

Are You Being Salt and Light? **Matthew 5:38-48**

This morning we're going back to the Sermon on the Mount to look at the last two examples Jesus gives in Matthew Ch. 5 to show the difference between the empty righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees and the true righteousness that God seeks in his people. As we've been seeing in previous weeks, the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was an empty shell. They looked good on the outside and did all kinds of religious things, but on the inside they were full of sin. Jesus was pointing that out through the examples he gave to the people; he was also calling them to a much different kind of righteousness that affected every part of their lives: heart, soul, mind, and strength.

It's easy for Christians to fall into the same thinking and pattern of behavior as the scribes and Pharisees and go through the motions of Christianity on the outside but be really disengaged, complacent, or even spiritually dead on the inside. And the statement Jesus made in Matthew 5:20 that should be a wakeup call for all of us is that unless our righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees we will surely not enter the kingdom of heaven. You believe in Jesus? Great! But if your righteousness doesn't go beyond the scribes and Pharisees, what good is your faith? Faith without works is dead. And Jesus says those who don't live out their faith in the way that he's describing won't enter the kingdom of heaven. We need to take that to heart, listen to what Jesus says, examine our lives, repent where we need to repent, and seek to walk in obedience to him.

The examples we look at today are very relevant again, especially with some of the things going on in our society. The situation in Minneapolis gives us a current scenario by which we can test ourselves with what Jesus is going to say. We see the way people are acting and responding and we have our own reactions and responses. We see people we look up to and how they respond and we probably feel pressure to respond a certain way. A lot of us have been doing that, but I really want us to see what Jesus has to say in these last two examples because I think they are going to help us understand what he wants us to do and how we can fulfill our calling and purpose and be that salt and light in the world today when we face these kinds of issues.

Read Matthew 5:38-42.

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.

Jesus brings up some scenarios the people might face related to evil people in their lives and being mistreated, abused or taken advantage of. The standard of righteousness that the scribes and Pharisees used in these situations came from a familiar rule in the OT law that said if you or someone else is physically harmed, the same kind of harm should be inflicted on the person who caused it (by the civil authorities). One passage states it like this: “*But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, ²⁴ eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵ burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.*” (Ex. 21:23-25. Cf. Lev. 24:19-20; Deut. 19:21)

This rule was meant to purge evil doers out of Israel, promote just punishment, and prevent excessive punishment. But people had adopted the mentality that the rule entitled them to seek vengeance or retaliation. “If someone hurts me, I have the right to pay them back by doing to them what they did to me.” And that was considered righteous behavior.

But Jesus made it clear that it wasn’t. Our calling to be salt and light does not allow us to act that way. If we do, how is that different than anyone else? That doesn’t mean Jesus was against governments, law enforcement, and legal systems protecting people and carrying out just punishment for crimes committed. That’s one of the reasons God established government and that’s not what he’s talking about. He’s also not against defending ourselves from dangerous people. It’s fine to protect yourself or protect your family. But then what? If you get hurt or mistreated while protecting yourself or your family, or in any other situation, is it ok for you to go back to that person later and inflict the same harm on them that they did to you? Jesus says “no.”

True righteousness means laying down your desire for personal vengeance; forgiving the people who hurt you and choosing to show kindness and blessing to them instead. How many Christians are doing that in our world today? Paul actually writes about this in Romans 12:19-21: *“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”²⁰ To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” (which is bringing conviction through unusual kindness)²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”*

Jesus gave 5 examples of what that would look like:

- If someone slaps you on the right cheek (which was an act of insult), don't slap them back. Instead, turn to him the other cheek. That would definitely be unusual!
- If someone sues you and takes your tunic (a person's primary outfit, like a suit or dress), let him have your cloak as well (a person's personalized overcoat that was much more valuable to them than their tunic). This too would make an impression.
- If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. A Roman soldier was legally allowed to force a Jew to carry their heavy gear for a mile. It was meant to be humiliating. Jesus says, carry it for two!
- If anyone begs from you, give to him. And...
- If anyone needs to borrow from you, do not refuse them. Jesus is likely confronting the common response of only giving or lending to someone if they can give you something in return. No. Give freely to help them without demanding something in return.

That's what true righteousness looks like. Not paying people back evil for evil, but returning evil with good, demonstrating radical kindness and blessing that doesn't make sense in our world.

What is your attitude and reaction toward people who are mean to you? People who have hurt you? You have them in your neighborhood, at work, or school. Do you get them back like everyone else, or show kindness? How do you respond to your spouse when they make hurtful comments? What about the situation in Minneapolis? If you were there, how do you think Jesus would

want you to react to undocumented immigrants who are in need? What about ICE agents (similar to Roman soldiers) who are carrying out their operations? Protesters who are angry and causing disruption? (Like Jewish Zealots in Jesus' day) How does Jesus want you to respond to cutting remarks or insults against what you post on social media? How does he want you to treat your political enemies? These are good things to think about and talk about in small groups. Are we conforming to the culture around us and becoming like everyone else? Have we lost our saltiness and hidden our light? Or are we making a positive influence for Christ and revealing him to the world by being different?

And now let's look at Jesus's last example. What does true righteousness look like when you're dealing with your enemies?

Read Matthew 5:43-48.

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.

So you can see this example is related to the first – the Jewish people had enemies and persecutors. I think they would have been thinking about the Roman soldiers, tax collectors, or fellow Jews who were against them. Later on, for Christ's followers, it would have included Jews and Gentiles who were persecuting them for their faith.

The OT law said: "You shall love your neighbor," but it didn't ever say "hate your enemy." It is likely that idea came from a misunderstanding of God's anger and punishment upon evildoers and enemies of Israel. The people came to believe that it was righteous to hate your enemies – like the Romans and tax collectors who were considered enemies of Israel and enemies of God.

Jesus confronted this mentality and revealed the way of true righteousness. They were to love and pray for both their friends and their enemies – a radically different approach. Love the Jewish tax collectors? Pray for Roman soldiers?

He points their attention to their Father in heaven. God causes the sun to rise on the evil and good, not just the good. He sends rain on the just and unjust, not just the just. Be like him. How are you any different than anyone else if you just love those who love you? That isn't any different than the Gentiles!

Once again we can apply this example to all the situations and people I brought up earlier. Who are your enemies? Who are the ones that are persecuting you? Are you treating them like they're your enemies? Are you paying them back for what they've done? Or are you treating them like Jesus is calling you to treat them in these verses – showing love to them and praying for them? How can we influence the world and reveal God to people who are lost in sin if we just behave like everyone else?

The church of our day needs to hear these words, and many need to repent, and walk in obedience. This calls for some raw self-examination. A lot of the things Christians are doing in our current situation are more like sinners than followers of Jesus. And it's really clear what Jesus is calling us to do. The question is whether we will or not. "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will surely not enter the kingdom of heaven." Faith, if it is not accompanied by works, is dead.

The last sentence in chapter 5 says this: "*You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" I've always had a hard time with this sentence because the way it sounds is that Jesus is demanding God-like perfection and if that's the case, then all those people would have been left with, "Well, that ain't gonna happen, so why even try?" But I don't think that's what happened.

All throughout the chapter Jesus was calling them to a different kind of righteousness than what they saw in the scribes and Pharisees – a righteousness that went beyond just outward religious activity and permeated every part of their being – their thoughts, attitudes, speech, behavior and will. That's the kind of righteousness God has and that's the kind of righteousness

he calls and equips his people to have. That is the goal that we're seeking to attain to. And that kind of righteousness is "perfect" righteousness. It doesn't mean free from failure; it means whole and complete.

The word is "teleios" and it means: perfect, complete, mature, full-grown. The Helps Word Study says: "*mature* from going through the necessary stages to reach the *end-goal*, i.e. *developed* into a consummating *completion* by fulfilling the necessary *process* (*spiritual journey*). The Topical Lexicon says the word "teleios" "*clusters around the idea of completeness brought to its intended goal. It speaks less of flawlessness and more of the wholeness that results when God's purpose is fully realized in a person, act, or era.*"

Jesus wasn't giving them an impossible demand, he was calling them to pursue a goal for their lives – as your heavenly Father is righteous, seek to become righteous like him in all these ways. Don't settle for the empty righteousness and hollow shell of religiosity of the scribes and Pharisees.

There have been many times where I have longed for Christians in America to have our eyes opened to the things we've seen today and learn how to live them out in our lives. Going back to COVID and masks and George Floyd and the 2020 election I could see that many Christians had been led away from the way of Christ by our political leaders, politically influenced pastors, and even our own human nature. I can see many of the same things coming up again because of recent events. We don't love our enemies, we curse them. We don't pray for our persecutors, we bash them.

The way of Christ is not like the politically charged Christianity that many of us find ourselves in. And I hope and pray that the things that Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount will make that clear. I encourage you to spend time in these verses and ask the Lord to show you how he wants you to live your life. What does it look like to be salt and light for Christ in the corrupt, politically hostile world in which we live? How does he actually want us to live?