

The Jesus Way / THE LIFE GOD WANTS FOR YOU
How Good is Good Enough?
Matthew 5-7

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. ¹⁸ I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. ¹⁹ Anyone who breaks 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 practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ 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.
Matthew 5:17-20

On the morning of October 2, 2006, a troubled milkman named Charles Carl Roberts barricaded himself inside the West Nickel Mine Amish School. There he ultimately murdered five young girls and wounded six others. When police arrived on the scene, Roberts finished it all by committing suicide. It was a dark day for the Amish community of West Nickel Mines, but it was also a dark day for Marie Roberts—the wife of the gunman—and her two young children. That is a picture of radical evil.

But on the following Saturday, Marie experienced something truly countercultural while attending her husband’s funeral. That day, she and her children watched as Amish families—about half of the 75 mourners present—came and stood alongside them in the midst of their own blinding grief. Despite the awful crime the man had perpetrated, the Amish came to mourn Charles Carl Roberts—a husband and daddy. Bruce Porter, a fire department chaplain who attended the service, described what moved him most about the gesture: “It’s the love, the forgiveness, the heartfelt forgiveness they have toward the family. I broke down and cried seeing it displayed.”ⁱ

This is a picture of what we might call “radical righteousness.” Radical righteousness (or goodness) doesn’t just *keep* the law; it *exceeds* the law. Radical righteousness isn’t just about outward actions, but inner motivations. Radical righteousness is not motivated by the praise of men, but only by the praise of God. Radical righteousness goes beyond the limits of culture and common sense. Radical righteousness forgives the unforgivable, loves the unlovable, and sacrifices what is unthinkable. Radical righteousness is countercultural.

Jesus calls you and me to live lives that are marked by “radical righteousness.” And it is this kind of life that Jesus describes in what has become known as the Sermon on the Mount, or better, Jesus’ “talk on the hillside” as recorded in Matthew 5-7. In these chapters Jesus us one thing: *Radical righteousness characterizes true citizens of God’s promised kingdom.* ⁱⁱ

Right-eous-ness

Righteousness. That's not a word that is part of our everyday vocabulary, but you can't understand these words of Jesus without understanding what "righteousness" is. It's used seven times in chapters 5-7. If you take off the "ness" you have "righteous." And if you take off the "eous" you have "right." Simply put, "righteousness" speaks then of "that which is right."

"Simple enough," you might say. There's a caveat, however. The rightness Jesus speaks of is not just outward, it is also inward. It must characterize not only our actions, but also our attitudes and motivations of the heart.

But there is more. For something or somebody to be judged as "right" and "good," there must be a standard of measurement. And the Bible makes it clear that the only standard for measuring what is "right" or "good" is God himself. That's why Jesus gives us the bottom line in Matthew 5:48 – "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

On one occasion a man came up to Jesus and asked "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" Jesus replied: "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only *One* who is good" (Matthew 19:16-17). Now I don't know if Jesus was pointing to himself when he said that, but that's the point. No one but God is radically righteous, i.e. radically good.

So is Jesus is telling us to be perfect ("radically righteous") just like our heavenly Father is perfect? How can that be? We'll come back to those questions.

Kingdom

Another concept that we need to understand in order to grasp what Jesus is saying here is the idea of the "kingdom." Again, this is a word that we don't often use, living in a democratic society. If you're into biology, you might think of a category in the animal kingdom. Or if you're into hard core metal rock, you might think of the group Cataract (particularly if you're from Europe). Or if you're into movies, you might think of the recent DVD release called *The Kingdom* at blockbuster. Of course, Jesus' concept is far removed from all of these.

For there to be a kingdom, there has to be three things: (1) a ruler; (2) a realm; and (3) a rule of a king over a realm. Throughout history, God's "universal kingdom" has been in operation. Ultimately, God is in charge of everything. The earth, the worlds, and the entire universe are under God's "rule." As the prophet Jeremiah says, "You, O Lord, reign forever!" (Lam. 5:19). But this is *not* what Jesus is talking about here.

The kingdom Jesus is talking about involves himself, Jesus Christ as King ruling over the earth as his realm. Throughout the Old Testament, this literal, physical kingdom was promised to God's people, Israel. The prophet Isaiah speaks of this kingdom when he says of the coming Messiah: "He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom" (Isaiah 9:7). And now, just as if there had been no break of over 400 years between the Old and New Testaments, this same kingdom is being offered. In Matthew 3:2 John the Baptist's message is "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." And then Jesus himself picks up on this same message: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 4:17). And then Matthew 4:23 tells us that Jesus

went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the “good news of the kingdom.” And in this very “talk on the hill,” Jesus teaches us to pray: “Thy kingdom come, they will be done” and to “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.”

What precisely *is* this kingdom? It is when Christ as king will rule over the earth as his realm. It is this physical, messianic kingdom that Jesus is offering to Israel (5:10, 19; 6:10, etc.).ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus’ intent in giving this Sermon on the Mount and Matthew’s intent in recording this Sermon are one in the same. Both want you and me to sense the urgency of the day. There is a kingdom on the horizon!^{iv} The question is: *Are you ready for it?*”

Well, just how *can* we be ready for this kingdom? And how do we *enter* this kingdom? This brings us back to the key idea of this famous sermon: *Radical righteousness characterizes true citizens of God’s promised kingdom.*

Jesus begins by defining for us this “radical righteousness” in Matthew 5:20 and then he gives us some illustrations in the rest of the chapter that help us grasp a hold of this idea. Let’s look again at that key verse, Matthew 5:20 –

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. Matthew 5:20

These people listening to Jesus didn’t need to be told that righteousness was necessary for entering God’s kingdom. What they *did* need to know was what *kind* of righteousness was needed. Just *how* righteous – how good – did one need to be to enter God’s Kingdom? And Jesus here gives the answer: you’ve got to be *radically righteous*. Your righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

The religious folk of Jesus’ day were really “into” this idea of righteousness. The Pharisees had codified the law into 365 prohibitions (one for each day of our calendar) and 248 commandments. On top of these were added all kinds of ridiculous details, such as not wearing false teeth on the Sabbath. If they fell out, you would have to carry them and that would be work! I didn’t even know that they had false teeth back then! Here’s something else I didn’t know. I didn’t know they had stilts. Another law said that you couldn’t walk on or carry stilts on the Sabbath. And so the problem, as we have seen, is that “righteousness” was defined primarily in outward terms, rather than inward terms. Just look good on the outside, don’t worry too much about cleaning up the inside!

Probably the best word to describe the perspective of these religious leaders is “religion.” What is “religion?” Religion is basically man’s best attempt to get to God on his own. Whether one is Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Protestant, Catholic, or agnostic ... whatever label you may wear, if you are depending on your best attempt to get to God, then you are into “religion.”

I don’t know him personally, but I suspect that Warren Buffet, the world’s second richest man, is into “religion.” In June of 2006 he announced that he would donate 85 percent of his \$44 billion fortune to five charitable foundations. Commenting on this extreme level of generosity, Buffet said: “There is more than one way to get to heaven, but this is a great way.”^{vi}

First of all, Mr. Buffet, there is only *one* way to get to heaven. And donating even 85 percent of your billions is not going to make it happen. In fact, donating 100 percent of your billions won't make it happen. And the same is true for you.

But Jesus makes it clear in these verses that, in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, we must have a righteousness that is “over and beyond” the righteousness of the religious folk, like the teachers and Pharisees of Jesus' day. We must have a “radical righteousness.”

This is what Jesus is demonstrating in Matthew 5:21-48. Here Jesus walks us through six different situations in life in which radical righteousness (which comes from the heart) is contrasted with mere “religious” righteousness (which is limited to outward actions). He is saying that the true citizens of God's kingdom are marked by a radical righteousness that is *inward*, not simply *outward*.^{vii} In the coming weeks, we'll be looking at several of these more specifically. But for now, let me mention just two or three.

For example, Jesus addresses first in verses 21-26 the situation of relational difficulty. And who doesn't have that from time to time! Maybe there were a few unkind words shared in the car this morning as you came to church! Here's what Jesus says in verse 21 “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not *murder*...’” (Matthew 5:21).

So far so good! That is, if you are measuring in terms of “religious righteousness.” I suspect that few (if any) in this room have ever committed murder. And certainly not in the way Charles Carl Roberts did in taking those innocent lives. But that doesn't let you off the hook. Jesus continues: “But I tell you that anyone who is *angry* with his brother will be subject to judgment” (Matthew 5:21-22). Here Jesus gives us the terms of “radical righteousness.” And if you're like me, you fall far, far short. Were you angry with your spouse or your children this morning? Or last night? Or the day before? Or with someone else?

Let's look at the next one found in verse 27. Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’” (Matthew 5:27). Now this hits already a little closer to home. I won't ask you to raise your hand if you have ever committed the physical act of adultery. If I did, you probably wouldn't do it anyway! Then you may be guilty of another sin that Jesus talks about in these verses (5:33-37) – honesty and integrity.

But even if you've never committed the physical act of adultery, that doesn't let you off the hook. Jesus continues: “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28). Those are the terms of “radical righteousness.” And every man (or boy) in this auditorium either has or will fall short of this standard!

Let's take just one more. We read in verse 43: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” While the first phrase (“Love your neighbor”) *is* found in the Old Testament (Leviticus 19:18), the additional statement “hate your enemy” was misinterpretation of Old Testament law added on by the Pharisees. Both, however, reflect a “righteousness” that doesn't go far enough. Jesus then gives us the standard of “radical righteousness:” “But I tell you, ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’” (Matthew 5:44).

This is the kind of “radical righteousness” shown by those suffering families who had lost their children to the murderous hands of Charles Carl Roberts. They not only loved their neighbor, they showed love to their enemy. Can you imagine coming alongside to console the family of the very one who murdered your child? That is “radical righteousness.”

But *why* does Jesus do this? Why does he six times state the *outward* law of “religious righteousness” and then state the *inward* law of “radical righteousness?” Jesus is awakening us to our *own* sinfulness and our desperate need of *his* righteousness, *his* goodness. You see, sin – the opposite of righteousness – means literally “to miss the mark,” the “mark” of God’s perfect standard. Sin is not limited to *outward actions*. It also includes the inner *thoughts* and *attitudes* of the heart.

According to a FBI crime report, here’s how often various crimes are committed in the US:

Theft: every 4.5 seconds
Burglary: every 15.4 seconds
Robbery: every 1.3 minutes
Rape: every 5.8 minutes
Murder: every 33.9 minutes

What if we took these statistics to the level of Jesus’ requirement of “radical righteousness,” the kind that characterizes citizens of his kingdom? What if we included not just theft, but covetousness? What if we included not just robbery, but dishonesty? What if we included not just rape, but lust? And on top of that, according to Jesus’ teaching on radical righteousness, sin is not just the bad that we do, but also the good that we fail to do. In other words, it includes both sins of *commission* (the bad things we *commit*) and sins of *omission* (the good things we *omit*).

Obviously, as you can see then, we all have a problem. We might be religiously righteous on the outside, but far – so far – from reflecting the radical inner righteousness that characterizes citizens of God’s kingdom.

I understand that when archeologist Howard Carter and his associates found King Tutankhamen’s (King Tut) tomb, they opened up his casket only to find another casket within the first one. They opened up the second, which was covered with gold leaf, and found a third. Inside the third casket was a fourth made of pure gold. The pharaoh’s body was in the fourth one, wrapped in a gold cloth with a gold face mask. But when the body was unwrapped, it was leathery and shriveled.^{viii}

This is exactly how Jesus described the religious leaders of his day: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness” (Matthew 23:27-28).

Does that describe you? You might look really good on the outside. But God doesn’t measure in those terms. He looks on the heart. So just how good is good enough? How good do you have to

be to be accepted into God's kingdom? Jesus says that you have to be as good as the Law reveals God to be. Perfect! Throughout history, God has had only one standard of acceptance: his righteousness, his perfection. Jesus puts it this way in Matthew 5:48, "Be perfect, therefore, even as your heavenly Father is perfect."^{ix} "Whoa," you might say, "that counts me out." Yes, that counts me out also. That counts out each of us! For none of us – not a one – is perfect as God is perfect.

This begs the question, of course, as to just *who can* enter God's kingdom? How does one receive the "radical righteousness" necessary to become a citizen of God's kingdom?

Jesus also answers that question in his "talk on the hill." Notice what he says in Matthew 7:13-14 –

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. Matthew 7:13-14

Solomon says (and he says it twice, just to get his point across!): "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death" (Proverbs 14:12; 16:25). The "way" that seems right to us is "religion," our best attempt to get to God. Jesus calls that the "wide gate" and the "broad road." And they both lead to destruction.

But there is a better way; in fact, the *only* way. Jesus calls that entering in by the "narrow gate." And that "narrow gate" is Jesus Christ. The Bible has one storyline. It's this. It tells us how a holy God can take sinful people like you and me, clean us up and bring us into His own perfect heaven without fouling up heaven and without losing His own righteousness.

COMMUNION

ⁱ "Amish Mourn Gunman in School Rampage," USA Today (10-7-06); submitted by David Slagle, Atlanta, Georgia

ⁱⁱ The Sermon on the Mount raises many questions as to its primary interpretation and application: Does the Sermon on the Mount show us the way of salvation? Was it spoken primarily as a guide to the Christian life? Or was it given primarily to describe life in the Kingdom of God? I believe that this "sermon" was given primarily to prepare Jesus' disciples (i.e. "followers," whether believers or unbelievers at the time) for the impending Kingdom that had been announced by John the Baptist and now by Christ himself.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus' audience on this occasion includes the disciples, at least the six that he had called up to this point – John, Andrew, Peter, Philip, Nathaneal, and James. But it also included the "crowds" of 4:25. These, too, were "disciples" in the sense that they were "following" Jesus.

^{iv} The entire gospel of Matthew is about the Kingdom of God being "at hand." The kingdom was proclaimed throughout Acts long after Israel had rejected that kingdom (Acts 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). That is why this message cannot be relegated to the future Tribulation period when the gospel of the kingdom will also be proclaimed. While the full realization of this physical, earthly kingdom is yet future, there are certain aspects of this kingdom that are present even today (Colossians 1:13; Hebrews 12:28).

^v Jesus' purpose in giving this message was to prepare his disciples for the Kingdom he was offering to the nation of Israel. John the Baptist's message was "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). Jesus the King had also been announcing the same message: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 4:17). Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom... (Matthew 4:23). The Lord's prayer requests the coming of the kingdom: "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). Other indications that this "sermon" was given to prepare Jesus' disciples for entry into and life in the offered kingdom include: (1) the many miracles that Jesus performed (cf. Matthew 4:23-25) which

serve to authenticate this offer of the kingdom; (2) the large crowds that began to follow Jesus in anticipation of the beginning of the kingdom (Matthew 4:25); (3) the fact that Jesus describes the future rewards in the kingdom: “Whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5:19. Other references to rewards include: 5:12, 46; 6:2, 4, 5, 6, 18; (4) the place where Jesus gave this “sermon.” There are three mountains that are very important in the gospels. First, there is the mountain on which Jesus is “transfigured.” That’s found in Matthew 17. This is a picture in miniature of the kingdom of God. Then there is the mountain on which Jesus gives the great commission of Matthew 28. From there he sends out his followers to “make disciples” of all the nations. And then there is the mountain on which Jesus gives this famous sermon in Matthew 5-7; and (5) the posture of Jesus. Jesus sat down, a picture of a king sitting on his throne

^{vi} Associated Press, “How Do You Spend \$1.5 Billion a Year?” cbsnews.com (6-27-06); submitted by Van Morris, Mount Washington, Kentucky

^{vii} Six times Jesus draws a contrast between the superficial “religious” interpretation of the law given by the Pharisees and the authentic, radical righteousness that the law actually requires (vv. 21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). Not once in these six passages does Jesus say, “You have heard that it was written.” He always says, “You have heard that it was said.” Most of Jesus’ quotations are associated with the Old Testament, but they are not all direct quotations. In many cases, Jesus is quoting what the Pharisees have *said* about the Old Testament. One of the best examples of this is found in verse 21. “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder,’ and ‘anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’” Matthew 5:21. The first part is found in the Old Testament in Exodus 20:13 or Deuteronomy 5:17. But the last half (“anyone who murders will be subject to judgment”) comes not from the Old Testament but from Pharisaical tradition. The following summarizes the six contrasts that Jesus draws between “religious righteousness” and “radical righteousness:”

| Situation | Religious Righteousness | Radical Righteousness |
|--|--|---|
| Relational Difficulty (21-26) | No murder | No anger; seek reconciliation |
| Sexual attraction (27-30) | No adultery | No lust in heart |
| Unhappiness with marriage partner (31-32) | Follow the law | No divorce as then practiced |
| Wanting someone to believe something (33-37) | Keep your oaths in order to convince the other | No verbal manipulation |
| Being personally injured (38-42) | Inflict equal injury on the offender | Don’t harm but help the one who injured you |
| Having an enemy (43-48) | Hate your enemy | Love and bless your enemy |

^{viii} An Expositor’s Illustration File edited by Michael Green, Dallas Theological Seminary 1982.

^{ix} In most of this sermon, Jesus is *not* telling us how to become righteous; he is showing how the “righteousness” of the religious leaders falls short of God’s righteousness.