

## The Letter of the Law, the Spirit of the Law

The Sermon on the Mount is a lengthy teaching that Jesus gave to His disciples. He began with the Beatitudes, which describe the character of the Christian. Those traits show the Christian to be the best kind of person, but the world inevitably responds to us with persecution, hatred, reviling, and false accusations. In spite of this, Christians are the salt of the earth, providing preservation against the judgment of God until He is pleased to bring judgment. And we are the light of the world, positive demonstrations of what true righteousness is life.

In Matthew 5:20 Jesus makes an astounding statement; those hearing Him would have been shocked. He says,

**Matthew 5:20 (ESV) — 20** For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

These words are the foundation for the entire Sermon on the Mount. They tell us why the Beatitudes are so important. They tell us why the world hates us. And they set the stage for what is to come. In the remainder of Matthew 5, Jesus illustrates what it means to have righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees.

**TRANSITION:** This morning I will give you an overview of Matthew 5:20-48, and then in the weeks to come we'll take each paragraph one at a time.

## FOUNDATION

So again, Matthew 5:20 provides the foundation for the Sermon on the Mount. It is the will of God, and the requirement of God, that His people be truly righteous.

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven. ([Matthew 5:20](#)).

I am socially awkward, and I know it. I don't understand a lot of social clues. I'm not good at reading facial expressions or body language. I don't pick up on hints and nuances. I appreciate it when people are clear about their expectations. If Linda wants me grill burgers for dinner, she needs to say, "Would you grill burgers for dinner?" and not "Wouldn't it be great to have burgers for dinner?"

So I am very grateful that Jesus was so clear and unmistakable here.

**FOR I TELL YOU** These are Jesus' own words, not a summary, spoken to His disciples, which means they are spoken to us as well.

**UNLESS YOUR RIGHTEOUSNESS EXCEEDS THAT OF THE SCRIBES AND THE PHARISEES** The scribes and Pharisees gave the most attention to personal righteousness. They were professionals regarding righteousness. It was the primary focus of their lives. Everyone knew it. So Jesus requires that the righteousness of His disciples exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees. We know what "exceed" means; to go beyond. Jesus requires a greater righteousness than that of the most righteous people of His time.

By the way, this is the shocking part. There was no way to have greater righteousness than the scribes and the Pharisees. They defined righteousness as successfully observing the Law of God, as interpreted by their tradition, in every detail; it was the result of your own personal effort. No one put in more effort than the scribes and Pharisees, and so no one could exceed their righteousness.

Of course, we know that Jesus isn't saying that we must do what they did, only better. He's going to show us in the verses that follow that their method of gaining righteousness was wrong from the very start, and so it was doomed to fail.

So, **UNLESS YOUR RIGHTEOUSNESS EXCEEDS THAT OF THE SCRIBES AND THE PHARISEES, YOU WILL NEVER ENTER THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.** We know what 'never' means. Never doesn't mean later. Never doesn't mean maybe. Never

means never, not under any circumstances. Later is like a closed door; maybe is like a locked door; never is no door at all. There are two Greek words that mean “no” or “not”. When they are put together, as they are here, they meant absolutely never, or under no circumstances whatsoever. So, never means never, period.

At the end of Matthew 5 Jesus states this same principle in different words:

**Matthew 5:48 (ESV) — 48 You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**

Matthew 5:20 puts it in a negative sense: UNLESS your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will NEVER enter the Kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5:48 puts it in positive terms: You therefore MUST be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect.

So it boils down to this: unless we are more righteous than the most righteous people we can imagine, and as perfect as God is perfect, we will never enter the Kingdom of heaven. Some might say that they disagree with my interpretation. But I’m not interpreting, I’m just reading the text.

**TRANSITION:** Now, if our righteousness is going to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, and if we are to be perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect, we need to first understand where the scribes and Pharisees went wrong. That’s what Jesus shows us in the rest of the chapter. And then we need to understand how true righteousness can be obtained; that is found as the Gospel unfolds. The problem of the scribes and Pharisees is the difference between the letter of the Law and the spirit of the Law.

## THE LETTER OF THE LAW

The scribes and the Pharisees believed that righteousness would be found through strict adherence to the letter of the Law; that is, the surface meaning. Of course, they

interpreted the Law through a wrong understanding of the Law's purpose, and arrived at their traditions, which they made superior to the Law of God.

There are six passages in the remainder of Matthew 5, and Jesus begins each by stating the tradition of the scribes and Pharisees.

Matthew 5:21 (ESV) — 21 “**You have heard that it was said** to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’

Matthew 5:27 (ESV) — 27 “**You have heard that it was said**, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’

Matthew 5:31 (ESV) — 31 “**It was also said**, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’

Matthew 5:33 (ESV) — 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.’

Matthew 5:38 (ESV) — 38 “**You have heard that it was said**, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’

Matthew 5:43 (ESV) — 43 “**You have heard that it was said**, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’

If the scribes and Pharisees were truly focused on the Scripture, Jesus would have said, “You have heard that it was written.” Instead, He focuses on the oral traditions of the scribes and Pharisees.

Do not murder, and you're in great shape. Don't commit adultery, and you can congratulate yourself. Divorce as you like; just give your wife a certificate of divorce, and all is well. Shore up your untrustworthy character by swearing oaths in the name of God or the gold of the temple. Get revenge on those who hurt you. Hate those who hate you.

These are the rules, the scribes and Pharisees said. Keep the rules, and you will please God.

You know, the people around us don't generally think much about keeping the letter of the Law. When was the last time someone said to you, "Hey, you didn't murder anyone today - good job!" But the scribes and Pharisees decided that if you didn't commit these actions, you were fine in God's sight.

TRANSITION: The letter of the Law prohibits some actions and commands other actions. But the spirit of the Law is something very different.

## THE SPIRIT OF THE LAW

The spirit of the Law is God's purpose in giving the Law. The letter of the Law always seeks to minimize the actual commandment, and make it pure action. The spirit of the Law maximizes the commandment, and examines the deepest parts of the heart. The letter of the Law is only concerned with the fruit, the action that we carry out. The spirit of the Law deals with the root of sin in our hearts.

So the letter of the Law prohibits murder, but murder doesn't exist on its own. It requires a root. The spirit of the Law addresses the root of murder: sinful anger, contempt, reviling others. Jesus says that it's the root that condemns us, not just the fruit.

And the letter of the Law prohibits adultery, but adultery doesn't happen in a vacuum. The spirit of the Law reveals the root of sinful desires within our heart. It is that root that condemns us, not merely the fruit.

The letter of the Law says divorce your wife if you like; just give her a certificate of divorce. But the spirit of the Law shows that the desire to destroy the one-flesh relationship of marriage originates with a deep, poisonous root within the heart. That root is fed by sins like unforgiveness, bitterness, criticism, and illicit lust. It is that root that condemns, not only the fruit.

And the letter of the Law demands that you fulfill oaths, but the need for oaths doesn't arise all by itself. The spirit of the Law tells us that oaths begin with a root of untrustworthy character, so that someone needs to say "As God is my witness." It is that root that condemns us, not simply the fruit.

The letter of the Law calls for hurting those who hurt you. The spirit of the Law tells us that the root of retaliation, the belief that we can Judge as rightly and truly as God, begins deep in the heart. It is that root, and not only the fruit, that condemns us.

And the letter of the Law loves those who love us, and hates those who hate us. But the spirit of the Law reveals a root which is opposed to the nature of God. It is that root, and not merely the fruit, that condemns us.

## **THE LETTER EASY, THE SPIRIT IS HARD**

Some might say that the letter of the Law was hard to live by. It certainly took a vast amount of time and energy, but at the same time, it really only amounted to checking off predefined behaviors. It was complicated and detailed, true, but was also doable for those who really put their mind to it. When Peter speaks in Acts 15 of the yoke that no one could bear, it wasn't the yoke of the letter of the Law, but of the spirit.

There are about 328 million people in the United States, and only about 16,000 commit murder each year, but all of those 328 million over the age of two feel sinful anger, contempt, and revile others. It isn't hard to avoid adultery, but it's impossible to avoid wrongful desires for our entire lifetimes. It's easy to love those who love you.

The letter of the Law is easy. The spirit of the Law is hard. You can keep the letter of the Law without much difficulty. But let's be honest; none of us can keep the spirit of the Law. None of us can achieve a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees. None of us is perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect.

## Bringing it Home

Over the next few weeks we are going to look at these six passages. We'll see why the letter of the Law cannot produce true righteousness. And then we'll consider the spirit of the Law, and how it defines true righteousness.

But this is the most important thing to know and remember. Jesus Christ has fulfilled the Law in every respect. Jesus is the Man who was never murderous in act or heart. Jesus was never lustful in act or heart. Jesus never used the Law to benefit Himself in action or in attitude. Jesus never made a promise He failed to keep or didn't want to keep. Jesus never retaliated against those who harmed Him, in either thought or deed. Jesus is the very definition of loving one's enemies and praying for those who persecute you. Jesus' righteousness infinitely exceeded that of the scribes and the Pharisees. Jesus is as perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect.

Justification means having Jesus' righteousness credited to your account by the grace of God, through faith in Jesus and His finished work. When Jesus fulfilled the Law, He did so for all of the elect. This means that we are not under the authority of the Law as far as righteousness is concerned. Romans 3:20-22 makes this abundantly clear:

Romans 3:20–22 (ESV) — 20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. 21 But now **the righteousness of God** has been manifested **apart from the law**, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— 22 **the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.**

However, the spirit of the Law continues to serve as a guideline and standard for our lives. Those who are true Christians – who are born again, adopted into God's household, made new creations by the Holy Spirit, are filled with the Spirit – do not merely fulfill the letter of the Law, but increasingly fulfill the spirit of the Law. Living this

way is not how we GET saved; it is the evidence that we HAVE BEEN saved. Those who are in Christ are enabled by the Spirit of God to increasingly live according to the spirit of the Law, which is the fullness of the righteousness of Christ.

I hope that you consider yourself a Christian. If you do, does your life reveal a growing Christ-likeness as you increasingly fulfill the spirit of the Law of God? Are you growing in holiness and sanctification? If you are, even if that growth seems slow and painful, then give God thanks! That increasing Christ-likeness is a gracious confirmation of your life in Christ.

But if your life doesn't reveal growth in holiness in the spirit of the Law, if you focus your attention on the letter of the Law, and pride yourself that you keep the letter of the Law, even while you know that your heart wants to kill, or commit adultery, or revenge yourself, then please think carefully about what I've shown you today. It could be, in spite of your self-confidence, that you've not been reborn and made God's child and filled with His Spirit. The scribes and Pharisees were in great shape as far as their own standards were concerned, but their standards were not God's. Praise God, the apostle Paul was a Pharisee who had devoted his life to living according to the letter of the Law, but the Lord called him in grace and mercy, and granted him faith, and caused him to be reborn, and he became a very different man. The God who saved Paul can save you, too. Will you humble yourself before Him and call upon His name? I pray that He brings you into His Kingdom.

Let's pray.

