

The Righteousness We Need pt. 2

Matthew 5:21-48

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Introduction:

- Through the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus invites us to examine our hearts.
 - I know that self-examination can be painful.
 - But if we never look inside, we can't grow. And it'll be difficult for us to be salt and light.
 - Paul says, *"Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers,"* (1 Timothy 4:16).
 - And so, we need to examine our hearts, not only to save ourselves, but also to save others.
- Now, last week, we learned how Jesus didn't come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them.
 - Jesus and his disciples didn't follow all the Jewish customs of the time.
 - And it seemed like Jesus was going against the law.
 - But he makes it clear, he came to fulfill the law.
- In fact, we'll see in our passage today, how Jesus shows the true meaning of the law.
 - It wasn't Jesus who was disobeying God's commands, it was the religious leaders who were disobeying God's commands.
 - They twisted God's truth to make it more convenient for them.
 - They followed the letter of the law, but not the spirit of the law.
- And so, in our passage, Jesus helps us to become more spiritually self-aware, so we can rightly obey his commands, so we can be salt and light in our world and make a greater impact in our world.

Point 1:

- First, Jesus gives us encouragement in our struggle for peace.
- Matthew 5:21-22 states, *"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment...'"*
 - Do not murder, is the 6th commandment.
 - And the religious leaders were teaching that the act of murder made you liable to judgement.
 - This of course is true.
 - No argument there.
- But Jesus says, it's not only the act of murder that makes you liable to judgment but even hate.
 - Hating someone may not bring judgment in a human court.
 - But there's also a spiritual court.
 - And if you hate, you'll be liable to the hell of fire.

- By hell of fire, Jesus isn't necessarily saying that you're going to go to hell, for hating someone.
- Rather, he's saying that you'll be liable to the judgment of God.
- The hell of fire is a reference to God's judgment.
- Jesus shows the heart of murder.
 - It comes from bitter anger and hate.
 - And those who have this heart, are committing sin.
 - They're disobeying the spirit of this law.
- And one way Jesus says, we can harbor hate is by insulting others.
 - *"Whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire,"* (Matthew 5:22).
 - There are times when you need to speak the truth, and it can be heart breaking to hear.
 - "I'm so sorry, but you didn't pass the test."
 - "I'm so sorry, but you didn't get the job."
 - Even when we speak with love, it may dishearten someone's heart.
- In contrast, insulting someone will not only break their heart, but it'll make them feel foolish and belittled.
 - Proverbs 12:18, states, *"There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts..."*
 - It's crushing someone because you want them to suffer.
 - It's hurting someone's reputation.
 - It's putting others down to make yourself look better.
 - It's the parent who is quick to find fault in other children, but never their own.
 - Or the person who crushes the spirit of their spouse.
 - Or the person who humiliates a co-worker in a meeting.
- Jesus wants you to be salt and light.
 - And one way you do that is by the way you speak.
 - You represent Jesus Christ when you speak.
 - Even if you're not sharing the gospel, the way you speak to others shows the love of Christ.
 - The Apostle Paul states, *"Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person,"* (Colossians 4:6).
- The Heidelberg Catechism sums it up, when it asks, *"What does God require in the sixth commandment?"*
 - Answer: *I am not to dishonor, hate, injure, or kill my neighbor by thoughts, words, or gestures, and much less by deeds, whether personally or through another; rather, I am to put away all desire of revenge,"* (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 105).
- And look at what Jesus says, not only about our anger, but about those who are angry at us.
 - He says, *"So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift,"* (Matthew 5:23-24).

- In this verse, I was thinking Jesus would say, “So, if you’re angry at someone, go reconcile with him or her before you worship me.”
- But instead, it says, *“If you...remember that your brother has something against you...first be reconciled to your brother...”*
- Isn’t this interesting?
- Let me paraphrase what Jesus is saying.
- He’s saying, “Even if you’re not angry with a person who’s angry with you, even if you didn’t do anything wrong, go and do your best to reconcile with the person who’s angry at you.”
- We need to deal with our anger, and reconcile with others, but Jesus also commands us to help others face their anger.
- Now, it may be the person who has something against you, doesn’t want to reconcile with you.
- And there’s nothing you can do about that.
- But the Bible commands, *“So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”*
Matthew 5:23-24
- Jesus also gives a warning about waiting too long to reconcile with others.
 - Yes, sometimes you need to let things cool down.
 - You may need to give time for your spouse or friend to process their thoughts.
 - But if you wait too long, it’s possible for the bitterness to grow.
 - Jesus says, *“Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny,”* (Matthew 5:25-27).
 - Jesus is saying that if you wait too long, things may get worse.
 - You’ll have to pay every last penny.
 - There will be a higher price to pay.
 - And so, Jesus is commanding us to reconcile as quickly as you can.
 - After fighting with your spouse, don’t let it go too long. Don’t wait for the other person to make the first move. Rather, be the first person to seek peace.
 - If things get a little heated in the meeting, be the first person to reach out to your co-worker and seek peace.
 - Parents, if you lose it with your kid, don’t wait too long, but quickly apologize for what you did wrong.
- And let’s remember what Jesus did for the people who hated him.
 - The crowds were angry at Jesus.
 - *“Pilate said to them, ‘Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?’ They all said, ‘Let him be crucified!’ And he said, ‘Why? What evil has he done?’ But they shouted all the more, ‘Let him be crucified!’”* (Matthew 27:22-23).
 - The people were angry at Jesus.
 - But in all this, Jesus sought to bring peace.
 - But because we wouldn’t listen, because of our rebellion, we owed every penny. We deserved the fires of hell.
 - But Jesus paid every last penny himself, to bring reconciliation.

- And looking to Jesus, we can also bring peace to others.
- Jesus gives us encouragement in our struggle for peace.

Point 2:

- Second, Jesus gives us encouragement in our struggle for purity.
- Verse 27 states, *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart,"* (Matthew 5:27).
- The act of adultery can be defined as sleeping with, or having an emotional affair with a person who's married.
 - But Jesus shows the root cause of adultery.
 - He says that anyone who looks at a woman or man, with lustful intent, has committed adultery in the heart.
 - This means, fantasizing about someone in your imagination is adultery.
 - This means, looking at sexually explicit material is adultery.
 - This means, sleeping with someone before you get married is adultery.
 - This means, wanting a divorce because you love another person is also adultery.
- In fact, that's why Jesus talks about divorce, right after speaking about adultery.
 - Christian Scholars state how divorce was more common in Jesus' day, then it is today (O'Donnell, 138, Matthew).
 - And the religious people, especially the men, since they held the power of divorce, wanted to twist God's law, because they wanted to sleep with other women.
 - They knew that sleeping with a woman who wasn't your wife was sin.
 - And so, they'd divorce their wife and marry someone else, to legally sleep with another woman.
- The Bible allows for divorce in certain cases, and the law allowed a man to give his wife a certificate of divorce.
 - The certificate protected the woman's rights, so she could get legally married again.
 - It released any legal obligations she had to her former husband.
 - But the people relaxed the law so much, you could divorce your wife for almost any reason.
 - In fact, the Jewish law stated that a man could divorce his wife for burning his food.
 - So, a man would make up some bogus reason for divorce, then marry another woman.
- That's why before talking about divorce, Jesus talks about adultery.
 - Lust was causing people to diminish the sacredness of marriage.
 - Lust was breaking families apart.
 - Lust was causing religious men to take advantage of women.
- That's why, Jesus uses strong language against lust.
 - It was causing great harm.
 - Just like it's causing great harm in many people today.
 - And so, he commands us to cut it off.

- I know I said this before, but I want to be clear, Jesus isn't literally saying that we need to gauge out our eye or cut off our hand.
 - You can lose both your eyes and still lust in your mind.
 - Rather, Jesus is commanding us to get rid of anything that leads to lust.
 - If a certain show causes you to lust, you need to stop watching that show.
 - If being alone causes you to lust, you may need to stay busy or spend more time out of the house.
- Some people think that private lust doesn't harm others, but that's simply not true.
- Lust can diminish your love for your spouse and really hurt their heart.
 - Lust can cause deep pain in marriage and relationships.
- Lust demeans the image of God in others.
 - When you lust after someone, you're devaluing who they are as God's creation.
 - You're treating them like an object, and not a person.
- Lust will keep you from faithfully serving Jesus Christ.
 - You can't serve two masters.
 - You'll begin to hate the one and love the other.
- Lust will enslave your mind to sin.
 - When you give in to lust, it makes it harder for you to resist.
- Lust grieves the Holy Spirit living inside of you.
 - Instead of living by the Spirit, you'll begin to close your ears to God's leading.
- Now, the title of this point isn't how to make you feel guilty, but rather, encouragement for your struggle for purity.
- So, let me share some ways you can cut off lust in your life.
- First, remember how lust is a sin against God.
 - In Genesis, we're told the story of Potiphar's wife, who asked Joseph, day after day to sleep with her.
 - But he was able to resist because he saw how this would be sin against God.
 - He says, "*How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?*" (Genesis 39:9).
 - Remember that lust is first and foremost a sin against God.
- Second, be filled with the Holy Spirit.
 - That means you need to make Sunday worship a priority.
 - When you have an opportunity to sing, sing with all your heart to God.
 - You need to meet with other Christian believers to study God's word and pray.
 - Make reading God's word a priority in your life.
- Third, find a way to serve.
 - Lust is all about serving yourself.

- But the more you serve others, you'll direct your heart away from lust and to loving others.
- Fourth, confess your sin.
 - We need to confess our sin to God.
 - But James says, *"Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed,"* (James 5:16).
 - Confessing your sin and receiving prayer can give you strength to fight against your lust.
- Fifth, seek to love Jesus more.
 - Don't forget that your sins are forgiven.
 - Even when you fail again and again, Jesus is able to forgive.
 - Jesus Christ has removed all your sins.
 - And as you remember God's love, you'll grow in your love for him.
 - And you'll be able to fight against lust
 - *"If you love me, you will keep my commandments,"* (John 14:15).
 - Jesus gives us encouragement in our struggle for purity.

Point 3:

- Third, Jesus gives us encouragement in our struggle for integrity.
 - Verse 33 states, *"Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' But I say to you, 'Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King,'"* (Matthew 5:33-35).
- Now, the Bible isn't saying that we can't take oaths.
 - God makes many promises in the Bible.
 - And so did, Abraham, Joseph, King David, and the Apostle Paul.
 - The Bible allows us to swear on the Bible, when we testify in court.
- Rather, this commandment is giving instructions on taking false oaths.
 - God is saying that we shouldn't lie.
 - He's commanding us to tell the truth.
 - If you say you're going to do something, God is saying that you should do it.
- But the religious leaders relaxed the law, so they didn't have to follow through on their promises.
 - Listen to Matthew 23:16-18
 - Here, Jesus is rebuking the Pharisees for making excuses to keep their promises.
 - *"Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath.' You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath.'"*
 - If the people didn't want to keep a promise, or fell through on a promise, instead of admitting their fault, they made pathetic excuses.
 - *"I'm sorry, that contract is void, because I didn't swear by the gold in the temple."*

- “I’m sorry, I can’t pay the money back because I didn’t swear by the gift of the altar.”
- That’s why Jesus says, *“Let your yes, be a yes, and your no a no.”*
 - In other words, Jesus is commanding his people to be trustworthy and reliable.
 - To be people who tell the truth without crossing their fingers.
- Let me share a few ways we can grow in our trustworthiness.
- We can learn to be trustworthy by keeping our promises.
 - Be the person who follows through and shows up.
 - Be the person people can rely on.
 - Don’t be the person who can’t keep a promise.
- We can learn to be trustworthy by taking responsibility when God gives you something to do.
 - When you refrain from making a commitment to a responsibility, or to a relationship, or to church, or to a job, you may not be breaking any commitment.
 - But it’s also true you’re also not making any commitments either.
 - Allowing your yes, be yes, and your no, be no, doesn’t mean you always say no.
 - It also means you step out and take responsibility for what God brings before you.
- We can learn to be trustworthy when we stay committed even when things are hard.
 - Commitment keeping isn’t easy.
 - There are always challenges in family, friendships, workplaces, marriage, and even in church.
 - There are times when unexpected situations happen, and you’ll need to follow through, even when it’s hard. Even when it’s not convenient.
 - Learn to persevere and stand firm.
- Keep your promises. Take responsibility. Persevere through hardship, and you’ll be salt and light in this world.
- And let’s remember how Jesus is the trustworthy Savior, who’ll never let us go.
 - Even when we fail, he continues to forgive us, just as he promised.
 - Even when we get tired, he continues to work good in our lives.
 - Even when we run away, he continues to bring us back.
 - Even when our love grows cold, his love remains steadfast.
 - Even when he had to face the wrath of the Father, he went to the cross and took our place.
 - Jesus is our trustworthy Savior, and he’ll never let us go.

Point 4:

- Fourth and finally, Jesus gives us encouragement, in our struggle for justice.
- Take a look at verse 38.
 - *“You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. 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,”* (Matthew 5:38-39).

- This commandment was given so that in court, the punishment would fit the crime.
 - This command was given for legal justice.
- But the religious leaders twisted this law to get private revenge.
 - When someone hurt them, they would justify themselves with this law, to get others back.
- And here, Jesus shows how this wasn't the purpose of the law.
- And in terms of personal attacks from others.
 - Jesus says to turn the other cheek, to let others have your cloak, to go the extra mile, to give to the one who begs.
 - Just like Jesus doesn't want us to literally cut off our hand, he's not saying that we should literally let people abuse us, and give all our clothing away, and work without pay, and deplete everything we own and give it away.
 - The basic principle is that when others attack us, we're not to attack back, but to show grace.
- To get hit on the cheek wasn't necessarily physical abuse, but a way to dishonor someone.
 - A slap on the face was a way to hurt someone's credibility.
 - And when Jesus says to turn the other cheek, he's saying: Don't hurt them, like they hurt you.
 - Don't put them down, like they put you down.
- When you look at Jesus' life, he spoke up for the woman caught in adultery. He spoke up for tax collectors and sinners. He touched and healed those who were sick and leprous. He spoke up for children.
 - And we need to do that too.
 - We need to welcome the person who feels left out.
 - We need to speak up for the person who has no voice.
 - We need to speak up against unrighteousness.
 - We need to speak out against sin.
 - We need to speak up for others.
- But when Jesus was personally attacked, he didn't attack back.
 - But rather entrusted himself to the Father.
 - On the cross, he turned the other cheek.
 - He was stripped of his cloak and clothing.
 - He was forced to carry his cross.
 - And he paid the ultimate price; he gave his life.
 - And why?
 - He did this because he loved us.
- The religious leaders twisted God's law so they could hate their enemies.
 - But Jesus says that we're to love our enemies.
 - In fact, he says that if you love those who love you, there's nothing different about you.

- Because even vile sinners love those who love them.
- But what makes us salty, what makes us light, is that we love even those who hate us.
- In the end, God will bring justice.
 - God will make all things right.
 - But until then, God has called us to love, as he loved others.
 - *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 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. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect,” (Matthew 5:43-48).*
- When we rebelled against God, and yelled out, *“Crucify him,”* Jesus didn’t let us die in our sin.
 - He came to us, to die for us.
- When we were worshipping other gods, just like Hosea’s wife, and committing adultery against God.
 - He stayed faithful.
 - He’s the trustworthy Savior, who never lets us go.
- When we keep failing and failing, Jesus doesn’t turn his back on us.
 - But even today, he’s interceding for us.
 - When we sin, Jesus says to the Father, “look at my hands, look at my feet, I paid the price.”
- When we were his enemies, mocking him, hurling insults at him, he didn’t call down fire from heaven.
 - But he said, *“Father forgive them, they know not what they do.”*
 - *“But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us,” (Romans 5:8).*
- When you look through what God commands, you may feel overwhelmed.
 - How can I do this?
 - But instead of feeling overwhelmed.
 - You should feel great encouragement.
 - These aren’t only God’s commands, but they’re also his promises to you.
 - St. Augustine writes, *“Give what command, and command what you will.”*
 - By our own strength, we can’t live this out.
 - But when we look to God’s commands, it’ll drive us to God’s grace, and his power.
 - Look at all that Christ has done for you, look at what Christ has done in you.
 - And you will be able to obey, because he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion.

¹Unless otherwise noted, all references to the Bible are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

²Heidelberg Catechism. 1563. Christian Reformed Church in North America.