

## **Jesus & the Bible: Part II Matthew 5:17-20**

Part II sermons are always unsatisfactory in my opinion. If you were not there the previous week you start out with an inherent disadvantage. It is for this reason that I so seldom preach them. They can discourage by the mere title. Nevertheless, sometimes they are important and even necessary. This is one of those, I hope.

The important lesson from my sermon last week was this:

**When we approach the Scriptures with our most pressing questions about how to make life work we are most in danger of forfeiting life. In other words when we make the Bible only about what “we think” is practical we end up seeing only ourselves. These verses, particularly verses 17-18, reveal the way Jesus wants us to see the Bible. It is not a handbook for obedience, but a story of redemption. Jesus wants us to see that the Bible is first and foremost points to him and his gracious work of salvation. Everything in the Bible points to him, whether by revealing our need for Jesus or by revealing his person and work, it all points to him.**

**I made the claim that when we approach the Bible with our pragmatic or practical questions at the forefront of our thought we are most in danger of moralism. Moralism is the idea that through our perfect obedience we can either earn our salvation or maintain our salvation. Moralism is how the religious escape the Gospel. It is how the religious are sinful. The most obvious Biblical examples we have of moralists are the Pharisees and the Scribes of Jesus’ day.**

**Today moralism can be seen in every sector of Christianity—mainline liberals and evangelical fundamentalists, Reformed zealots and Arminian defenders. Of course, those outside of the church are practically moralists, assuming that their actions earn merit or favor with a god of some sort. None of us are immune from this siren call.**

**Therefore, if we are to approach the Bible rightly we must see Jesus first—his work of fulfillment. In other words, God’s gracious actions in Jesus are the starting point for interpreting the Bible. If we leave grace out of the Bible, we haven’t become less Christian we have become non-Christian.**

**Seeing Jesus Christ as the one who has purchased grace for us:**

- **Frees us from despair in our failure to perfectly keep God’s law**
- **And it frees us from pride in our “perceived” successes, which might also lead us to despise others who do not appear as “successful.”**

Okay. Now that I have said all of that, some of you are beginning to ask the “so what” question. If it is all about Jesus, what does it have to do with me. If I don’t have to work to earn my salvation then do I have to work?

**Key Question: If *moralism* is not the answer, does the Bible give me a moral vision?**

And that is what I want us to explore this morning. It is this question that is the preoccupation of Jesus’ words in verses 19-20. Of course, the answer is yes. **For the Christian, grace becomes the key reason for everything in the Christian life. I don’t obey to get Jesus’ love; I obey because I already have it.**

Here Jesus does an amazing thing: While he has protected us from *moralism* in verses 17-18, he doesn't allow us to escape a moral vision for our lives. In fact, he turns the tables even on the Pharisees and the Scribes. While we are often hard on these religious leaders and view their teachings as obvious perversions of the Bible, this was not how they were perceived in the Jesus' day. Pharisees were the unquestioned leaders in matters of religious doctrine and practice. In other words, if you had wanted to progress in spirituality you would have consulted the Pharisees. Paul himself recognizes their high reputation in his letter to the Philippians as he retells his own past religious devotion (Phil. 3:2-6). Yet for all of their religious devotion, Jesus asserts that it came up short. It was insufficient for what Jesus required for his people. In verse 20 Jesus tells us that our righteousness must *exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees* if we are to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. **It was not that they were too strict; it was that they were not strict enough! It was not that they were good; it was that they were not good enough!** Their *moralism* did not have a sufficient moral vision for God's people.

**Key Idea: After revealing the failures of moralism in verses 17-18, Jesus reveals the moral vision he requires of his disciples in verses 19-20. How does he do that?**

### **1) Jesus' moral vision exposes more fully our failure to obey:**

It is clear that Jesus intention is not to do away with the Bible's law. Yes it is true that all of the laws of the Old Testament are fulfilled with his coming. Some of them no longer obligate Christians. For example, we are no longer obligated to the food laws of the Bible and nor are we obligated the laws regulating worship in the temple at Jerusalem. These ceremonial laws have been fulfilled by Christ. Nonetheless, all of these laws have an abiding significance and none can be done away with. Even the ceremonial laws are important in so far as they reveal Christ's absolute holiness.

Jesus says, "Therefore, 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 . . . (19)." If we survey the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, it is evident that the laws that remain obligatory are those, which have both a universal and intrinsic moral significance. Theologians have referred to this commonly as the moral law of God. **Jesus summed this up as our requirement to love God with all of who we are and our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:37-40).**

In doing this, Jesus intensifies the requirement of the law. It cannot be construed as external and perfunctory obedience. **Obedience must derive the heart and must be expressed as love—love to God and to neighbor.**

In fact, this is a key purpose of God's law: **to expose our failure to love God and neighbor.** A right understanding of the law will not excuse our actions, but expose our failure.

- **The Pharisees had used the law to excuse their actions:**
- **Jesus intends for the law to expose our failure:**

We do the same thing.

I have shared this illustration before, but it illustrates this point so well. 829,000 individuals responded to the question on the SAT, "How many of you are below average at getting along with other people?" Zero people responded that they were below average. 60% rated themselves in the top quarter of humanity, while 25% acknowledged themselves to be in the top 1% of all people. Psychologists call this phenomenon a "self-serving" bias.

The bible calls it self-justifying behavior which at root is simply sin. Self-justifying behavior is our attempt to manipulate a law to excuse our actions. The truth is we all think we're pretty good people, just like the Pharisees. This takes many forms. Yet, all of them are our attempts to mask

the radical insecurity, shame, brokenness, fear, rebellion and God-hating and human-hating tendencies which reside in our own hearts.

Instead of defending ourselves before the Law and concluding that we have “passed the bar,” Jesus wants us to see ourselves as failing before its requirements and to run to him for mercy.

**Key idea: Properly understood the Law exposes more fully my failure not my success. In so doing it gives a reason to look to Jesus’ fulfillment of the law and not my own. It leads me to grace, not works. It leads me to the righteousness of Jesus not my own righteousness!**

## **2) Jesus’ moral vision enables more fully a greater obedience:**

This second point is very important. While Jesus uses the Law to expose our sin, he also can use the Law to lead us to true obedience. In other words, through Jesus we can keep the law more fully. Jesus’ moral vision leads to the greater obedience to the Law that he demands in verses 19-20.

How does he do this?

- **Jesus is the engine for obedience**

Because Jesus has fulfilled the law on our behalf, we do not have to be crushed when we fail to obey the law. By faith, Paul teaches us in Romans 3 his righteousness has become our righteousness. Positionally or legally, we are as righteous as Jesus is. In this way, we have a righteousness that exceeds a righteousness built on our record. Theologically, we call this our justification.

**Key point:** Practically it means that the law is no longer a threat. I am free from its condemnation because I am seen in and through Jesus’ righteousness. I no longer have to struggle to achieve a righteousness based upon my record to secure life with God. Christ has done that for me.

- **Jesus is the example for obedience**

Secondly and just as important as that first point is this: Jesus reveals what real obedience looks like. Jesus did not do away with the Law. Yes, he transformed it so that certain commandments do not remain, but the essence of what God requires of his people does. Jesus explains what the essence of a moral life is all about in the Sermon on the Mount.

In so doing, Jesus becomes our example for obedience. He gives us a model of what it means to love our God whole-heartedly and love our neighbor sacrificially. He reveals a **real righteousness that serves as an example to us.**

In this way, it is sometimes right for us to ask, “What would Jesus do?” Jesus reveals an exceeding righteousness.

A parent’s commandment can expose a child’s failure. We say, “Dorothy, please sit down.” “No! Mommy,” is the retort. The command shows her failure. But what if Dorothy sat down? Does that mean she is really obeying if retains a sour disposition in our heart? Of course not. In fact, what she is saying is this, “Mommy, I’m sitting down in my chair, but I’m standing up in my heart.”

**Application:** That is how many of us obey Jesus. We try to externally obey him, yet do not completely yield our hearts to him. Conversely, Jesus reveals that true law keeping is

keeping the law both externally and internally. **It is not enough to obey the law we have to do the law for the right reasons. To have the exceeding righteousness Jesus speaks about we must:**

- **Obey all the way**
- **From the heart**

Now think with me about all the ways that Jesus is calling us to a greater or an exceeding righteousness. That is really what the rest of the Sermon on the Mount is all about. It is not enough

- to pray for your friends, you have to pray for your enemies
- to not murder your enemy, you can't angry with them
- to not commit adultery, you can't lust
- to give the minimum, you have to give all
- to sacrifice some of your agenda, you have to sacrifice it all

It is impossible to underestimate the significance of vision. Any company will tell you that without vision a company will suffer a lack focus and so will compromise its resources, both people and finances, necessary to either sustain the company or propel it into the future. All great companies begin with vision. "Nothing precedes purpose," says Rick Warren of Saddleback Community Church in Orange County, California.

It is no different for any great organization. Great organizations need a vision which addresses a problem and engages that challenge. It corrects past mistakes and encourages one to take the proper steps into the future.

Here in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus shows us how the Bible really does provide a moral vision:

- ❖ The Bible addresses the fundamental problem of sin and engages that challenge through the redemptive mercies of the Lord Jesus.
- ❖ The Bible corrects the failure of moralism by focusing our attention on the grace of the Lord Jesus, who rescues us from our sin. The Bible leads us away from self-salvation and to salvation in the Lord Jesus.
- ❖ Finally, the Bible leads us to appropriate reasons for obedience and also provides us perfect illustration of that obedience through the love and sacrifice of Jesus himself.