

Get Real!

Sins of the Heart

Matthew 5:17-30

Mark Vroegop

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 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. 19 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. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

21 "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' 22 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. 23 So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are 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. 26 Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

27 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell (Matt 5:17-30)

Well, I'm curious. Did you have an opportunity to be a peace-maker this week? Did you face any opportunities to put your "little light" under a bushel? Did you show someone mercy? I know that some of you did because I heard from one of our staff wives that my sermon really messed up the traffic flow after services. With a huge smile she said, "Mark, you've got to back off your application of the mercy of letting more than one car in when you are waiting in traffic. People were letting five or six cars in, and it messed up the entire flow. I was in line forever!" That made my day!

The story reminds me of two things: 1) I love how aggressive College Park is on finding ways to apply the Word (yes, even if it backs up traffic!), and 2) I love how practical this section of Matthew is to our lives. Getting real is really important. Honestly, heaven and hell hang in the balance; we are dealing with deep and critical matters of the soul. So please join our staff and elders in praying that God would use this series to help all of us, at some level, to get real. I mean that. My vision for this series is that we would be able to look back and see 3,000 people who, in a variety of unique ways, heard from God and could say, "I'm not as superficial as what I was 6 months ago."

Ethics of Grace Again

The Beatitudes introduced to us the concept that I called the Ethics of Grace, a description of the outcome of the Sermon on Mount in our lives. In Matthew 5-7 Jesus describes the overflow (I think I called it a "righteous burp" last week) of a heart that has been invaded by the kingdom of God. He is assaulting the superficial religion that prevailed in his day with a shocking, in-your-face, and provocative message. I called it the Ethics of Grace because the sermon certainly involves actions (ethics) but they are not a new law; they are products of God's grace. It is righteousness from the inside out.

We learned the Beatitudes were descriptions of those who are already approved by God, and the result will be that those who live like this will be salt and light in world, at times facing persecution. You might think of 5:1-16 as an introduction or a summary.

Now verse 17 marks a major change. We will spend July and September (remember we are taking a break in August for the series on relationships – "How to Kill Relationships and Irritate People) unpacking what kingdom living looks like (5:17-7:12). This is where Jesus' teaching gets very personal and even more practical.

This section is designed to show us one very important thing: **the seeds of superficial religion are sown in the soil of self-deception and self-justification.**

Jesus wants to show us that superficial religion doesn't just happen. It is birth through something that sounds like "look I'm just fine – I've never murdered anyone" or "I'm not that bad, at least I've not committed adultery." Jesus is going to go after that with a gracious tenacity because he aims to show us the kind of righteousness that is real.

Today we are going to look at two things: 1) The righteousness established by Jesus, and 2) Two examples: anger and lust.

Righteousness that Jesus Fulfills

There is a principle that is established in verses 17-20, and then Jesus illustrates it with six different statements beginning with the phrase, "you have heard that it was said" (5:21, 5:27, 5:31, 5:33, 5:38 and 5:43). He is trying to show his disciples what true religion is all about.

What is the main principle that he establishes? **Jesus identifies that he fulfills what real righteousness is.** The implications of this are stunning:

- He is the end or the goal of Law, not the abolisher of the Law
- He is the definitive interpreter of the Law, revealing the ultimate meaning of the Law
- His righteousness is the real righteousness, not the fake and damning righteousness of the religious rulers¹

The word "fulfill" (v 17) is a very important word; it is central to the principle. It plays an important part in Matthew's gospel, and it has the meaning of something coming into being to which the Scripture pointed forward.² The Old Testament was often described as the Law and the Prophets – the commands related to obedience and the prophecies regarding the future. When Jesus says that he fulfills the Law and prophets he means that he and his teaching are what the Law and Prophets were pointing towards. In other words, Jesus is the substance, the Law and the Prophets are the shadow. And that is why Jesus says that he has not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. He has not come to destroy the shadow – the shadow has role – but Jesus is clearly identifying himself and his teaching and the end or goal of the Law. Jesus brings them to their divinely intended goal because they point to him.³

The second implication relates to Jesus' authority over the Law and Prophets. Since Jesus is the goal and since they were pointing to him, then he is the definitive interpreter of the Law and the prophets; he reveals the ultimate meaning of the Law. That is why Jesus can say, "not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished" (v 18) and also say, "you have heard that it was said...but I say to you." Jesus is interpreting the Law, explaining the real intent of what God was driving at when he gave the Law. Jesus is calling his followers to see the "more challenging level of discerning the will of God which underlies the legal rulings of the {Law}." ⁴

Now this does not mean that Jesus was suggesting that every part of the Old Testament Law is still in effect in the same way that it was before Jesus came. Jesus himself indicated that love

¹ David Turner, Matthew – Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic Publishing, 2008), 167.

² R.T. France, New International Commentary on the New Testament – Matthew, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 182.

³ Turner, 162.

⁴ France, 182.

fulfills the Law (Matt 22:37-40), the early church saw that the applying the Law to the Gentiles (Acts 15:22-29), and Paul clearly said that after Christ had come that we are no longer under the guardianship of the Law (Gal 3:21-26). Jesus and Paul identify that the work of Christ and the coming of the Spirit elevate faith and love as the supreme over the Law (see John 13:34, Rom 13:10, Gal 5:16, & Rom 14:23).

Finally, Jesus makes a stunning statement about the fake righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. In verse 19 he warns about relaxing one of the least of the commandments, and in verse 20 states that the religious leaders had missed real righteousness. Ironically the religious rulers of Jesus days had created extra laws in order to prevent people from disobeying the Scriptures. But in so doing they actually missed the heart of the law and ended up relaxing the real obedience that God wanted. This is what legalism does. It creates a system of rules to make you feel like you are righteous when in fact you are actually sinning more. For example, you feel good about tithing on spices, and therefore you neglect things like mercy, justice and faithfulness (Matt 23:23).

Now you have to feel the shock value of what Jesus says here. The scribes and Pharisees were regarded as the most spiritual people of the day. But Jesus says that their righteousness is damning! Unless righteousness exceeds what the people know about the religious leaders, they will not enter the kingdom. Here is the startling point: **hell will be filled with superficial religious people – those who are guilty of self-deception and self-justification.**

Now that point needed some explanation and so Jesus turns to six different examples (5:21-48) in order to make his point very clear. He is aiming for the heart.

“We’ll I’m not a murderer or an adulterer!”

Jesus intends to shock and humble us by getting to the core of what real righteousness should be. He uses a similar formula in verses 21-26 and 27-30:

- He states the command – “You have heard it said...”
- He explains the intent – “But I say to you...”
- He calls for radical action – “leave your gift” (v 24), “tear out your eye” (v 27)

Murder

Jesus begins his examples with murder. He states the command in verse 21, and then he expands it in two ways:

1. He says that being angry with someone else puts you in jeopardy of judgment.

2. Abusive speech is also identified here as equally sinful and worthy of punishment. Jesus warns against “insults” or statements like “You fool!” – the kind of statements that come from a heart filled with anger toward someone.

Jesus is showing us that below murder, anger, and abusive speech is a condition of the heart that does not fit with the call to be his disciple. You might wonder what kind of anger is Jesus censoring here? Or what kind of statements are out of bounds? But that really misses the point. Jesus is after the negative attitude toward others. Murder, anger, and sinful outburst are merely the fruits of a sinful attitude toward others. And he views it as serious. In fact, the person who is angry enough to utter derogatory words like this is guilty enough to go to hell (v 20).

Then he goes even further to give the remedy. Jesus urges radical reconciliation that takes precedence over worship (“leave your gift at the altar...”) and that makes aggressive overtures (“while you are going with him to court”). Now Jesus is not saying that there is no difference between murder and anger. However, he is identifying that real righteousness is so much more than not killing people! To prop up yourself on the most extreme example of disobedience may make you feel better, but it only confirms that you are so far from real righteousness. In other words, you have to look deeper into the Law to see what God was really driving at.

Jesus aims for us to see that righteousness flows from the heart. Because of that, we have to take careful inventory of the following:

- Have you ever found yourself saying, “Look, I’m not that bad!” At least I haven’t killed anyone or hit anyone or swear or yell or stay angry for a long time.
- Do you find yourself justifying your anger or attitude based upon the actions of others – “I wouldn’t say these things if you weren’t so...”
- Are you waiting for reconciliation because “they’re the ones with the problem?”
- Do you justify internal bitterness because you never act on it?
- Are you angry on the inside but hiding it and justifying it?

Jesus warns us that anger of the heart is not the kind of righteousness that fits with the kingdom.

Adultery

The second example that Jesus gives is regarding adultery. Once again, he states the command and then he expands it: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’, but I say to you that everyone who looks on a woman with lustful intent had already committed adultery with her in his heart” (v 27-28). Jesus is aiming for the heart and assaulting the notion that all God is looking for is not having intercourse with someone other than one’s wife.

Jesus is not suggesting that sins of the heart are the same as committing adultery. Rather, he is driving at the fact that real righteousness is not found in just not committing adultery. He is aiming for a righteousness that relates to the desires and the intentions of the heart. That is why he says, "looks at a woman with lustful intent..." The problem is not just what you do physically; it relates to the intention of the heart. It is the look that leads to the physical act that comes under condemnation.⁵

What exactly is Jesus condemning? The word lust means to desire, and it would be closely connected to the 10th commandment that forbade coveting your neighbor's wife. The structure of the language here suggests that the focus is clearly on internal intent – "to look at a woman in such a way that desire for her is aroused in him."⁶ So Jesus is not just concerned about the physical; he is concerned about the heart. Specifically, he is concerned about the kind of heart whose intent creates a lustful look.

This is where Jesus really breaks us. He presses on the intention of the heart and then he calls for radical action – pluck out your eye, cut off your hand – to emphasize the serious nature of this. The focus on the heart alone is enough to sink us, but Jesus cuts through the societal toleration of "lust as a sport" or "lust as advertizing" to remind us how serious this really is. This call is radical indeed.

Real righteousness exists in the intentions of heart. And with that in mind – knowing how easy it is to be deceived and justify ourselves, let me give you a few cautions:

- Be careful about defining pre-marital moral purity as simply not having intercourse.
- Be careful about giving yourself one look because you think it's the second look that is sinful.
- Be careful about justifying a drooling perusal of magazine or website because it "isn't pornography."
- Be careful about a heart bent toward a self-centered meeting of your sexual needs while thinking that no one is really affected by what I do in private.
- Be careful about choosing your clothing (especially in the Summer) based more on the attention you will receive for what you reveal than what clothing is supposed to do – namely, cover your nakedness.
- Be careful of emotional or relational connections that may not be "looks" but come from the same heart bent on lustful intent.

Jesus is aiming for your heart! He is trying to show us that self-deception and self-justification yield a nasty harvest of superficial religion. Real righteousness – from the inside out – is what

⁵ Leon Morris, The Gospel According to Matthew – Pillar Commentary Series, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 116.

⁶ Morris, 188 – note 106

Jesus is trying to show us. And he uses anger and lust to break us. Why do I say that? Because there are few sins that are more common and cultural than these. Anger and lust are a part of the air we breathe, so if you are feeling like you are about to drown and sink – you are right where Jesus wants you.

Jesus, help me!

This entire section ultimately ends with him saying, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (5:48). And before you throw up your hands and say, “I can’t do this!” remember that this is only part of Jesus’ message. Eventually he will say, “Come to me...take my yoke upon you...for my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (11:28-29) and “abide in me and I in you...apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:4-5).

To know real righteousness should drive us to run to him. If you think, “Oh, I can do this!” then you are not seeing what he is saying clearly. But if you are feeling, “Oh, Jesus – help me!” that is essence of the kingdom.

Remember, Jesus’ aim is to shock us out our superficial religion. And just because he doesn’t resolve this in the next few verses, doesn’t mean he never resolves our problem. In fact, Matthew aims to show you that Jesus is the only one who can save you from your own heart. And he is the only one who can give you any level of victory. We need the kingdom of Jesus to invade our hearts.

Paul said it this way:

“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:24-25a).

In other words, the only remedy for self-deception and self-justification is the truth of God’s word and justification of Jesus. Our Lord aims to shatter our superficial religion but not leave us destroyed. Rather he aims to point us to himself as the only one who can help us with sins of the heart like anger and lust.

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