

Hollow On The Inside

Matthew 5:13-26

We started our winter sermon and small group series last week on the Sermon on the Mount and looked at the introduction to that sermon, which is known as the beatitudes. Jesus made several statements where he declared what people are like who would be blessed in the kingdom of heaven and I think it would have been disruptive for most of the people listening because the people he was describing were a lot different than their religious leaders and influencers. We saw that sometimes the influencers in our lives aren't actually leading us to the kind of life Jesus has called us to and we need to get back to his teachings in order to see that. And that's what we're doing in this sermon series. We're looking at what Jesus has to say and discovering the hidden life of joy in his teachings.

As we get started today I want to tell you about a tree in our back yard. When we bought our home in 2003, there was a huge weeping willow tree in the back yard. It was full and beautiful when we first moved in, but over the years it started looking pretty rough. Eventually it really started to lean, so we decided to cut it down. Kent came over with his chainsaw and within just a few minutes it was on the ground – way easier to drop than we expected. We were surprised to find out that even though it looked alive on the outside it was completely hollow on the inside – a huge trunk with only a few inches of solid wood all the way around.

It's really easy to live like that in the Christian life. It's easy to live a life that looks Christian on the outside but is hollow on the inside. I think it's one of the most common pitfalls we fall into. Instead of living out our calling and purpose like Jesus intended, we just go through some religious motions and don't really do anything for his kingdom. We live our lives pretty much like everybody else, wearing a Christian shell without making any difference for Christ. This morning we're going to begin to look at a passage that will help us see if that's what's happening and what it looks like to turn things around.

We are going to start to get into the main body of the Sermon on the Mount today where Jesus teaches the people what true righteousness looks like. And to do that, he first reminds them of what their calling and purpose is.

Read Matthew 5:13-16.

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

After getting their attention in the beatitudes, Jesus reminded them of the unique calling and purpose they received from God. They were to be salt and light in the world. God had chosen them, revealed himself to them, and entered into a covenant with them so that they would make an influence in the world like salt, and reveal him to the world like light by the way they lived their lives. This was God’s purpose for them going all the way back to Moses, the Exodus, and Mt. Sinai. And it continues to be his purpose for us today.

But Jesus also pointed out that if God’s people aren’t fulfilling their purpose, but just blending in and becoming like everyone else, they are of no benefit to the kingdom of heaven on earth. Therefore they must let their light shine and live in such a way that they have an influence for the glory of God in the world.

For the most part, the people Jesus was speaking to had lost sight of their purpose. They weren’t fulfilling their calling. The influence and result of the teaching and religion of the scribes and Pharisees had caused them to lose their saltiness and hide their light. They looked religious on the outside but were hollow on the inside. Jesus had seen it for many years and now he had come to reawaken his people from their spiritual slumber.

As he began his ministry, he knew his teachings sounded a lot different than the teachings they were used to and that he would be accused of casting aside the Scriptures – the Law and the Prophets – and replacing them with a new code of conduct. So as he continued in the Sermon on the Mount, he addressed that and exposed what the real problem was.

Read Matthew 5:17-20.

“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. ¹⁸For 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. ¹⁹Therefore 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. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

So he clearly affirms his devotion to the Scriptures and their value and importance. He had not come to cast them aside; he had come to fulfill them. All the commands were vitally important and must be obeyed. The reason his teaching sounded different and new was because the teaching and interpretation of Scriptures they had heard and seen in the scribes and Pharisees was wrong. The way they were living their lives and leading the people was wrong. And Jesus said in verse 20: *“unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

They had missed the mark. They were not fulfilling their calling and purpose or leading people in the way they should go. Their interpretation and application of Scripture was not as God intended, and if the people Jesus was speaking to wanted to enter the kingdom of heaven, they must not be like them.

So Jesus doesn't tippy-toe around the problem. He exposes it and I'm sure it led to a lot of questions – if the scribes and Pharisees were wrong when it came to righteousness, then what does true righteousness look like? That's the key question that leads into Jesus' teaching in the rest of this chapter because now he's going to show them what true righteousness looks like and how they were to understand and apply the Scriptures to their lives. It wouldn't be like the scribes and Pharisees who did religious things on the outside but were hollow inside and we'll see that as we look at the examples Jesus gives. We'll look at the first example today and cover the rest in a couple weeks.

Read Matthew 5:21-26.

“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.

So Jesus brings one of the Ten Commandments before them: You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment – which was a reference to the death penalty. What does true righteousness look like when it comes to this command?

He brings up a common situation that all of them would face – a serious conflict with someone that is affecting both of you. You have feelings of anger, bitterness, and even hatred toward them for what they’ve done, and they have similar feelings toward you. The law forbids you to murder them and Jesus implies that the scribes and Pharisees would have focused on obeying that law and not committing the act of murder itself – outward obedience. And they would have assumed that by not committing murder they were obeying the command and had a righteous standing before God.

But that left the door open to many other common sinful responses that Jesus brings up next, like anger, abuse, and insults. These were the things that Jesus knew were practiced by the people and religious leaders alike. And yet they considered themselves righteous before God because they didn’t commit murder. So their idea of righteousness meant outward adherence to the commands while their inner attitudes, thoughts, speech and other behaviors didn’t matter.

Jesus strongly confronted that way of thinking, saying that if you harbor anger, bitterness, rage, and hatred you will be subject to condemnation – just like

murder. All of those are sins against God and if you live that way you are no different than anyone else. You are not the salt and light that God called you to be and that kind of righteousness is worthless.

Then what does true righteousness look like? Jesus gives an example. If you go to the temple to offer your sacrifice for sin and while doing that are reminded of the conflict you have with your brother, you need to first go and make things right with him. Why? I think what Jesus is getting at is that God is convicting you: “How can I go to the altar to ask God to forgive the wrongs I’ve done against him if I’m not willing to do the same for my brother?”

So Jesus says, “When that conviction comes, stop what you’re doing. First be reconciled to your brother and then come back to offer your sacrifice.” That’s what true righteousness looks like. It isn’t just outward adherence to the law; it’s responding to the conviction of the Spirit. It’s inward obedience and submission to God. In this example it includes things like humility, repentance, forgiveness, showing mercy, and seeking reconciliation. If you refuse to do those things and think you’re fine because you didn’t commit murder, your righteousness is worthless. God doesn’t want your empty sacrifice; he wants your full devotion.

He follows that with a warning by using the analogy of an accuser taking them to court. The conviction they feel about the conflict they’re in is like an accuser taking them to court. They need to listen to that conviction and settle accounts with their accuser by going to their brother to seek reconciliation. They need to do that before they get to court to appear before the judge, which represents going to the temple to appear before God. If they ignore that conviction and go to court to stand before God, they will be found guilty. Their sacrifice will be worthless, their sin will be on their shoulders, and they will be put in prison, which represents God’s judgment. However, if they listen to that inner prompting of the Spirit, humble themselves before the Lord and go to their brother for reconciliation, their sacrifice will atone for their sins and they will be forgiven.

Jesus was showing them that true righteousness isn’t just going through the outward signs of religion. If you look good outwardly but are hollow on the

inside you will be condemned. Your righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees or you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Don't be fooled into believing that if you do some Christian things on the outside that's all that matters. That kind of Christianity is completely worthless and will be exposed when we stand before God. True Christianity and true righteousness is the kind that has an influence on every part of your life because it comes from a heart and mind that have been transformed and made new by the power of God. You won't be perfect because we still live in a fallen world with these bodies of flesh, but you won't be hollow. You will see things like conviction of sin, remorse, repentance, and the Fruit of the Spirit.

Christ is calling us to live those kinds of lives – to cooperate with the work he's doing inside us and walk in step with the Spirit. That's how we fulfill God's calling and purpose to be salt and light here on earth and have a righteousness that surpasses the scribes and Pharisees.

Perhaps you're here this morning and you realize that your whole life has been like a hollow tree trunk and you want to come clean before God and start over. Christ has done everything on the cross to pay the penalty for your sins so that you can be forgiven – trust in him and invite him to take over your life. He will transform you from the inside out and give you the Holy Spirit to live in you and make you into a new person.