

Matthew 5

The Beatitudes

5 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Salt and Light

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.

¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

The Law and the Prophets

¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore, whoever breaks 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. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Isaiah 58

False and True Worship

58 Shout out, do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.

² Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments,
they delight to draw near to God.

³ “Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.

⁴ Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.

⁵ Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?

⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,

and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
⁸ Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
⁹ Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
¹⁰ if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
¹¹ The LORD will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.
¹² Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.

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Matthew 5:1-20; Isaiah 58:1-12

Excelling in Righteousness

Kerra Becker English

Righteousness. It's a biblical kind of word. It's about being morally right, following the law, having justification for what you do. It's also an action-y kind of word. Something you do, like being a prophet or a peacemaker. But it can also be about who you are. What kind of person are you? A righteous person? Are you known for being even more righteous than the Pharisees? Would you even want to be? Jesus tends to have harsh words for the religious stubbornness and purity-seeking ways of the Pharisees, so what does it really mean to exceed them in righteousness?

Jesus certainly has his moments where he tells it like it is. Just when we think he's all soft about love, and forgiveness, and welcoming every sinner and stranger who comes his way, he puts the smack down about the commandments. We are supposed to follow them, all of them, and not lead others astray from them. Following the law and paying attention to the prophets are not options for us. They are required reading, mandates from heaven.

But there's a big difference, and Jesus knew it, between actual righteousness and self-righteousness. Actual righteousness seems to be the theme of his famous Sermon on the Mount, the sermon that starts with this reading in the fifth chapter of Matthew where Jesus goes up on a mountain, followed by a crowd and his disciples, and he begins to teach. This teaching continues through the end of the seventh chapter with the first verse of the eighth chapter concluding the teaching by saying, "When Jesus had come down from the mountain." It may not be a long sermon by some preachers' standards, but this is the most-extended single teaching that we have from Jesus himself. And it's a doozy. It preaches just fine on its own. A gifted orator can make this sermon

sing, and it is fun to preach as a unified text. On the other hand, every single line of the Beatitudes could beget its own sermon. Each blessing is a message in and of itself. Then embed within this dense text – you are the light of the world, the salt of the earth; love your enemies; where your treasure is, there your heart will be also; don't worry about tomorrow, consider how God cares for the lilies, God clothes the grasses of the field that are here today and gone tomorrow; judge not, lest ye be judged; ask and it will be given you, seek and you will find; and do unto others what you would have them do unto you. Also, Jesus includes teaching about divorce, adultery, false prophets, retaliation, and then almsgiving and prayer. It's hard to imagine what's NOT covered in this message.

So, if you want to know what righteousness looks like, don't take my word for it, read up on Jesus. He knew what he was talking about. The law and the prophets were familiar old friends to him. He knows what the Lord requires. He knows what kind of fast God prefers. He knew better than the self-proclaimed experts then, and it is my hope that we who claim religion in his name now would follow his guidance on what such righteousness looks like.

In the section of Jesus' sermon that is the main point of my sermon today, he says something that ought to make us take a mental pause, and even more than that, perhaps should nudge us in a particular direction. He says, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness *exceeds* that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." That's a pretty serious charge to those of us who find eternal life to be part of the benefits package of this religion. You can also make the case that Jesus was inviting those gathered there on the mountain to enter the "kingdom life" right now. Jesus didn't draw the same kind of boundaries that we do for eternal life beginning at the point of death. The abundant life starts right now, and is found in practicing this kind of righteousness.

The scribes and Pharisees were the law followers, the observant ones, the loud and proud religious practitioners of the rules and regulations. But as is repeatedly made clear in scripture, Jesus found them to have no heart in their practices. It should come as no shock to you that there are a lot of Christians who would fit this framework today. They claim to know and practice all the rules, but there's no heart in it, and as Jesus might say, then there's little righteousness in it as well. I think Jesus wants our hearts in the game.

Though at first this line might seem belittling to the Pharisees, the kind of thing you might find in the comments section of Facebook and Twitter, I think he's trying to say far more here than meets the eye. I think Jesus is saying that righteousness is not simply the job of the hyper-religious, we are all obligated to the practices that make our lives together better. And, it can't be just for show. We must mean it. Righteousness is not a designation to lord over others – his spot-on critique of the scribes and Pharisees. Rather, honest to goodness righteousness that exceeds that of those who relish in demonstrating their public piety, has the effect of uniting us as human beings, and bringing us another step closer to realizing the Kingdom of Heaven in our own lives.

In a recent article in Sojourners magazine, Stephen Mattson makes the argument that, “Mainstream Christianity in America has failed. It looks nothing like Jesus.” To prove his point he says, “For the last few years Christians have been singing worship songs that include lyrics like ‘*keep my eyes above the waves, when oceans rise ...*’ and yet have rejected refugees who’ve seen loved ones die beneath waves, who themselves have *literally* struggled to keep from drowning in oceans. Those American Christians — particularly white evangelicals — continue to sing the words: ‘*Spirit lead me where my trust is without borders ...*’ but fail to realize the shameful irony that they’re largely responsible for refusing shelter and opportunity to some of the world’s most helpless and oppressed people.”

Adding...

“This represents a predominant theme of Westernized Christendom: proclaiming Christian rhetoric while actively — or passively — practicing the opposite in reality.

Because while the gospels instruct followers of Christ to help the poor, oppressed, maligned, mistreated, sick, and those most in need of help, Christians in America have largely supported measures that have rejected refugees, refused aid to immigrants, cut social services to the poor, diminished help for the sick, fueled xenophobia, reinforced misogyny, ignored racism, stoked hatred, reinforced corruption, and largely increased inequality, prejudice, and fear.”

The righteousness of being a Christian on a membership roll but doing nothing about it is little righteousness at all. Actively doing things that go against Jesus’ teachings is even worse. It is a failure if Westernized Christianity has become known for its self-righteous piety rather than its compassion. Jesus knew it would be so. Mattson’s point has been made over and over again throughout history. It isn’t news to us. Our own interests slip in. Our complacency. Our insecurity and fear. The attitude of having the right answers but caring little about having a right practice that Jesus pointed out in the scribes and Pharisees has not gone away, no matter how true Jesus’ words have rung throughout the generations.

But hopefully we will keep coming back to Jesus’ words. He’s painting a picture here, starting with the blessings of the first 12 verses, verses we read last week, and I chose to share again because of their incredible power to address just what this righteousness can be. The poor in spirit will know what heaven feels like. The mourners will be comforted. The meek will inherit the earth. Those hungry for a taste of righteousness will be filled by it. The merciful will receive mercy. The pure in heart will see God. The peacemakers will be called children of God. The persecuted will receive their heavenly reward.

Stephen Mattson, makes a point about the kind of critique we want to make of “other” Christians – myself included. Jesus puts labels out there too by pointing his finger at the scribes and Pharisees, but rather than patting ourselves on the back too quickly as “not that kind of Christian,” again I think Jesus’ call is a call for righteousness that exceeds stamping whatever we feel like stamping with Christian approval. This is a time to look to scripture, to hear Jesus preaching, not just to the crowd on the mountain, but directly to us. Righteousness is not a maybe, or a “when we feel like it.” Pursuing righteousness is being true to who we are in Jesus Christ as those called to join him in being repairers of the breach, and to be the ones who see and identify these blessings that so well hidden that it would look like to an outside observer that Christianity is a failed experiment.

We have our work cut out for us. The rubber stamp of Christianity has been getting used on things lately that make me cringe to carry the label myself. And yet, I know that righteousness is far more gracious and comprehensive than the kind of Christian belly-aching that gets media attention or the Christian zealotry that is used to drive personally profitable agendas. Stay awake my friends. Keep the fast that God chooses. Remove the pointing of the finger, and the speaking of evil. Offer food to the hungry, and relief to the afflicted. Be guided by the Lord, and your needs will be met even when you have given absolutely all you can and are parched beyond words. We can be known as repairers of the breach – even if the breach seems overwhelming. Stay the course with Jesus. Exceed the righteousness of today’s Pharisees whoever they may be, for they hide behind their own self-righteousness as an agenda, and we need to be wary of any Christian agenda that is not consistent with the gospel. Amen.