

Surpassing Righteousness

Matthew 5:17–20ⁱ

The Gospel of the Kingdom

In Matthew, chapter 4, Jesus came into the region of Galilee,

²³ ...teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom...

demonstrating that He had the authority to do so by

...healing every disease and every affliction among the people. Matthew 4:23 ESV

In response to His message—the Gospel of the Kingdom—and His ministry,

²⁵ ...great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. Matthew 4:25 ESV

We've noted all of this before, but I think it's important as we take up the Sermon on the Mount again, to be reminded that this sermon—this discourse that Jesus taught to His disciples—is, in fact, the gospel referred to in the previous chapter. The Sermon on the Mount is not some inferior “kingdom ethic” that applies only tangentially to Jesus' followers under the New Covenant, nor is this teaching for some Kingdom era at the end of the world, as some dispensational authors have implied. When Jesus opened His mouth and began to teach in Matthew chapter 5, what He taught—what He proclaimed—was nothing more and nothing less than the gospel.

This is especially important because some would be quite willing to see the gospel in the beatitudes; in those blessings pronounced at the beginning of Matthew 5 on those who have, by the grace of God embraced the King and His kingdom by faith. But if we think of the Beatitudes as speaking of who we are—poor in spirit, mourning over our sin, meek, hungry and thirsting for a righteousness that is not our own, and so on—then, as Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote:

...we must ever remember it and let our life be such that it will always be a manifestation of this essential being of ours. We are children of God and citizens of the kingdom of heaven. Because of that, we have to manifest the characteristics of such people...to manifest **His** glory...that others may be brought to glorify Him.ⁱⁱ

You Shall Be Holy

This is a high and holy calling then, as when God said to His Old Covenant people

² ...**You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.** Leviticus 19:2 ESV

And just in case we might be tempted to think that this was an Old Covenant thing; something required only under the law, Jesus would practically quote this in Matthew 5, verse 48, saying

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

In other words, we are not saved so that we can continue in sin, living as we please, doing what we want, choosing our way over God's, all the while expecting that in the end, when we die, He will graciously intervene and bring us to heaven. That's not a biblical understanding of salvation. God has already graciously intervened, creating faith and repentance in our hearts, bringing us to salvation through the power of the Holy Spirit as He sovereignly works by the word of the Gospel. As it says in Romans, chapter 6:

¹ What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? Romans 6:1 ESV

Some have been known to teach just that, but the question is answered for us in the very next verse.

² By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Romans 6:2 ESV

In other words, the grace of God is not a get out of jail free card to be played on the day of judgment. Salvation—eternal life—is not for the next life while we continue to live this life on our own terms.

³ Do you not know...

the Apostle continued,

...that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, **we too might walk in newness of life.**
Romans 6:3-4 ESV

And again, in Titus, chapter 2:

¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people... Titus 2:11 ESV

But look at what the grace of God does.

¹² ...training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives **in the present age...** Titus 2:12 ESV

That is, living “self-controlled, upright, and godly lives” right here, right now, even as we wait

¹³ ...for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, ¹⁴ who gave himself for us **to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.** Titus 2:11-14 ESV

This is not only the purpose of salvation then, **this is the salvation** that the grace of God brings. We are not saved to live in lawlessness. We are not saved to live in sin. We are saved that we might be redeemed from all lawlessness, and we are saved that we might be zealous to do good works.

The Law and the Prophets

So, what good works? Well, the good works

¹⁰ ...which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2:10 ESV

Those good works—the good works that God prepared beforehand; the good works that Jesus is about to expound through the rest of His Sermon on the Mount. The thing is, upon further reflection we will see that the rest of Matthew, chapter 5, is pretty much an exposition of what we sometimes call the second table of the law, the part of the law that is summarized by the statement, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Not surprisingly, then, Jesus will, in effect, quote this verse as well before He is done with this Sermon. Matthew chapter 7, verse 12:

¹² “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them...” Matthew 7:12 ESV

(in other words, “Love your neighbor as yourself”)

...for this is the Law and the Prophets. Matthew 7:12 ESV

But, this is the gospel of the kingdom too. This is the gospel according to Jesus, and this shouldn't surprise us, because here in our text this morning Jesus said:

¹⁷ “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. ¹⁸ 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. Matthew 5:17–18 ESV

And what are the implications of this for us? Well, verse 19.

¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same...

(whoever looses, unties, or releases one of the least of these commandments; whoever presumes to say, “Well, **that** doesn't matter anymore; we're not under law but under grace”)

...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. Matthew 5:19 ESV

Surpassing Righteousness

And why is it important that we understand and teach this? Well, in verse 20 Jesus said:

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

Which is a pretty weighty statement if you think about it, and it sets the tone for everything that follows. So, we'll be coming back to it often as we go through the rest of the chapter, because when Jesus said (as He did several times in the verses that follow, “You have heard that it was said...” He was talking about the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, and when He went on to say, “But I say to you...” that's this surpassing righteousness, without which we will never enter the kingdom of heaven. See, this is of ultimate importance and not to be breezed over lightly as some do when they preach or read this sermon as a simple replacement for the law.

First of all, as we will see, Lord willing, in weeks to come, if we are to pursue this as a kind of good works road map to salvation, then we're all doomed, because Jesus didn't come along and say, "Since salvation by works of the Old Testament law was so hard, I'll just make it a bit easier for you." Rather, in every case, He raised the bar.

In effect, He said, "You've been taught that righteousness is about ticking boxes on a relatively simple list—you've been taught that salvation is about simply doing your best to keep the 10 commandments in terms of outward behavior—but I say, it's about your heart; it's about a righteousness that is much deeper, a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees." And that's saying a lot, because the scribes and Pharisees were really pretty good at observing the fine points of the law. The apostle Paul would later say,

⁴ ...If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; **as to righteousness under the law, blameless.** Philippians 3:4–6 ESV

In other words, when it came to, "You have heard that it was said..." he was blameless, and I don't think this would have been all that uncommon an attitude among the Pharisees. But when it came to the truth of what was in Paul's heart at that time, he would say in another place,

¹⁵ The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. 1 Timothy 1:15 ESV

When it came to the "But I say unto you..." part, he realized, as he said to Peter in Galatians 2:

¹⁵ We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; ¹⁶ yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, **because by works of the law no one will be justified.** Galatians 2:15–16 ESV

See, this is a very fine line, but we don't need and could never achieve a righteousness that comes from somewhere within ourselves. We don't need and could never, never, never achieve a righteousness that comes by human effort.

Now again, and this can't be overemphasized, this is not to say that we don't need to be holy as He is holy—it's not to say that the moral law of God is no longer in effect and we can live however we want. "It is not," as Lloyd-Jones wrote,

to make it easy for us or to enable us to say, "Christ has done it all for us and therefore it matters not what we do." We always tend in our folly to consider things as antitheses which are meant to be complementary. Our Lord is teaching that the proof of our having truly received the grace of God in Jesus Christ is that we are living a righteous life.

He went on:

You know the old argument, of course, about faith and works. Some say the one is all important, some say the other.

(As if they could even be separated.)

The Bible teaches that both these views are wrong: it is faith showing itself by works that is the mark of a true Christian.ⁱⁱⁱ

Which is to say that if we are ever going to keep God's law in a way that is acceptable to Him, if we are going to be holy as He is holy, then we need a righteousness that comes from outside ourselves. We need the righteousness of Christ. Paul continued in Galatians, chapter 2, writing,

¹⁸ For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. ¹⁹ For through the law I died to the law, **so that I might live to God.** Galatians 2:18–19 ESV

And how did he—how do we “live to God”? Verse 20:

²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. Galatians 2:18–20 ESV

See, the surpassing righteousness that we need is nothing less than the righteousness of Christ, given to those who turn to Him in faith, finding in Him not only forgiveness of sin, but cleansing, and sanctification as well. That's why, when we come to the table of the Lord, as we will in just a few moments, we affirm over and over again that

...we do not come to this supper claiming any merit in ourselves. On the contrary, we come testifying that we seek our salvation apart from ourselves in Jesus Christ.^{iv}

Indeed, for the life that we now live in the flesh we live by faith in the Son of God who loved us, and gave Himself for us and our salvation. In Him we have died to sin. In Him we have been buried through baptism. In Him we have been raised to walk in the surpassing holiness and righteousness, purchased for us with His body and blood, and applied by the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.

Even so, please stand and join with me as we confess our faith together in the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 23, question and answer 60.

How are you right with God?

Only by true faith in Jesus Christ.

Even though my conscience accuses me of having grievously sinned against all God's commandments, and of never having kept any of them, and even though I am still inclined toward all evil,

nevertheless, without my deserving it at all, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ,

as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me.

All I need to do is to accept this gift of God with a believing heart.^v

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- i All Scripture citations unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).
 - ii D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount: Volume One* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), 180, (emphasis mine).
 - iii Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 208.
 - iv Christian Reformed Church (CRCNA), "Celebration of the Lord's Supper", *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1987, 1988), 984.
 - v Christian Reformed Church (CRCNA), "Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 60", *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Publications, 1988), 38.