

The Righteousness God Requires

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Bible Verse: Matthew 5:21-48
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Well, this evening we have the privilege of returning to the Sermon on the Mount, which we have been teaching through again in recent months, and we come to a new section, a longer section in the Sermon on the Mount, beginning in verse 21 of chapter 5, and I invite you to turn there with me. I'm going to actually take the time to read the entire section down through verse 48. We're going to treat this in a very much an overview manner, and then we'll go through verse by verse in weeks to come, but it's very, very important for an understanding of the whole Sermon on the Mount and of these six sections that are in front of us to see how they all tie together. And so, in Matthew chapter 5 verse 21, and following, we read this, and as we go through, let me just, for tonight especially, notice the multiple times that Jesus says, "you have heard that, you have heard, you have heard." There's a very important interpretive aspect to that that we will be going into. So in verse 21, we read Jesus saying,

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. 31 "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 32 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. 33 "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' 34 But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36 And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil. 38 "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' 39 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. 40 And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. 41 And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. 42 Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. 43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

What is Jesus doing here? Well, he is setting forth what the righteousness of God requires from every man, woman, and child, and he's setting forth the impossibly high standard that is required in order to enter into the kingdom of heaven. And you can see this in a couple of ways; I want to kind of remind you of some broader context to the whole subject matter. If you'll turn back for a moment to Matthew chapter 4 verse 17, as Matthew is introducing the ministry of Jesus, the public ministry of Jesus, he gives this summary statement of the theme of Jesus' preaching found in Matthew chapter 4 verse 17, where he says, "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" Then if you go to Matthew chapter 5 verse 3, you'll see that there is a very close link and connection to that summary theme to the opening statement, the opening salvo, if you will, in the Sermon on the Mount as we read in verse 3, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And you go down to verse 10, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And then if you go to verse 19, let's say, actually let's just go to verse 20 for the sake of time, we read, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." And so there is this theme of repentance and the kingdom of heaven that Jesus is explaining and he is in the Sermon on the Mount, he is explaining what the fruit of true repentance looks like. He is expounding what the new birth produces in those who believe and it is a complete transformation of character of the most thoroughgoing kind.

Notice at the end there at verse 20, he says, "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Now we have already looked at the fact that to the audience there in the first century, that would have been an unthinkable statement for Jesus to make. Utterly unthinkable because to them, the Pharisees and scribes were the pinnacle of what righteousness looked like. When the Pharisees taught, they were automatically believed. They were accorded such authority and deference and respect in that first century Jewish society that for Jesus to say that your righteousness has to exceed theirs, would have been just a colossal collision of conflicting emotions. "How could that possibly be? I don't measure up to them as it is, and you're telling me I've got to exceed them in their righteousness." Well, what Jesus is doing is he is explaining to them and bringing forth to them the fact that the Pharisees, contrary to popular opinion, were not reliable guides about what the kingdom of heaven required and what the righteousness of God requires. And so Jesus here in the Sermon on the Mount, and particularly in this section of Scripture that I just read, he is clarifying what true righteousness is and contrasting it with the prevailing teaching of his day, so that in all six sections, and we'll point these out in just a moment, he draws a contrast. He says, "You have heard such and such, but I say to you. You have heard this, but I say to you." And he is not challenging the teaching of the law of the Old Testament, rather, he is contradicting the prevailing teaching of the Pharisees which was a perversion of the law in several different ways. But ultimately what he is doing, what he is explaining is and expounding on is what we see there in verse 20, if you'll look at that again with me. He says, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

So what he is doing here in this next lengthy section is he is explaining the righteousness that God requires. "The Righteousness God Requires," that's the title of tonight's message and he ties it to the Old Testament. Look at verse 17, and I should read this prior section just to make this connection very clear for you. Jesus says, "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. 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." So if you want to understand what's happening in Matthew chapter 5, you need to see that the overarching point that Jesus is making is twofold. One, there is an enduring, abiding authority of the Old Testament, of the Law and Prophets, that's a summary term to describe what we now know as the Old Testament. There's an abiding authority. Nothing can contradict them. Nothing in them whatsoever can be set aside or annulled or contradicted. It all must be fulfilled. It all must be upheld. It all must be honored and violations must be punished.

And so there's this abiding authority of the Old Testament that he is describing and then, along with that, he is explaining and helping to clarify their understanding of his relationship to the law of God, his relationship to the Old Testament. So that's why he says in verse 17, "Don't think that I've come to abolish it, I'm here to fulfill it." And so the Old Testament has this abiding authority, and Jesus says, "I've come to fulfill it." And it was important for him to say that because what he was teaching and the early things that he had said in the Beatitudes was so contrary and so different and so distinct from what the Pharisees taught, and so immediately it looks like Jesus is contradicting the Old

Testament because he's contradicting the Pharisees and they thought the Pharisees had a monopoly on the meaning of the law of God. And what Jesus is showing them is, "It's not that I'm contradicting the law, I'm contradicting the Pharisees, and I'm contradicting the Pharisees because they are contradicting the law contrary to the prevailing mindset that you all have," speaking to the first century audience. And so, with that in mind, Jesus clarifies for them what the law of God and what God requires so that he says in verse 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. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Okay, so now we've got a little bit of a sense of the momentum of Jesus' teaching and where this is all going in light of what he has said before.

Now, to understand the following section, verses 21 to 48, you must understand that Jesus is expounding upon his statement in verse 20. He is expanding on it. He is illustrating the point. Verse 21 is not new and unconnected to verse 20. It is intimately connected, and everything that follows through verse 48 is connected to that statement there in verse 20 and so Jesus is explaining what the righteousness is that God requires. Somehow, somehow the law and the prophets were setting forth a standard, a standard that could not be violated for what God requires from men and women, boys and girls, if they want to enter into the kingdom of heaven. So, somehow the Old Testament was setting a standard.

Now, I only have two points for tonight. The first point is this, is that the Old Testament standard, the Old Testament requires heart righteousness. The Old Testament requires heart righteousness by which we mean that God requires an inner righteousness from men. He requires a spiritual righteousness. God is not satisfied with mere external behavior. The law of God always – watch this because this is just very, very important – the law of God always had a moral force that went beyond external behavior. The law always applied to the heart of men, not simply the outer man. It had an inner component to it that was always clear from the beginning, even though people are blind and usually willfully blind to this point. I'm going to illustrate that with multiple passages from the Old Testament. Let me just say this, if I can, and I can, because I'm about to do it. It is just so very, very important for you to develop somehow and to find a way over time, even if it takes you two or three years to do it, to read the Bible cover to cover and to be thoroughly exposed to everything that the Bible says, not simply focusing on a favorite Psalm or a favorite gospel or something like that and just occasionally dipping your toe into what the Bible says. If you're going to understand the fullness of biblical revelation, if you're going to understand what God requires and what it is that he expects from you, then you need to know the fullness of Scripture, and by reading Scripture repeatedly over the course of your lifetime, some of these themes become so obvious that you wonder how you ever missed them in the first place. And so I'm saying all of that in the context of the statement that the Old Testament requires heart righteousness. The Old Testament requires heart righteousness and we're emphasizing that point here as kind of a context for what Jesus is saying because the Pharisees utterly ignored that in their teaching as we'll see as we go through this verse by verse in coming weeks. The Pharisees just

focused on externals. Jesus said of the Pharisees that these were men who loved to tithe the most precise amounts of herbs that they raised in their gardens, so to speak, but they neglected the weightier matters of justice and righteousness. The Pharisees focused on details that were attainable to the utter neglect of the other things that the law of God said was more important to begin with.

And now, circling back to what I said, the law always had a moral force beyond external behavior. In the Ten Commandments, that perfect summary of God's moral law, do you know what the 10th commandment is? You should. You know, we think of the Ten Commandments and, you know, I understand that many people can't do well to recite two or three of them. You know, "you shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, and then, oh, look, a squirrel!" to just distract from the course of the discussion. The 10th commandment says this in Exodus chapter 20 verse 17. This is what the law of God requires. It says, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's." Beloved, understand that the moral law of God, the Ten commandments themselves apply to the heart, to the motives, to the desires, to the inner man and what the inner man is like, and the God who created the body created the inner man as well and he rules over the body and he rules over the heart and the law of God applies to your heart, to who you are, to what you think, to what your desires are, what your lusts are, all of those inner components that go into making your personality, God says this is how you must be. It's right there on the surface of the Ten Commandments. And so, God sees our attitudes, he sees our desires, he sees our motives, not simply our behavior, and he is going to hold us accountable for all of those intricate motions of the human heart. And let me just give you a few passages. I'm going to just read a few passages for you and then we'll turn to some places in the Psalms. This is so important that I'm not willing to just gloss over it here but I encourage you to write these references down and to look them up later if you would.

1 Chronicles 28 verse 9. It says, "the LORD searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought." The Lord searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought, 1 Chronicles 28 verse 9. In Proverbs 16 verse 2, we read this, "All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the spirit." The inner man. And then in Jeremiah 17 verse 10, we read this, Yahweh stating himself, "I the LORD search the heart and test the mind." And so Scripture has put us on notice that God is looking at the inner man and it is in that realm of the inner man that God requires perfect righteousness and a failure of righteousness in the inner man is a failure to keep the law of God, even if there is nothing that on a horizontal level, any human being could convict you of wrongdoing because he searches the heart, he searches the mind, he tells us not to covet. And as we saw when we studied the Ten Commandments a few years ago, that inner aspect applies to all of the commandments, and Jesus makes this plain so that when the Ten Commandments say, "You shall not commit adultery," for example, when it's joined together and you view the Ten Commandments as a unit, it's saying not only shall you not commit the external act of physical immorality, in your inner man you shall not even desire it or you have broken the law of God and are subject to judgment as an adulterer. It's really remarkable.

Now continuing on, the Psalms, of course, are filled with matters that address the inner man. Turn to Psalm 19. We're just going to look at three really familiar passages here. Psalm 19, Psalm 19 in its first six verses acknowledged the general revelation of God. In verses 7 through 11, the psalmist praises God for his special revelation in the written word, and so we live under this umbrella of the canopy of the skies that declare the glory of God and then we have the full revelation of God in his word that is perfect and revives the soul and reveals the right precepts of God, and on it goes. And so the psalmist, David, after contemplating the skies and the Scriptures, he turns his eyes inward and shows us what the application of all of this revelation is, how do we personally respond to the revelation of God, and he goes to the inner man. Verse 12, he says, "Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults," the things that are inside me. Verse 13, "Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me!" He says in response to the revelation of God, he says, "How can I even know where I fall short? I'm blind, I'm blind to my own iniquity. I am numb to the ways that I myself fall short," and he says, "my hidden faults, the things inside me, God, equip me, declare me innocent from that, forgive me of my sins in the inner man."

Look at Psalm 51 as we see that the Old Testament requires heart righteousness. If you'll turn over to Psalm 51 with me, here David, of course, is confessing his sin with Bathsheba, confessing the sinfulness of the way that he dispatched her husband Uriah, as we read about in the narrative portion of the Old Testament, and as he is confessing his sin, he states plainly what it is that God requires, what the righteousness is that God requires, and where it is that God is looking. In verse 6 of Psalm 51, he says, "Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart." He says, "God, what you require is a righteousness in my inner man, in my inward being. In the realm of the heart, God, you are looking for sympathies and desires and affirmation of righteousness and godliness in my inner man," so that the inward motions of our heart are subject to the law of God.

Psalm 139, this is the last one that we'll look at here for this point anyway. Psalm 139, in the opening four verses, we read this. Psalm 139, the first four verses. "O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it." And so he says explicitly, "God, you discern my thoughts. You know what my thoughts are." And beloved, a holy God, and God is holy, perfectly holy, separate from everything evil, he cannot tolerate evil in any sense, a holy God then who looks on the inner man obviously requires holiness in the inner man. A holy God knows and judges our secrets. Nothing is hidden from him so that even if we deceive everyone around us, God knows the internal reality of who we really are on the inside.

That's a little bit unsettling, isn't it? Nothing is hidden from him. He judges our secrets. The Old Testament makes that principle plain and if you connect this to the New

Testament, we won't bother turning there, it was precisely on this point that the Apostle Paul was convicted of sin. Paul said, he said that the law revealed to him what God requires in the inner man. He said, "I would not have known about coveting except that the law said, you shall not covet, and as I understood the application of the law, I came to recognize," the Apostle Paul says, "I came to recognize that there was all manner of coveting within me so that it just multiplied in my understanding as I came to understand what God requires in this principle against coveting that is revealed in the law of God." This had a converting, convicting impact on no one less than the Apostle Paul.

And so, we see that the Old Testament requires heart righteousness. Now, going back to Matthew chapter 5 and turning to our second point, we see that in perfect harmony with the Old Testament, Jesus Christ requires heart righteousness. Jesus Christ requires heart righteousness, that's our second point here this evening. Our Lord covers this in great detail in verses 21 to 48. He upholds heart righteousness against the false appearances of the Pharisees. And so we're just going to consider this in an overview fashion here in the rest of our time this evening. Just understand that verses 21 to 48, it is a unit. You are to view these things together and see the transcendent point that Jesus is making rather than focusing immediately on details and controversial statements within it. Jesus has an obvious pattern that I've already pointed out. He refutes false interpretations of the law in order to recover the truth and what Jesus is doing is showing that the traditions of the Pharisee violate the call to heart righteousness. And let's go through this now and again in an overview fashion.

Look at verses 21 and 22 with me. He says, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.'" The Pharisees taught that as long as you had not physically actually slain someone, that you had satisfied what the law of God requires. They didn't go to the inner man. Jesus clarifies what the true import of the law is when he says in verse 22, "But I say to you." Don't miss the fact that Jesus is teaching on his own authority. Jesus presents himself as the one who is entitled of his own authority to interpret and tell us what the law of God means and he says in verse 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." Now look, that's a game changer. That changes everything when you realize that God is not simply concerned about the physical act of murder that the vast majority of population in the world is not guilty of and therefore you could think by the teaching of the Pharisees, "If I haven't done that, then I've never violated the commandment against murder." Jesus says "Not so fast." Understand that because the law requires a heart righteousness, that your anger, God looks at your anger and says that is a violation of the commandment against murder because what leads to murder except for the initial heart sin of anger and hatred. And so Jesus says, look at it then again in verse 22, everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment. Whoever insults his brother, whoever says "you fool" will be liable to the hell of fire.

And just understand, my friends, beloved, understand and let it sink into you the significance of what's being said. I'm assuming, I think it's probably a pretty safe

assumption, that none of us here have ever committed murder, but I also think that it is a pretty safe assumption that all of us have been angry, sinfully angry with others at some point or another. All of us have said harsh words in reaction to others, have said insulting things to others, and if we haven't said it directly to their face, we've said it to ourselves in private in the inner heart of our man. And what Jesus is saying here, what Jesus is saying here is that that anger, that insulting spirit, that critical mind in the bad sense of the word critical, that violates the commandment against murder. We're all murderers as the law of God applies to our heart in the way that God requires heart righteousness.

He goes on a second time in verse 27 in a very familiar text. We won't need to spend much time on it. But Jesus says, "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." That the commandment, the commandment against adultery is violated by sinful desires, sinful lusts, that those inward motions of wanting something forbidden themselves are adulterous in nature and therefore the God who is spirit, who looks on our spirit and sees that spiritual deformity and rebellion, sees the spirit of adultery and judges it according to the commandment that forbids adultery, whether you've ever committed the physical act or not.

I remember a conversation with a fellow seminary student some 30 years ago, with a guy who understood this, I can't remember all of the details, but I don't know if he had gotten straight into explicit materials or whatever it was. But he said something that was really insightful. He said, "The start of my sin was not when I looked at this," I'm kind of summarizing and probably distorting some of the details, but the principle's still the same. He says, "It wasn't when I looked, it wasn't when I made a step in that direction." He said, "The beginning of my sin was when I first wanted to do it in the first place. That was the first motion of it, is when I decided to turn my head to the right in order to look at it." And that's exactly right and so we're not able to excuse ourselves, we're not able to excuse ourselves from conviction for the sinful spirit of adultery simply by saying, "Well, but I stopped before I got there. I never touched her." That doesn't matter. Did you want to touch her? "Did I ever," someone might say. What Jesus is saying is that "did I ever," that's the sinful spirit of adultery because God's law requires a heart righteousness and you are not innocent of the requirements of the commandment against adultery simply because there's never been flesh on flesh; what happened on your heart, even if no one knew about it, because God saw it and your heart was in rebellion against that commandment, that made you guilty of violating the commandment against adultery.

Look at it there in verse 28. You can't read it any other way. Jesus said, "everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart." We don't even need to go any further into this in terms of what people do with their computers, their devices, and you know, who knows what else. We see what Jesus requires. Jesus says not even in the lustful intent, and it's kind of a controversial point, what I'm about to say, and this deserves a full message of its own, that I'm not going to take the time to do any time soon. But this needs to be said in the very wicked age in which we live, because within the church, within the church and trying to find accommodation with the wild embrace of homosexuality and everything else that goes

along with the perversion of the age in which we live, there are prominent voices in the church, including from John Piper's ministry years ago, saying that it's okay to be a homosexual as long as you're celibate. It's okay if you have these same-sex desires just as long as you don't act on them. Beloved, don't drink that. That's poison. That is a direct contradiction of what Jesus is teaching here. Jesus says the illicit desire itself is sinful. And you can no more, listen, this isn't difficult, you can't do the forbidden thing and Scripture says you cannot desire the forbidden thing. The desire itself is an evidence of the sinfulness of your heart and so we see this in what Jesus says, you look at a woman with lustful intent, you have already committed adultery with her in your heart. And so, beloved, this is a really important point because we cannot separate the inner man from the outward behavior and be faithful to what Scripture says that God looks on the heart. God judges the heart. He looks on things in a way that is different from what men do.

And so the Pharisees on their oral tradition restricted and narrowed the commandments to something that was attainable. Jesus wipes away the accumulated distortions of that and says, "Let me clarify this for you. You've heard what they've said. They limit it, narrow it to something that everyone can attain. What I'm telling you is, is that the law of God is something different." When he says, "I say to you," he is clarifying what the written word of God really meant and so he's opposing the Pharisees, not changing anything about the law.

Now follow the pattern as Jesus continues, the pattern of, "You've heard it said, but I say to you," the contrast there. You see it in verse 31 and 32. "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 on it goes. "It was said, you've heard that it was said, but I say to you. This is what your teachers have said to you, this is what the truth is. They say the law of God means this, they're wrong, I'm telling you what the real intent and force of the law is." That's what Jesus is doing here.

Verses 33 and 34. "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King." The Pharisees said that you could make lesser oaths and not have to keep them as long as you didn't swear by the gold of the temple or whatever. Jesus says no. He says every word that comes out of your mouth is something that you're accountable for. Every promise that you make is something that you'll be held accountable for and that you should keep. You can't cross your fingers and say none of it matters because I crossed my fingers. Jesus says, whether you cross your fingers or not, your words must be kept, your words must be true.

Verse 38, "You have 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." And on it goes. Jesus here, what the Pharisees did was they turned a restriction into an opportunity to inflict revenge. So the law says an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and that was done in a desire to make sure that things didn't escalate and that there was a restriction on the way that justice would be

implemented and that the justice would fit the crime. So it was a restraint against overreaction. What the Pharisees did, and we'll look at this when we eventually get to the passage, what the Pharisees said was, the Bible says an eye for an eye, and that means you hit me, I get to hit you back, and they turned a restriction into a right to retaliate and to act on their feelings of vengeance. And Jesus says that's not what the law means at all. The whole, you know, you can't take what's meant for civic justice and turn that into an authorization for your personal vendetta. That's not the point. On a personal level, Jesus says you need to avoid the sin of retaliation and grudges and striking back.

Then in verses 43 and 44, we read this. Jesus said, "You have 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." Notice what he does here in this particular section. He says you think about what God is like and understand that that's what you're to be like. God has his enemies throughout all of the earth, and what does he do in his providential operation of the world environment around us? Is it only good people, is it only lovers of God that get the benefit of the sun and the rain? No, God generously pours out these blessings on those who love him and those who hate him alike. There is this broad generosity in God even toward his enemies, Jesus says, and the crushing, the powerful, the convicting thing that he says is you look at what God is like in this realm and understand that that's what you're to be like as well. You have enemies, so does God. What does God do with his enemies? He shows goodness and kindness to them. What are you to do with your enemies? You're to show goodness and kindness to them and purge out that sense and that desire for retaliation and revenge.

And he clenches the point, lest you think that I'm overinterpreting it, in verse 48, his conclusion of all six of these illustrations is, "You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." As God is perfect in his spirit, that's what God requires from you. A perfect righteousness in your inner man, in your heart, that's what you are to be like. This had nothing to do with anything the Pharisees ever said. They were proud, hypocritical, boastful men. You can read what Jesus thinks about the Pharisees in Matthew 23, and eight times there he says, "Woe to you Pharisees, woe, woe, woe to you Pharisees." He wasn't buying what the religious authorities were selling and so he makes this direct assault on the prevailing religious institutions of his day as he explains the true force of the law of God and what it means for the heart of men everywhere. And the conclusion of it all is this: God requires spiritual perfection in the inner man, inside and out, that's the standard of God. And as our elder chairman said when he opened our study here tonight, he said God can't compromise that. He doesn't violate that. He doesn't lower the standard because we don't meet it. That is the standard and that is what God requires. And if we were together going to kind of meditate on this here this evening, we would, if we understood it rightly, come to the posture of the Apostle Paul where he says this reveals to me all kinds of sin in my heart that I didn't know was there. This shows me that there is a principle of wickedness, of evil, of sin within me that I did not see.

And I want to read a quote here in a moment, but, beloved, one of the things that happens, and Romans 7 talks about this, here's what happens. When the law of God

properly interpreted comes with power to your heart, it has an effect of opening your eyes to realities about your sin that you didn't know were there beforehand. You see something of the deceitfulness of sin, the depth of sin, the power of sin that is within you and that is a disconcerting thing to happen, and sometimes what happens is that people react against that, they react against the word of God, they react against the teacher of the word of God, they lash back at that which exposes the truth of who they are, and all I can encourage those of you that are here tonight is to not let that become the prevailing way that you respond to what Jesus himself has said, what the law of God, what the word of God says. We should not say, "Well, that can't be what it means because I don't meet that. And so that can't be what it means." Well, why does the fact that you don't meet it mean that that can't mean what it says? It is what it says. It is what it means. Jesus made this really clear and so we shouldn't respond by denying the word of God. We shouldn't respond in anger to what Scripture says and the way the Spirit of God searches us out, but rather to humble ourselves within our own hearts before God, even before each other, and say, "I'm not the person I thought I was. I had a pretty high opinion of myself. I thought I was a pretty good person. But now the word of God shows me a different reality that I can't deny." Paul said, "I see all manner of coveting in myself. I saw all manner of coveting in myself when the Spirit of God illumined my mind and opened my mind to it. I saw all manner of coveting." Well, in like manner, every one of us somewhere on the spectrum of inner things says, "You know what? It's true, I'm an angry person. It's true, I'm filled with lust even though I've never touched another person illicitly. It's true, I bear grudges and I strike out against people when they cross me. It's true that I don't keep my word. I make promises that I have no intention of keeping and I've broken so many promises to so many people I couldn't even begin to count them." Things like that.

And, you know, we can get mad at God, say, "I don't like that standard." That doesn't change anything. It is the standard perfection inside and out, and so it doesn't do us any good to get mad about it. It doesn't do any good to, you know, strike back at those who call these things to your attention if it's consistent with the word of God. It doesn't do any good to retreat into the Pharisees, "Yeah, but I'm okay on the outside." But God looks at the inside so why do you defend yourself with something that's not even relevant to the discussion? You see, beloved, and in one sense I get why people react against teaching like this. It's so uncomfortable. It's so pressing. It's so searching. It shows us that we're not who we say we are. We're not who we think we are. We're something much less. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says this and helps us see how it is that we're to think rightly about these things, and let me just say one other thing in support of what Nathaniel said. You know, you shouldn't make your first response to run and try to find a biblical counselor to escape the force of the conviction that the Spirit of God brings on your heart. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says this and helps us all apply it rightly to our hearts. He says, "As you examine yourself before you go to bed, you do not just ask yourself if you have committed murder or adultery, and if you have not, thank God that all is well. No. You ask yourself rather questions like these. Has God been supreme in my life today? Do I know him better? Has there been anything in me that has been unlike Christ, thoughts, imaginations, desires, impulses? In other words, you examine yourself in the light of a living person. and not merely in terms of a mechanical code of rules and regulations." See, it's not, "I haven't done these things and therefore I'm okay," and this gets to be

autobiographical in my own life. Beloved, I can't preach on these things, every time I preach on these things, I remember the way that I was before the Lord saved me and how the fact that I was not guilty of certain sins established in my unconverted mind the fact that I was righteous and I was better than others. But I had nothing to do with the love of Christ. I had nothing to do with the love for the word of God. I was full of anger and all kinds of sin on the inside, even if others didn't see it. I was a sinner of the most vile sort and then the law of God came alive to me, convicted me, and slew me, as it were, and divested me of any claim to a righteousness of my own, because the inward man was so corrupt and other things combined together left me with no claim of righteousness of my own before Holy God. That's where all of this is designed to lead us. That is the kind of righteousness that God requires and the sinfulness of the inner man that God condemns.

Now here's the thing, my friends, and I couldn't be more on your side and more sympathetic in the things that I'm saying to you here this evening. My friends, you and I, we cannot possibly meet this standard. We have broken the standard before we walked into this room, and we do not in ourselves have the power to meet this standard at all. This convicts every one of us. I know that you are guilty of breaking the law of God without knowing you by name because Scripture says this is true of all of us. I know things about you because I read the word of God, and if you read the word of God, you know things about me, even if you don't know them in detail. We are all convicted and guilty before this teaching of the word of God and teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now my friends, that tells us something about the gospel. It tells us something about the glory of the gospel. The glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ is not that it tells us how good we are and congratulates us for us and that God can't wait to bring us into heaven to be alongside him in his holiness. That's not the glory of the gospel. The glory of the gospel is not the goodness of man. The glory of the gospel includes the utter sinfulness of every man, woman, and child who has ever lived since Adam. No, the glory of the gospel is that despite our sin, Jesus Christ came into this world, lived a righteous life, offered his own life, his own blood as a sacrifice to God so that guilty sinners like you and me can be forgiven, we can be washed, we can be cleansed, we can be renewed, we can be born again through the work of the Spirit of God, through the great power of the word of God, and the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That's the glory of the gospel, that God has done something on behalf of men and women who did not deserve it.

Christ does not save the self-righteous. He said it's not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. He says in Luke 5:31 and 32, he says, "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." And see, the work of the Spirit of God, the blessing of God, and if we can put it in human terms, the way that you respond to these things with great wisdom, is not to resist them but to accept them, to accept even if it's by faith, "God, these things that you say about me are true and I accept your judgment on me and I appeal to you for mercy that I don't deserve rather than protesting a righteousness that in fact I do not have." Beloved, Jesus Christ does not save the self-righteous. He does not save anyone who protests their own innocence before the throne of God. What he does is he saves gladly, freely, abundantly, he saves repentant sinners.

As we close, let's look at Luke 18 for a moment. Luke 18, just to see this contrast and how fitting it is, it's a contrast that involves a Pharisee and you see the repulsive, suffocating, self-righteous spirit that marked the Pharisees of the day. Luke 18 verse 9, Jesus "told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'" Self-righteous. Seeing nothing of the way the law of God applies to his inner man, appealing to everything about his external behavior, and going before a holy God and saying, "God, I am holy like you. Look at who I am." Verse 13. This is the guy that you want to identify with. This is the one, this is the example to follow. "But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'" Look at that prayer, "God, be merciful to me. God, I do not claim any righteousness in your presence. I ask you to act toward me in accordance with your character, not in accordance with mine. You are full of mercy and I am full of sin and so I ask you to show mercy to me that I don't deserve. I do not claim any righteousness by which you would be obligated to me." Jesus looks at that tax collector in the parable and he says, "I tell you, this man," this being the one he had most recently spoken about, "this man went down to his house justified," declared righteous by God, not trusting in his own works, not trusting in anything that he had done or not done, but rather trusting in the mercy of God according to the revelation of God, confessing his sins freely, that man goes away declared righteous "rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Beloved, you look at the church broadly speaking, maybe even internally, and I wouldn't argue with someone who said, "You know, I think maybe I see more Pharisees in the church than tax collectors. I see more people that seem satisfied, self-satisfied, self-righteous," and you say, "It shows up by their proud, bitter, critical spirits toward all things spiritual." I wouldn't argue with somebody who said something like that. Jesus himself said, "The gate is small, the way is narrow." People are so in love with themselves, so convinced of their own righteousness and goodness that the truth of the gospel, the truth of the righteousness that God requires is not even appealing to them. I have higher hopes for those of you that are here but I do invite you, watching over the live stream, watching over the video, hearing this on subsequent audio files, those of you in the room, my dear, dear friends, in light of the surpassing consequences of what we consider here, Jesus made it plain this is a contrast between the kingdom of heaven and the fires of hell. This is what Jesus said. I'm not making this up. I wouldn't make this up. My dear friends, in light of it, examine your own heart. Ask the Spirit of God to reveal any lingering self-righteousness that you could forsake it and repent of it and rely on the righteousness of Christ alone, the mercy of God alone. Be honest about your many sins. And if we could go even further, having done that, choose your friends wisely. Be careful who you walk with because Jesus is teaching for keeps. He means what he says. This is what God really requires, and this really is the consequence. And so, as we leave tonight, let's, with all of our heart, with all of our being, with all of our effort, identify ourselves with that humble tax collector. "God, I claim nothing. I simply ask you for mercy on me,

the sinner. Deliver me from the spirit of the Pharisee in my heart and in relationships, and let me take my portion with those who humble themselves at the feet of the cross."

Let's pray together.

Father, it is so difficult. to see ourselves rightly, to look past our self-bias, to look past our blind spots, and to see ourselves as you really do. Father, I suppose if we saw it truly and comprehensively, it would be utterly crushing. We just ask for the help of your Spirit that we would rightly assess these things, that you would grant understanding to our minds and the humble spirit necessary to apply these things to ourselves, not reacting against the word of God, but rather submitting to it, embracing it, and turning afresh to the Lord Jesus Christ who is able by his blood to cleanse us from all sin. We seek the righteousness that you require. We ask you to supply what we lack. We ask you to cleanse us in the many ways that we have failed, refresh and renew us that we might walk in the Spirit and thus prove ourselves to be among those who belong truly to the kingdom of God. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

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