

A Life That is Pleasing to God

Matthew 5:27-37

This morning we are continuing our sermon series on the Sermon on the Mount and continuing to study a passage that we started to look at two weeks ago. It's a passage where Jesus was reminding the people of their calling and purpose in life – they were to be salt and light to the world around them, influencing people for the kingdom of heaven and revealing who God is by the way they lived their lives. They shouldn't blend in and be just like everyone else, they should be different.

And for the most part, I think they thought they were. They were the Jews; they had the Law and the Prophets; they had the temple and sacrifices; they had the Passover, Sabbaths and Feasts. They were very unique. And by following their laws and rituals and celebrations they thought they were fulfilling their calling and purpose and living lives that were pleasing to God.

But then Jesus started preaching and pointed out some things that would have been very eye opening. The kind of people who were blessed by God and would belong to his kingdom sounded different than what they were seeing in their religious leaders and probably in their own lives. And then Jesus said this: "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will surely not enter the kingdom of heaven." Very surprising. The scribes and Pharisees were their spiritual leaders. They were the ones who were teaching them and had been leading the way in their religion. How could it be that they wouldn't enter the kingdom of heaven?

Jesus went on to give several examples to show how the religion of the scribes and Pharisees was lacking. Yes, they were keeping the law and doing the right things on the outside, but they weren't following the Lord and honoring God on the inside. In fact, they were full of sin. Their righteousness was an empty shell and if the people Jesus was speaking to were like them, they would never enter the kingdom of heaven. In order to live a life that is pleasing to God, their righteousness must go beyond the surface and influence every area of their lives.

The first example he gave was about a conflict you have with someone else and there's been anger, offense, and division. The righteousness of the Pharisees focused on obeying the law that says, "You shall not murder," but didn't deal with anger, bitterness, and hatred inside. They obeyed the law on the outside but were full of sin within. Jesus told the people that true righteousness hears God's conviction and listens. They realize their sinful thoughts and attitudes and go to seek reconciliation with the person in conflict. They practice humility, forgiveness, and seek to work through their differences with the other person.

That's where we left off two weeks ago and we're going to pick things up from there and look at the next three examples this morning – three areas of life that we can relate to and test ourselves to see if we're living more like the scribes and Pharisees, or in a way that is actually pleasing to God.

Read Matthew 5:27-30.

"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. ²⁹If 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. ³⁰And 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.

This is such an important example for us today because the issue of lust is so prevalent in our world. If you're a true Christian, what should your response to lust look like? In the false teaching of Jesus's day, it was all about the command "you shall not commit adultery." They had things like sensual clothing, dancing, and prostitution, and that all resulted in sexual temptation, and the measure of righteousness was to not commit the act of adultery. But lustful looking, thinking, and other behaviors were not addressed.

But you can see that those behaviors were a huge problem according to Jesus. He considered them the same as committing adultery and equally as condemning. So rather than tolerating and harboring them, Jesus told them to treat those behaviors like a poisonous snake bite. He made deliberate

overstatements about plucking out your eye or cutting off your hand to emphasize how dangerous it was to ignore those sinful behaviors.

Does your approach to Christianity allow you to look at pornography or lust after people at the beach and act like it isn't a big deal? If so, you need to realize that whatever you're believing is a lie. Because Jesus says that lust is spiritual poison that needs to be fought against.

Now, some of you may be really discouraged because the battle has been so difficult and you just can't seem to stop looking. We live in a very sexualized world and it's really difficult to fight against lust. You need to know that Jesus isn't condemning you for struggling by what he says in these verses. If you are in the fight and seeking to eradicate lust from your life, that's way different than the person who brushes it off and lets it remain. That shows that you're actually different inside. Don't give up the fight. Do whatever it takes to keep moving in the right direction. Get filters on your phone. Seek help through accountability or counseling. Set up rules for phone use in your home. Be that salt and light to the world around you.

The third example has to do with divorce.

Read Matthew 5:31-32.

"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.

Jesus dives right into some personal stuff in these examples. But I'm glad he does so that we don't believe the lies that permeate our culture. Divorce and remarriage was another issue in Jesus's day that revealed the shallow righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. It might surprise you, but divorce and remarriage were common in Israel in Jesus's day. If you look at the law of Moses, there are only a couple commands that prohibit divorce in specific situations, but there isn't a universal command. So, divorce was allowed and practiced in that culture for many different reasons.

So one of the things they did to protect women who were divorced from their husbands was a regulation that a man who divorced his wife had to give her a certificate of divorce, because in that way she was free to remarry another man. In that culture remarriage was almost always necessary so that woman would have protection and financial provision. So divorce and remarriage were common and the scribes and Pharisees taught that as long as you gave your wife a certificate of divorce you could divorce her for any reason and still be righteous.

Jesus did not agree at all and made the shocking statement that any man who divorced his wife, even if he gave her a certificate of divorce, unless he was divorcing her for sexual immorality, was guilty of making her and her next husband commit adultery.

Now how do we unpack this one? Where is Jesus coming from? To start with, we need to remember that Jesus had a perfect understanding of marriage. Genesis 2:22-25 shows us that marriage was created by God in the beginning when he took Adam and brought Eve to him and the two became one flesh. Marriage was the binding union between a man and woman that made the two become one. Therefore it was a permanent union until one of the spouses died and then the survivor was free to remarry.

Jesus makes it clear that a certificate of divorce did not dissolve that union unless it was given because of sexual immorality. There are different view on what he meant, but here's what I think – in the case of sexual immorality, the unfaithful spouse was guilty of committing adultery and the penalty in the law was death (Deut. 22:22). Death would have obviously ended the union, and the surviving spouse would have been free to remarry. But where mercy was shown and the guilty person was not put to death, the innocent person was also shown mercy and allowed to divorce and remarry and not commit adultery. So that's why I think Jesus gives that as an exception.

But the point he was making was that all those men who were divorcing their wives for any and every reason and thought they were righteous because they gave them a certificate of divorce were wrong. They were sinning against God, sinning by the way they were treating their spouse, sinning by divorcing them, and sinning by forcing their spouse to have to remarry and commit adultery

with her next husband. Merely following the legal procedures of the state to procure a divorce does not mean you are righteous before God.

Well then, what does true righteousness look like? The clear implication of Jesus' teaching is that you should not divorce your spouse for just any reason. Jesus mentions an exception in the case of sexual immorality and Paul seems to indicate in 1 Cor. 7 that there may be an exception in the case of abandonment. But other than that, the Bible doesn't say much about divorce. Could there be other exceptions, like in cases of abuse? I don't know. The Bible doesn't say. What is very clear is that marriage is to be a binding union until death and the practices of easy divorce by the Israelites were sinful.

So true righteousness means honoring the union of marriage and treating your spouse like you would treat your own body. The two of you are one flesh. Paul teaches about righteousness in marriage in Ephesians 5:21-32 and it includes things like submitting to one another, wives showing respect to their husbands and husbands sacrificially loving their wives. Peter gives similar instructions in 1 Peter chapter 3.

Does your belief about divorce and remarriage line up with Christ's, or does it blend in with the culture?

Now, you might be thinking, "I'm in a marriage situation that appears to be sinful because of divorce and remarriage. What am I supposed to do?" Each situation requires biblical wisdom and discernment, but generally speaking, if you are divorced and remarried, the Bible is clear that you should not divorce your current spouse and try to go back to your former spouse. Instead, 1 John 1:9 says that if we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us of all unrighteousness. So confess your sin and from here forward you have the opportunity to walk in obedience and righteousness with the person you are married to.

And if you are divorced and not remarried, you may or may not be free to remarry your former spouse or anybody else, and it may not be advisable, depending on your situation. You need to study the Bible and be clear on what it teaches. And you need to be clear on what God wants you to do through prayer, Bible study, and seeking wise biblical counsel.

So we've seen the examples of conflict and anger, lust, divorce and remarriage, and next we have an example about making promises and agreements, and that's as far as we're going to go today.

Read Matthew 5:33-37.

“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.

From what I studied, it appears that the scribes and Pharisees had devised a system of oath taking that required specific oaths in order to make binding commitments. Some things required swearing by heaven, some by earth, some by Jerusalem, some by your head, and so on. But it led to this mentality that you were only bound to your word if you swore the assigned oath. In other cases, you weren't.

I think we have a similar practice today, only for us it has to do with our signature. We have a system that requires our signature on all kinds of different agreements, but if you don't sign an agreement it isn't considered binding. In Jesus day, if you didn't swear an oath, the agreement wasn't binding and the Pharisees taught that as long as you kept the agreements you swore an oath to, you would be righteous, even if you went back on your word on the other agreements where you didn't take an oath.

Jesus says, “That's baloney. True righteousness means you must be people of your word – honest and trustworthy. Forget about all these oaths. If you say “yes” to something, people should be able to trust that you will do it. And if you say “no,” that should be an honest answer as well.”

It shouldn't require a signature for us to be people of our word. Likewise we need to watch out for the temptation to twist the truth or leave out certain details or use exaggeration when we're trying to get something we really want

or avoid something that we don't. It can happen in all kinds of situations: job interviews, selling a home, filing your taxes, selling something on Marketplace. Jesus calls us to tell the truth and to be people of honesty and integrity. Is that the kind of approach you take in life? Or do Jesus' words reveal you've been off track?

Jesus was using these examples to teach his disciples how to live a life that is pleasing to God and no longer be like the scribes and Pharisees whose righteousness was only on the surface. What have these things pointed out to you about the way you're living your life? Do you have the same idea of righteousness and living the Christian life that Jesus does? Are you seeking to follow him with all your heart, soul, mind and strength? Or have you just been doing some Christian things on the outside and living like everyone else within? Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will surely not enter the kingdom of heaven. That's what Jesus said and we need to take that to heart.

If you're feeling convicted about the way you're living your life, you need to repent. The good news is that not only have we received a high calling from Christ about how to live our lives, but we can also receive mercy and forgiveness for our sins and failures because of what he's done for us. Christ paid the penalty to wash away our sins and purify us from unrighteousness. And when we are convicted of sin and waywardness, we turn to him in faith and repentance. Christ will forgive us and empower and equip us to live our lives pleasing to God.