
MORE THAN GOOD

Matthew 5:13-48

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INTRODUCTION:

This portion of “The Sermon on the Mount” is often parceled out and divided up into sections dealing with *evangelism* (“*Let your light shine before men*”), *reconciliation* (“*If your brother has something against you*”), *relationships*, and “*going the extra mile*.” While we would learn incredible truths with such a segmented approach, I’ve chosen to take a broader look at the whole passage. I think you will find a fresh understanding of and a new appreciation for what Jesus is saying. The whole text, Matthew 5:13-48, hinges on this verse:

“For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” ~Matthew ~5:20

To understand it better, we must remember that the religious people of Jesus’ day had fallen prey to a common corruption: they wanted a religion that enabled them to do what they wanted to do while making them feel that they were also doing what God wanted them to do. Bottom line, they interpreted God’s will in light of their own persuasions. Their religion was a legalistic, “*letter-of-the-Law*” set of prescriptions.

To these hyper-religious people, the truths Jesus was teaching seemed to do away with the Law and the Prophets. Actually, Jesus was challenging their narrow and self-accommodating interpretation of the guidelines God had given to His people. The scribes and Pharisees (and religious people today) made two mistakes about the Law:

- They thought that keeping the Law would make them righteous.
- They imagined that being “*good*” applied only to outward behaviors, not to inner thoughts and attitudes.

Jesus' words do not abolish the Law; they go to the heart of the Law and show how inadequate religion is to fix what is broken in us.

LIGHT AND SALT (Vs. 5:13-19)

The whole point of salt is to give flavor to food. If the sodium chloride has no taste, or if its taste blends in with the blandness of the food, what good is it? Light is supposed to dispel darkness; what's the point of turning on a light and covering the light with a box?

As we will see in the next sections, the Pharisees adopted a religion that didn't really do anything to change them. Their salt and their light were meaningless.

"I'VE NEVER KILLED ANYONE!" (Vs. 21-26)

Legalists congratulate themselves on how much better they are than other people. "I'm not like you; I would never do what you have done," says the moralist. Jesus corrects this mentality—not by dismissing murder as no big deal, but by pointing out how God defines such a capital crime. If we have ever been angry with someone else, or called them an idiot (or worse), then we have lost our moral superiority. "Oh yes, you have murdered," replies Jesus.

"I'VE NEVER COMMITTED ADULTERY!" (Vs. 27-32)

The Pharisees had a precise definition for adultery that allowed them to congratulate themselves while still doing great wrong. If they wanted to be with another woman, they simply wrote out a little certificate (like a receipt) to their wife before bedding the other woman. They removed the condition (being married) that got in the way of their desire, instead of battling the lust that drove them. Likewise, they intentionally gave themselves to visualizing what it would be like to be with whoever attracted them. Their reasoning was that adultery is a physical joining, and as long as you don't actually carry it out, you haven't done anything wrong.

Our culture has added another loophole—usually for women (who do not reportedly have the same intensity of focus on the physical aspects of being with someone). Emotional attachments, daydreams of deep communication and understanding from another man also qualify as adultery.

"I'VE KEPT ALL MY OATHS TO GOD!" (Vs. 33-37)

Jesus' basic response to such boasts is to ask why their character is so weak and unreliable that they need to swear by big things—things they can do nothing about anyway. Integrity is far more impressive than a list of all the props someone might use to bind themselves to their promises.

“I SQUARE ALL MY ACCOUNTS!” (Vs. 38-42)

What God had instituted as a means to prevent people from violating their neighbor with impunity, the Pharisees turned into a means of exacting revenge. Instead of relying on God’s justice, they used religion to impose their own self-centered justice.

“I’M A GOOD FRIEND!” (Vs. 43-48)

Later in His ministry Jesus will tell the story of the Good Samaritan—redefining neighbor—but here He puts the emphasis on loving our enemies and treating them kindly. It doesn’t take religion to make us good friends to our friends. God “*sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous*” (vs. 45), so if we claim relationship with Him, we will treat people with love regardless of their posture toward us.

THE BOTTOM LINE (Vs. 48)

“God is perfect,” Jesus concludes. He is exactly the way He is supposed to be. His righteousness is far more profound and encompassing than the meager correctness of “good people” or religious legalists.