



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Make Relationships Righteous

Matthew 5:17-32

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Can You Think of Someone . . .

Think of the most righteously religious person you know. Someone perhaps:

- Who knows the Bible thoroughly, and in depth.
- Who is serious about obeying God's Law as found in the Bible.
- Who regularly practices the spiritual disciplines.
- Who teaches correctly; even Jesus would recommend his teaching.
- Whose life, while not perfect, can correctly be described as "blameless."
- Who judges possible wrong doing judiciously, calling sin what it is, but also giving the benefit of the doubt where needed.
- Who wants to know God's will so much that he will go to any lengths to hear and question someone else who has impressed him with their knowledge of it.¹

Now, hear this: if you want to please God, your righteousness must go beyond (a good translation of *περισεύω*, *perisseuō* in 5.20) the righteousness of that person.

Surprised? Overwhelmed? Depressed? Doubtful that you could do that? Then, you're probably like the disciples when they heard Matthew 5.20.

Not all Pharisees were as bad or hypocritical as those who often engaged in controversy with Jesus.² And Jesus said his disciples' righteousness was to exceed theirs.

We need to understand what he meant.

¹ This list is a composite of some good Pharisees we meet in the New Testament: Paul (Phil. 3), Gamaliel (Acts 5), Nicodemus (John 3), as well as some of the positive things Jesus said about Pharisees (Mt. 23.2-3; Lk. 18.9-14).

² Continuing research into the group is such that it is correct to say that we would be better served when we mention them to add the word "some" to our description (per Craig Blomberg in a lecture at Freed-Hardeman University, October 25, 2013). For an introduction, see S. Mason, "Pharisees," in Stanley E. Porter & Craig A. Evans, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, electronic ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000.

Matthew 5.17-20 – Three Big Ideas

1. Jesus came to “fulfill” (πληρόω, *plēroō*) the Law, i.e., to show what it means and how it really should be lived (5.17).
 - a. Matthew uses “fulfill” (16x) to include more than the matching of specific OT predictions (e.g., 1.22; 2.15, 17, 23; 3.15; 4.14).³
 - b. As we study the examples in 5.21-48, we see that he is deepening understanding of the Law.
2. Jesus intends for his disciples to take the Law seriously (5.18-19).
 - a. Not even the smallest part will pass away until “heaven and earth pass away.”
 - b. Using a lesser-to-greater figure, he teaches that those who are serious about letting God rule their lives will take even what they deem to be “the least of these commandments” seriously (cf. Mt. 23.23).
3. Jesus understood the Law to be an “inside job,” concerned with attitudes and motives, not just behaviors (see 5.21-48).
 - a. The Law was about *principles*, not just behaviors. In each example in 5.21-48, Jesus cites a specific behavior command and declared it had been misunderstood to refer only to external behavior.
 - b. His concern is “righteousness” (cf. 5.6, 10; 6.1, 33).

Matthew 5.21-32 – Relationships Matter

In each example, Jesus identifies a serious behavior problem, demonstrates what’s causing and helping it along, and then shows how to take the Law seriously to get it right.

1. Murder is more than skin-deep (5.21-26)
 - a. The Law was clear about murder (Ex. 20.13; Dt. 5.17) and the consequence for the person who committed it (Ex. 21.12; Lev. 24.17) (21).
 - b. Jesus understood that it is the ultimate example of de-valuing another person, and that devaluing also occurs in some cases of anger and name-calling; in fact, it is those things that lead to murder (cf. Jas. 4.1-3) (22).
 - c. In the commands in verses 23-26, Jesus taught that relationships are so important that *urgent* steps must be taken to heal fractures in them.⁴

³ The rest of the references: Matt. 8.17; 12.17; 13.35, 48; 21.4; 23.32; 26.54, 56; 27.9.

⁴ Notice that there are no imperative verbs in v. 22; Jesus did not command against all anger, or even the designation of someone with a term that rightly describes his folly (see Lk. 12.20; 13.32). But, those things can easily get out of hand and stem from wrong motives.

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- i. His phrase, “that your brother has something *against you*” shows the importance of healing.⁵ Any strain in a relationship, regardless of who “started it,” calls for an urgent effort to resolve it.
 - ii. The specific applications may involve hyperbole (which would establish a pattern clearly continued in the next section), but serve to accentuate the urgency required.
 2. Adultery begins before having sex (5.27-30).
 - a. Again, the Law was clear about the behavior (Ex. 20.14; Dt. 5.18).
 - b. Jesus said adultery begins with the lustful intent that causes the adulterous act and is also a violation of the Law.
 - c. Again, Jesus uses hyperbole as he commands the urgent action that must be taken: do whatever it takes to stay away from the lustful intent, and the behavior of adultery will not be an issue (29-30).
 3. Divorce is also adultery (5.31-32).
 - a. Since adultery is a breaking of the covenant, Jesus took the firmest stand against divorce.
 - i. The quotation in v. 31 is from Dt. 24.1, the introduction to a longer law regulating divorce.
 - ii. The debate in Judaism at the time revolved around what constituted the least it took to justify a man putting away his wife (the “indecency” of Dt. 24.1).
 - b. Again, Jesus says that the problem is deeper: marriages should be kept together, there being just one exception to that general rule (and even then, reconciliation is possible).
 - i. Notice how strong his statement is: to put a wife away made her an adulteress, and made the one who married her an adulterer; i.e., the covenant had been shattered and everything after it corrupted.⁶
 - c. In this case, Jesus does not state a resolution, perhaps because it is so strongly implied. Clearly, it would be to make every effort to heal the strain. (Compare 1 Cor. 7.11 where Paul says, “be reconciled.”)

Make Relationships Righteous!

Landon Saunders tells of a group shipwrecked and stranded on a tiny island that was offered the chance to learn to swim so they could make it to shore. About 10 showed up. The first told the instructor that he must keep his 100 pounds of cabbage because he had heard there was no

⁵ The phrasing is surprising. It’s not, “that you have something against your brother,” as suggested by the wording in 18.15.

⁶ As a reminder to not judge some too harshly, we should appreciate a point Landon Saunders has made: “You can fail in a relationship without failing as a person.” See his manuscript, “Heart Embracing: Make Your Love Strong in the Broken Places,” at <http://heartbeat.life.org/dev/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/1022.doc>, accessed Nov. 13, 2013.

food on the mainland. A second said he would learn to swim only if he didn't have to get wet. And so it went for all 10. Consequently, none learned to swim or got off the island.

Saunders asks: "Is there anything familiar in that story about us? What do we do with our relationships? We have all kinds of baggage that we keep. We bring biases, prejudices, we bring demands, we bring expectations, we bring all of those things that are just terrible for relationships;. That drag you down, that form the undertow, and that destroy those relationships" (Saunders, "Heart Embracing").

Jesus taught that we can – indeed, must – change that. And that those who are really serious about being ruled by God will seek to change it.

Are we making our relationships righteous?

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