He doesn't say you don't need the Old Testament. Now, since I've come, he says the Old Testament remains authoritative for Christians, but it only remains authoritative if we interpret it in the light of Christ.

Because Christ is what the Old Testament is about, just as much as the New Testament. The veteran preacher, Alec Mottier, often says, Tear out the one uninspired page in your Bible.

Don't do it in the church Bibles, please. Do it on your own. That's the blank page between Malachi and Matthew. Because Malachi flows straight into Matthew.

[17 : 16] The Bible is about Christ. The Bible is not about... It's not 66 books. It's not even two books.

It's one book. Now, I know, of course, there are 66 pictures, if you like. But, essentially, we've got to see this as one book. And if we are going to understand the New Testament, then we won't understand it without the Old Testament.

How can we understand the holiness of God? How can we understand the love of God? There's so many things that the New Testament takes for granted.

The New Testament doesn't talk a great deal about creation. It doesn't talk about it, but it doesn't develop it in detail. It assumes knowledge of creation. The New Testament doesn't talk a great deal about the origin of evil and sin and so on.

But it assumes people will know. And will know the Old Testament. And the apostles, as they write the New Testament under the inspiration of the Spirit, draw on and build on the Old Testament.

[18 : 24] And this is the way in which the righteousness of God, the Beatitudes, are going to become part of it. Verse 18.

Until heaven and earth pass away. Not an iota. Not a dot. Now, the iota is the letter I, the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet. And the dot is the tiny little squiggle we get on the end of some letters, which distinguish them from other letters.

So, basically, you see what Jesus is saying? The Old Testament is actually the verbally inspired.

It's actually the words of God. Now, of course, it's also the words of people. The style is very different between the writers. It doesn't mean that the book dropped down out of heaven in the language of the authorized version.

These people, these writers long ago, worked very hard. They did their homework. They worked out what they were going to say.

[19 : 30] But in the Spirit, superintended the process. So, the result was not just, say, the words of Matthew or the words of Isaiah, but the word of God. And when Jesus spoke these words, the kingdom of God, the whole divine purpose of the Old Testament has still not yet been carried out.

He still had to go to the cross. He still had to rise again. And then, of course, the event, which is still future to us as it was then, the coming again. But the point, surely, is being made is Jesus is saying, or Matthew is recording Jesus saying, since everything so far has come true, then we can rely and trust on everything else coming true.

And then he, having established that, having established where does righteousness come from, it comes only from a living relationship with Christ, part of which is an engagement with him by the Spirit in the words of Scripture.

And now he returns to, if you like, to our righteousness. Therefore, whoever relaxes one and teaches will be called the least in the kingdom of heaven.

Whoever does them and teaches will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. In other words, we've got to be totally faithful to the word that's given to us.

[21 : 00] Now, this is no soft option, as we'll see next week, the very last verse of this chapter, and we'll talk about this more next week. You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

That's a terrifying verse, is it not? And we'll look at it more next week. But remember, this perfection is only going to be reached finally in the new creation, when we are completely like Christ.

But verse 20, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. Now, the scribes and Pharisees, many of them were good, well-intentioned people.

But the essence of their worldview was, you can reach perfection by rigid, scrupulous obedience to the law.

And not just to the law, to a whole body of material that they had built up over the centuries, covering every conceivable known circumstance. The whole, every part of human life had a rule covering it, most more than one.

[22 : 14] And verse 20 surely does not mean, you've got to have more rules and regulations than the Pharisees and scribes. You've got to be humorous. The point Jesus is making is something utterly different.

You will never become righteous by obeying rules and regulations. Because rules and regulations, by their very nature, are external.

They're observable. They say nothing whatever about the state of a person's heart. You can look at a person and say, well, I don't approve of this. I don't approve of where they go. I don't approve of how they dress.

That kind of thing. What you cannot do is know whether they are walking with God, whether their heart is right with God. That is the point, surely, that's being made.

Because legalism will never lead to righteousness. Because legalism, by its very nature, depends on externals. I'm not saying that we ought to break every law in sight.

[23 : 15] That's not what I'm saying. What I'm saying is that the change has to happen from the inside. It's not patching up the old, ill behavior.

Not becoming a better person. It's a transformed person. And only by Christ's righteousness can we enter the kingdom of heaven. That's why we can never enter the kingdom of heaven if we simply try to obey more rules.

Another thing I learned long ago when I was a young teacher was the more rules you make, the more excuse you give for the blighters to break them. It's better having a few simple and straightforward rules which give the guidelines.

Because human beings, ultimately, it's not about rules. It's about relationships. Later on, Paul is going to call this the fruit of the Spirit.

Now, of course, by observing the fruit of the Spirit, there are many things that the Pharisees and scribes wanted to do. But, as you read through the Gospels, as you discover their confrontations with Jesus over and over again, he is confronting them that they are rigid, they are legalistic, they are pedantic, but they do not love God.

[24 : 35] And they do not love their neighbor. So, you see, Jesus is saying, we're not good enough. We need to be righteous. That's the bad news.

The good news is, by his sacrifice, by his fulfilling of the Old Testament, by his total obedience to God, and by his Spirit in us, we can partially, at least, live that life here on earth and in the new creation, live it fully.

Amen. Let's pray. Lord, how we realize, indeed, that we are not good enough and never can be good enough by our own efforts. And so we thank you for the fountain that is opened for sin and uncleanness, for the grace that covers all our sins and the grace that, day by day, makes us like our Lord Jesus Christ.

And we know that when we see him, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Amen. Amen.