

3. For the Love of God

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[0 : 0 0] Today we are picking up where we left off before Easter in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew's Gospel, looking at the end of chapter 5. So turn if you would to page 810 in the Visitor's Bibles, Matthew 5.

Today we'll be reading the long section from verses 21 to 48. But let me give you a little bit of a reader's digest of what we saw a few weeks ago.

So this is Jesus laying down the manifesto for his new kingdom in the Sermon on the Mount. And so far he's shown us both his kingdom people and their kingdom purpose.

We saw the people right in verse 1 with the Beatitudes. They're the poor in spirit, the merciful who show mercy. And the kingdom purpose came down in verse 16.

Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. That's what it was all about. Which led Jesus to the difficult words that we ended with last week.

[1 : 1 1] For I tell you, verse 20, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. So what does that greater righteousness look like?

That's what we need to hear. Verse 21. You have heard, says Jesus, that it was said to those of old, you shall not murder, and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.

But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment. Whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council. And whoever says, you fool, will be liable to the hell of fire.

So if you're offering your gift at the altar and there, remember that your brother has something against you. Leave your gift there before the altar and go. First, be reconciled to your brother and then come to offer your gift.

Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you're going with him to court. Lest your accuser hand you over to the judge and the judge to the guard and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you've paid the last penny.

[2 : 2 2] You have heard that it was said you shall not commit adultery. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better for you to lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.

And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better for you to lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

It was also said whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce. But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery.

And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. Again, you've heard it was said to those of old, you shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.

- [3 : 24] But I say to you, do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of his great king.
- And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say simply be yes or no. Anything more than this comes from evil.
- You've heard that it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.
- And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.
- You've heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your father who is in heaven.
- [4 : 31] For he makes a son rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?
- Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect.
- Well, let's pray. Father God, these are difficult words to take into our hearts. But we believe that they are your words for your children.
- So help us, Lord, in the short time we have by your spirit to let them do their work in us. We ask it above all so that the world might see our good works and give glory to you.
- In Jesus' name. Amen. One habit which no human being can resist is drawing boundaries.
- [5 : 42] And I think it begins in our very earliest days. For my girls, the magic boundary is the number three. When their mother begins to count in a certain firm tone of voice, they know that a red line is coming.
- At the count of one, they can carry on doing whatever they're doing with absolute impunity. When she reaches two, they know they're safe, but not for long.
- And all activity stops dead just a fraction of a second before she reaches three. One side of the line, they could not care less.
- But cross it, and for all they know, the sky will fall on their heads. And we never really grow out of that, do we? The moment we learn right from wrong, we ask ourselves, how far can we go?
- Just how close to danger can we safely tread? One early theologian, when he read Jesus' words here on lust and adultery, thought it would be best to castrate himself just to be safe.
- [6 : 49] That way, he thought he'd surely keep on the right side of the mark. The irony, though, as he soon discovered, was that he was making just the sort of mistake that Jesus is correcting.
- Why are we human beings so addicted to boundaries and pass marks and deadlines? Well, because there's a little Pharisee inside every one of us.
- And as Jesus exposes for us today, that means we are fundamentally committed to twisting his way of righteousness into regulations which we can keep on just the right side of.
- Just enough to look respectable while getting away with as much as humanly possible. Which is why I think we react with such sheer panic to Matthew 5, verse 20.

For I tell you, unless your righteousness is greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. That verse sets up a contrast which has been in the background so far, but it's going to become more and more explicit as this sermon goes on.

[8 : 03] A contrast between the ways of righteousness and the ways of religion. And right at their heart, those two ways have fundamentally irreconcilable aims.

Everything Jesus' disciple does, we saw back in verse 16, is done so that the world might glorify our father in heaven. That verse laid down the one great purpose of his kingdom.

And so this righteousness Jesus is looking for here is righteousness for the love of God. It comes from a heart which loves our gracious king.

But the religious man, as will become more and more plain over the next few weeks, serves a different master. However pious his behavior, it's ultimately done to glorify him.

To keep him on just the right side of the line. And win praise from the people who matter to him. Well, for the rest of chapter 5, Jesus is going to show us a better way than that.

[9 : 15] A subversive righteousness which far exceeds that dead way of the scribes and the Pharisees. And his purpose here is to free his law from twisted human religion.

To let it search out the hearts and lives of us kingdom people. Verse 20 is the sort of sentence which just can't go unexplained, doesn't it?

We need to know what greater righteousness looks like. And so Jesus takes six illustrations now from every area of life. Each one shows us how religion twists and trivializes his law.

And in each one, Jesus fulfills that law for us. Shows us the way of greater righteousness which the law was really pointing to.

Righteousness that's not about rules and boundaries. But restored loving relationships. Six ways of relating rightly to each other for the love of God.

[10 : 26] Now in an ideal world, we'd stay here until the last man's standing and look at all six in turn. And we'd let Jesus get right to the heart of our relationships.

Starting with the most private and intimate. And ending with our widest and most public ones. That's what the passage does. And in both areas, calling for love to trump hatred.

For costly self-denial. And for real faithfulness to rule. But there's a bigger message here too. One which he makes right across all six parts of this section.

And I hope that we'll at least see that this lunchtime. Even if we don't have time to look at all six in detail. Just notice how each one of them starts in the same way. You've heard that it was said.

But I say to you. He's drawing a contrast each time, isn't he? But it's not the law which he's correcting. It's not what was written.

[11 : 28] But what people have heard was said. He's ripping away the layers of human religion. Which have trivialized and hidden what lay at the heart of his law.

And what bursts free is God's dazzling, heart-searching demand for love and grace. So in the time we have left, let's learn three very simple home truths from the Lord Jesus.

Three truths which righteousness knows, but religion always tends to forget. And the first one we should be able to see pretty quickly.

Lesson number one. Sin is monstrous. Not trivial. Sin is monstrous. Not trivial. You see the problem with the little Pharisee inside you and me.

Is that he tends to set the bar pretty low. Don't kill, verse 21. Don't have an affair, verse 27. We're not really too concerned, are we, with how we treat our brothers or our spouse.

[12 : 39] What matters is putting a tick in the box when we read the commandments. And because we don't actually see the blood or file for a divorce, we kid ourselves that we've got away with our bad behavior.

But what religion forgets is that sin is always ugly and cruel. And it's wrong whether or not we actually do harm to others.

Because it shows God that ugly cruelty deep down inside us. So righteousness looks at respectable churches like ours, verse 22, and sees corpses lying in the aisle, stabbed by tongues, and bludgeoned by short tempers.

Perhaps it sees the very same thing in our homes. How many of us Christian husbands have battered and broken wives? And we get away with it simply because our tempers never leave a bruise behind.

So we can go smiling back to church on Sunday as a happy family. And no one knows a thing. Except that we don't get away with it, do we?

[13 : 56] Jesus sees through us. And it hurts him, even if we never hurt the person that we're secretly festering away about.

Religion lets a man do shameful things in front of a computer screen, verse 28, all the while comforting himself that no harm's done.

His wife won't know, no one's been hurt, and he can say sorry to God before he goes to church. But righteousness looks at our heart or our internet browsers and sees a catalogue as ugly as a betrayed spouse and a broken family.

Religion crosses its fingers, verse 34, and words its promises carefully. And so it avoids actually using God's name when it's telling fibs.

But what it forgets is that dishonesty is always a slur on God. We can't wriggle out of his sight. And to try is to spit in his face.

[15 : 03] It's never trivial, and nor is where sin leads. Hatred of your brother, verse 22, must be one of the easiest doors from church to hell.

Lustfully flicking through a romantic novel seems like such a little monster, doesn't it? Such a harmless thing. It calls you so softly at first, but when it drags you to its lair, end of verse 29, there's no door out.

And that is why the action Jesus calls us to take is so drastic. Because sin is monstrous, both in the ugliness it shows now and in the hell it leads us to.

It's a monstrous thing. That's home truth number one. Righteousness knows it perfectly well, but somehow the real horror of sin is something religion always tends to forget.

And here's number two. The law searches hearts and not just scruples. The law searches our hearts and not just our scruples.

[16 : 18] Now we tend to think of the religious as those who take the law very seriously, don't we? So perhaps Jesus' assessment is a little surprising because he sees through our outward show to what's going on in our hearts.

And what we learn is that the little Pharisee in your and my heart does feel very threatened by sin. But it's not the Father's glory which comes under threat, is it?

It's our own respectability, our scruples. What will others think? Will I look less good if I'm found out?

Perhaps the easiest place to see that is the example about divorce. What matters to the Pharisee, verse 31, is getting the right paperwork filed away so that everything can be tidied up respectably.

The problem is that God absolutely hates the breakup of a marriage. There was one provision in his law for divorce and one only. And that was sexual unfaithfulness because it destroys the marriage bond in the same way as death.

[17 : 26] Well, how can the Pharisee then protect his scruples when he grows tired of his wife? The simplest thing would be to define the word indecency as loosely as possible.

Find some reason to send her away and pretend it's all legal. And so he exploits the one exception in the law designed to protect marriage and he uses it to condemn his wife to poverty or throwing herself on the mercy of another man.

But he, at least, keeps a nice, clean conscience. The law's focus was on faithfulness and protecting women, but he twisted it into a guide to keeping clean scruples.

For the religious man, God's law is nothing more than a costume to keep himself looking respectable. And if we think we're different, well, just ask how you last reasoned when you were last faced with temptation.

What did you think to yourself? I can't think when I last asked how deep Jesus' commands could go. What I want to do is make it as shallow as I can possibly get away with.

[18 : 47] Find a way to excuse my behavior, to twist his law. These are demands which go as deep as possible because our expression of love is what our obedience is all about, not our expression of respectability.

And if we believe that, if we believe the law is a way of showing love for Jesus, then his law starts to expose the most hidden reaches of our hearts, doesn't it? If the law tells us that God loves truthfulness, well, we shouldn't need to ask how strong our oaths have to be, verse 34.

Or if it tells us that God hates anger and bitterness, verse 21, well, we should be worrying about our consciences, not just our criminal records. And sitting here in church, singing about our love for God, that should provoke questions about our love for each other.

And if our conscience is pricked because of words we've spoken in haste or bitterness we've been harboring, well, of us 23, we'll leave the lunchtime service and do something about it.

What shows our father that we love him is making a phone call to a brother or sister to say we're sorry. And look how urgent that is.

[20 : 09] First be reconciled, he says. Don't hang around in church. Come to terms quickly, verse 25. Don't wait until it gets to court. Gouge out an eye, verse 29.

Get right down to the source of your sin and rip it out and be prepared for holiness, not just to inconvenience you, but to maim the things you most cherish.

The truth is that it never quite feels like the right time to start obeying. When I fall out with my wife, I always want to wait just a little longer to say I'm sorry.

Perhaps I want to cool down. Or perhaps I just want her to hurt for a little bit more. But Jesus says that estrangement and bitterness between brothers is like a festering wound.

Let it linger and it will kill you before you get a second chance. And so just as sin goes an awful lot deeper than religion lets on, so does Christ's law.

[21 : 19] It searches our hearts, not just our scruples. And finally, our response to sin in others goes a lot deeper as well. And perhaps the most costly test of a Christian's greater righteousness comes in the face of wrongdoing from other people.

So here's home truth number three. And perhaps the hardest lesson of all to teach our inner Pharisee. Love does not stand on rights.

It tramples them. Love doesn't stand on rights. It tramples them. The thing you just can't miss in these six examples is the call to say no to ourselves.

But that's not just in those areas of private self-control at the beginning of the passage. Sometimes it's the things we have to sacrifice in public which hurt the most. The chance to clear our name or claw back our dignity.

And that's where the focus is in Jesus' last two examples from verse 38 onwards. Sin is just as ugly in these last verses, but this time it's largely something that happens to us.

[22 : 31] Someone slaps you on the cheek or takes your tunic. Both humiliating insults. Or you're press ganged by some thug of a Roman soldier, verse 41, into lugging his equipment a mile uphill.

Well, our natural response is to hit back, isn't it? And so the Pharisee inside us springs into action. He asks, how far will God's law let me go?

Just how vindictive can I be? But then we hit a problem. Because the God who wrote the law is not a vindictive God.

In fact, his concern was to limit excessive retribution. An eye for an eye wasn't carte blanche to extort revenge. It set a principle for fair and proportionate justice in the public courts.

And so in expounding his law, Jesus isn't interested in revenge at all, is he? He's interested in grace. Let him have your tunic, even your coat.

[23 : 40] If he wants to insult you, let the blows fall. Don't stand on your rights, but bend over backwards to show mercy. Well, either that is the most stupid thing a man has ever taught, or there is something far more important than our immediate dignity at stake.

I think that unless we remember what Christ's kingdom is all about, this all looks about as pathetic as it gets. It just doesn't make any sense without verse 16, does it?

But that verse, remember, gave Jesus' people a far greater purpose, that the world might see our good works and give glory to our Father. and you cannot show his grace while standing on your rights.

One of them has to go. Wouldn't Christianity look so much more attractive if we Christians looked more like our Father? And we don't do that, verse 45, by just loving the people who love us back.

Even the cruelest human beings believe in that sort of love, don't they? So surely, verse 47, we forgiven Christians ought to be better than that. Of all the ways to twist and change a law which says, love your neighbor, hate your enemy, must be about the most perverse.

[25 : 08] It's the anti-gospel, isn't it? Just think of the perfect love that our Heavenly Father showed you and me, verse 48. Love that laid down his own son to redeem his killers.

So what better way to give him glory than by loving when it costs us? Friends, the Pharisee is not a million miles away.

His ways come far more naturally to us every time. But Christ is calling us to submit every relationship we have to the piercing standards of his love.

And yes, there is no denying that will cost us. Love that costs us nothing is worth nothing. But this isn't about rules and respectability.

It's a call to follow our King for the love of God. Let's pray. Father God, forgive us for the thousand and one ways that we shut our ears to your law of love.

[26 : 20] Thank you for the cross of your Son which frees us to live new lives for your glory. Help us to live them, Father, for the true love of our King.

In his name we pray. Amen. Amen.