

The Sermon on the Mount
Session II
Christian Righteousness (part 1)
Matthew 5:13-26

We are going to shift gears now and begin to move into the body of the sermon where Christ is focusing on his manifesto of how believers are to conduct their lives. In the Beatitudes, Jesus has outlined the characteristics of his followers. He now begins to move into some very specific teaching on how our lives should be lived. In the balance of the SOM, Jesus focuses on five categories of a believer's life: 1) righteousness, 2) piety, 3) ambition, 4) relationships, 5) commitment.

This first category, a believer's righteousness is the longest and will take us a couple of sessions to conclude. This category contains several components. First of all we will examine the metaphors of salt and light. Then we will see Jesus explain his relationship to the Law and the writings of the Old Testament Prophets. Finally, Jesus will present six contrasting examples regarding righteous lifestyles. These are significant because each of them represents areas where the religious leaders had twisted and misinterpreted the true meaning of God's law.

Let's get started with the **Salt & Light Metaphors**: Matthew 5:13-16

Why do you think Jesus spoke these metaphors immediately following the beatitudes??

Generally speaking the metaphors of salt and light are indicative of the Christian's ***influence*** for good in the world. The salt and light metaphors serve to provide "***purpose***" to the Christian characteristics of the beatitudes. The qualities of each beatitude hold the promise of present and future blessing for the believer, **however** they also serve the immediate evangelical purpose of helping others find salvation through the ***influence*** of a devote Christian walk!!!¹

One other point to make with each of the metaphors is one of the grammatical construction that Matthew employs. At the opening of v.13 and 14 we see the words "***You are***". But there is something lost in the English translation!!! In Greek this can be written with one word: **ἔστε** (*este*). However, in both of these cases Matthew used **ἡμεῖς ἔστε** – ***You! you are***. The term ἡμεῖς is an emphatic personal pronoun in the second person². It is used to specifically ***emphasize*** the great importance that believers have on the world!!

Can you think of examples of how believers are a significant influence upon the world?? Is this influence always good??

On the positive side: Jesus started with eleven true disciples. Many teachers estimate that there were fewer than 150 true followers of Christ at the time of his crucifixion. Today we have approximately 6.9 billion people on the earth and it is estimated that there are 2.2 billion Christians!!

But on the negative side: How many times have you encountered people who are resistant to the message of the gospel because they have been hurt by Christians or they have witnessed Christians living lives that are really no different than the rest of the world?

Jesus began the SOM by explaining the characteristics he expects us to have. Now he is about to use two metaphors to demonstrate why these ethical lifestyles are so very important.

Salt:

In ancient times, as well as today, salt had two primary purposes. What are they?

First of all, salt adds flavor to food. Secondly, it is used to preserve perishable food items. These are pretty easy concepts to grasp because salt is used today just as it was 2,000 years ago. ***But why would Jesus refer to believers as “the salt of the earth”?***

This fallen world is without any true “flavor” and most importantly it is rotting with decay!! A world without the gospel witness of Christians is a world doomed to a hopeless condition, to continual and never-ending lack of true joy and degradation³. Teachers debate over which of these qualities Jesus was focused more upon. I would contend that this effort is trying to place too much onto the text. Salt served two vital purposes, and each are analogous to Christian influence.

What is the value of the salt without its “saltiness”??

It becomes worthless!! This portion of the passage gets some discussion among teachers because salt (NaCl) is a very stable compound that really cannot be separated and remain as a material substance.

These folks are just “over thinking” the passage. Jesus is clearly demonstrating that the value of the “salt” comes from the qualities placed within it. In the case of the believer, their value doesn’t come from them, but from the Holy Spirit living within them and guiding their lives. Without this presence, we too are of no significant value for the purposes Jesus is speaking to.

Light:

Why do you think Jesus compared his followers to light??

This is one where we in the modern age can lose perspective. We take light for granted because of the proliferation of electricity. Most of us have little or no context of how dark things can be in nature. In the 1st century, they understood this. Light was an important thing. Travelers could often be guided by the lights in a distant city. Additionally, every home required light for the family to live in the evening hours. The importance of light must be considered in the context of this time period where light was not so plentiful.

Jesus says that his followers are the light of the world. What does he mean by that statement?

This world is truly a spiritually dark place. In fact, without the light of the gospel of Christ, shining into the world through his followers, this would be uninhabitable. Imagine being in a room that is painted black and totally sealed, no windows, door cracks or anything else. When the lights go out there is absolutely no light, your eyes are worthless because they require light to function. THAT is this world without the influence of the gospel of Christ!!!

Then in v.16 Jesus uses the word λαμψάτω. This is an imperative verb. All languages use imperatives to stress things. In this case it is used to give a COMMAND. Jesus is ordering us to “shine our light” for the world to see, but to do so while always giving the glory to God!!

One my favorite writers lays out three key lessons that these metaphors teach us:⁴

1. There is a fundamental difference between Christians and non-Christians, between the church and the world.
2. We must accept the responsibility which this distinction places upon us.
3. We must see our Christian responsibility as two-fold: Like salt & light, they give their all, and they totally expend themselves in the process of doing so.

So, let's move into the next segment of the sermon. Let me begin by noting that 5:1-16 have served as Jesus' introductory formula for the Sermon on the Mount. In this section Christ has spent time developing the ethical characteristics that we as believers must have as well as the responsibilities of being a follower of Christ and our role as witnesses in this fallen world.

Now Jesus opens the main body of the sermon which runs from 5:17 to 7:12. The first primary category that he is addressing is found in 5:17-48 where Christ is going to focus on the relationship between the Old and New Righteousness. Within the context of that category, Jesus will use v.17-20 to stress the continuity between the Old and New.

Christ and the Law: Matthew 5:17-20

What are your opening thoughts on this passage? Clearly it divides itself in two parts (v.17-18 and v.19-20); but give me the essence of what Jesus is saying here.

One teacher that I am using for this course says that this passage is among the most difficult of all Scripture to interpret. In v.17-18 Jesus is going to explain his relationship to the Law and the Prophets. Then in v.19-20 he is going to dive straight into the heart of a believer's righteousness.

So let's begin to examine these in a bit more detail:

v.17:

Jesus opens with a statement telling the people “**what not to think**” of his presence. This is most likely because even this early in his ministry, there were those who were thinking that he had a different purpose. Jesus sets the record straight regarding his mission: He has **not** come to **abolish** the Law and the Prophets. Additionally, we know from the language that Jesus did not come to **establish** a new law. Instead he is very clear that his role is to **fulfill** everything in that which has already been given!!

So, what exactly is “the Law or the Prophets”?

We have to understand that even though by as early as the 4th century BC the Jews had codified what we call the Old Testament, they generally referred to it with three distinctions:

1. **The Law** – Generally speaking these were the laws of Moses.
2. **The Prophets** – The books of the major and minor prophets of God.

3. *The Writings* – The remaining books of the OT, like the Psalms, Proverbs, etc etc. Therefore, when Jesus used the statement: *the Law or the Prophets* he was actually making reference to the entire corpus of the Old Testament, which at that time was the entirety of God’s revelation to mankind.⁵

v.18: This one gets quite a bit of discussion. Let’s break it down a little:

Re-read the verse to yourself. Notice that Jesus uses a familiar formula to open the verse. What is it and why do you think he is using it??

“truly, I say to you”: This formula of words was often used by Jesus to call specific attention to what he was about to say next. Recall, that the purpose of this short passage is for Christ to express the continuity between his teachings and those previously given in the Old Testament. This is a topic of HUGE importance, so Christ is basically saying: ***“Everyone needs to listen closely to what I am saying,,,,,”***

Notice also that Jesus is using the first person to make his statements. He is ***not*** doing what teachers of that period did. They would say something like; ***“Gamaliel says to us,,,,,”*** or ***“Our great father Abraham said,,,,,”*** As we will see throughout the sermon, Jesus teaches from the first person, he teaches as one having ***authority!!***

What is the main idea that Jesus is communicating??

Christ sandwiches the main idea of these entire four verses in one phrase:

“,,,not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law,,,,”

What do you think he means by this statement??

The meaning is very clear. Absolutely every aspect of the message contained in the body of the Old Testament shall come to pass. Various translations interpret the Greek terms ἰῶτα and κεραία in different ways. The first refers to the smallest letter in the Greek alphabet, the second to most minute marking of Hebrew text. However, the basic message is clear: Even the smallest and seemingly most insignificant components are going to be fulfilled!!

Notice that Jesus sandwiches the main idea between two phrases which emphasize the gravity of his message:

A. *“until heaven and earth pass away”*:

B. *“until all is accomplished”*:

The meaning of the first phrase is easy to grasp. Some have taken the second phrase to be a reference to Jesus concluding his ministry on the earth. This is unlikely. First of all, the text is not specific to that. Secondly, such an interpretation actually contradicts the first phrase. It is more in line with the passage to note that Jesus clearly stating that the revelation of God to man in the Old Testament shall be fully complete over the course of the duration of this world.

This is a broad question; but give me your thoughts on why you think God gave us the Scriptures that we call the “Old Testament”??

We know that all of Scripture is from God and completely without error. The overall purpose of Scripture is for God to reveal Himself to us. The mission of Scripture is to bring man into a redemptive relationship with God. God brings forward a steadily progressing picture of the salvation that Jesus would offer as the pages of the Old Testament turn.

One of my favorite writers breaks the teachings of the Old Testament into three basic categories:⁶

1. **Doctrinal Teaching**: The OT contains *revealed instruction* that was commonly referred to as *“law”*. This is expressed in the Torah and it clearly does instruct us about God, man, and salvation, etc etc. As Stott notes, *“All the great biblical doctrines are there. Yet it was only a partial revelation. Jesus fulfilled these in the sense of bringing it to completion by **his person, his teaching, and his work.**”*
2. **Predictive Prophecy**: Much of the message of the OT is devoted to *looking forward to* the days of the Messiah and either *foretells* him in words, or *foreshadows* him in type. **However**, this was only *anticipation*. Jesus actually *fulfilled* it all in the sense that what was predicted actually came to pass, with the climax obviously being his death on the cross as a sacrificial (penal-substitutionary) atonement for sin. This was the pinnacle of the Jewish religious system, and only in Jesus do we find the perfect fulfillment!!

3. **Ethical Precepts:** The OT clearly contains ethical precepts, or better stated *the moral law* of God. Yet these were very often *misunderstood* by the people. Jesus not only fulfills them, but he also explains them and what true obedience to them looks like for his disciples. This is exactly one of his objectives in the following six antithetical statements. He will demonstrate the OT ethical precept, the common misunderstanding of the precept, and explain what the OT message truly is for his followers.

v.19-20:

Powerful verses! As we said above, Jesus has moved from making a statement about himself relative to the Law and the Prophets, toward addressing each believer's righteousness.

V.19 begins with the term "therefore". What does this tell you??

It is very simple, what Jesus is about to say is predicated upon what he has just said. In other words, v.19-20 are based upon the conclusions drawn from v.17-18. There is a vital connection between the Law of God and the Kingdom of God.

There is another key theme in v.19, tell me what you see.

Obedience! Notice how Jesus uses two examples, first negative then positive, to express how vital it is that we obey the commands of God. Christ has just spoken very clearly about his relationship to the Law. He has just noted that every aspect of God's revelation looking forward to Christ will be fulfilled. Now Jesus is linking the believer's role. We are to be obedient!! Remember, he has just spoken about believers as "*salt and light*". We are that "*salt & light*" when we live lives of obedience to God before a lost and dying world!! Then, Jesus drills a bit deeper by drawing in the role of teachers here. James 3:1 is very clear on the great responsibility and accountability that teachers have:

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

This almost sounds like Jesus is prescribing some form of a "works-based" system of salvation. What are your thoughts here??

Jesus' statements here must have been earth-shaking to those present. We are called to obey God's word, and we are required to pass this on to the next generations by training them properly so that they too may know God. Yet, there is something even deeper being said here. The scribes and the Pharisees were clearly students of the Law. They were devoted to the most rigid forms of obedience. Yet, as we will see in the balance of the sermon, they completely missed the intent!!

The true message of God to us is not one of mere functional obedience, it is a message to our hearts!! The Pharisees missed this. They were more concerned with their "form" than "substance". Jesus is telling us that our righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees in kind rather than degree.⁷ They concentrated on the outward appearance as opposed to truly integrating the message of God into their hearts. Christ is calling for a true righteousness of the heart, not just an outward practice of some form of "forced righteousness" before men. When we truly integrate God's word into our hearts, the outward life cannot help but follow!!

In closing on v.17-20, we see that in one pass Jesus has simultaneously affirmed the everlasting truth of the Old Testament Scriptures (v.18). Additionally, he has flatly stated his role within the context of these Scriptures, to fulfill them (v.17). He has presented every believer's role in obedience to these commandments (v.19). Finally, he has highlighted the fact that our righteousness must exceed the outward-focused righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. We must have a inward, heart-focused righteousness (v.20).

Six Contrasting Statements:

We are about to turn now to a series of six examples that Jesus uses to make his point about the outward righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees and how far they had missed the true mark. By making the statement that he made in v.20, Jesus is telling the people that their religious leaders have missed the true message.

Think about this for a moment. If a teacher, with no formal education or experience, came into your area and began to preach that the greatest experts in your religion were so far off point that they would not enter heaven, what would you think??

From a mere human perspective, this is a pretty bold claim. In our time, we have the benefit of hindsight and all that Christ did both in ministry and upon the cross as well as the balance of the New Testament writings. Jesus knew that his words would shake up his listeners. Remember,

these people had been trained all their lives that the scribes and the Pharisees were the great teachers of God. Now Christ was blowing all that up!! It would be natural for someone listening to such a message to ask the speaker for examples. In essence, challenge him to back up the claims he was making. Before anyone could ask, Jesus does just that. What follows in v.21-48 is a series of six contrasting statements which serve as examples of exactly how these so-called religious experts got it wrong.

In these contrasting statements, Christ drills down on the topics of *anger, lust, divorce, the taking of oaths, personal retaliation, and loving your enemies*. The context is that the religious establishment has, over time, distorted the true intention of God to these areas. Christ is driving home the point that it is the condition of one's heart that is of importance.

Before we get into these statements, let's do a little background work on them to aid our study. A few points worthy of note here regarding the antithetical statements:⁸

- A. **Their Substance:** In each of the statements Jesus will *appear* to cite Mosaic Law, and thus *contradicting* these laws. However, as we will see, what he is actually contradicting is the religious establishment's *interpretation* of the law, not the law itself.
- B. **Introductory Formula:** Each of the six statements will begin with a common *formula* or phrase: "You have heard that it was said" or "You have heard that it was said to the men of old". This is one of those times when the translation from Greek to English really loses the significance of what Jesus was saying.
 1. **"it was said": (ἐρρέθη):** This is the Greek verb for "to say" in the **3rd person, aorist, indicative**. Being indicative means that "time order" *is* in reference. Being aorist means that the action is **completed**. Thus we know this is a simple reference to **past tense**. As such the translation, "it was said" makes perfect sense.
 2. **"it is written": (γέγραπται):** This is the Greek verb for "to write" in the **3rd person, perfect tense**. What is significant is the use of the **perfect tense**. Greek perfect verbs carry the unique component in that they represent **an action completed in the past, whose implications carry forward to the present!** (Remember the example of the soldier who lost his leg....)

So, how does this really matter??

Any time Jesus quoted Scripture, he used this perfect tense word **γέγραπται**, “it is written”. Yet in every one of these contrasting statements, he opens with this past tense word **ἔρρέθη**, “it was said”. Thus we know that Jesus **is not** contradicting Scripture, he **is** contradicting what the scribes and Pharisees had **said about** Scripture!!!

- C. **Contradictory Formula:** The style of these statements is a reflection of a Semitic, poetic style.⁹ Remember, Jesus is Jewish and he is speaking to a predominantly Jewish audience. As such we should expect to see a style that reflects the culture. Every culture has such styles. For example, in my culture we often see children’s fables begin with the formula: “*Once upon a time,,,*” and very often they end with something like: “*,,,and they lived happily ever after.*”

In each of the six statements Jesus *contradicts* what has commonly been taught by the religious establishment regarding the laws. He does so with the same phrase in each section: “*but I say to you*” (**ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν**). Just as we saw in v.17-20, Jesus employs the powerful use of the 1st person (I) to demonstrate *his authority* in rightly instructing the people. This practice was completely unheard of in that period. Teachers taught by referencing the Scripture and the work of other teachers. Jesus taught, asserting his divine authority, by emphatically saying “*but I, I!! say to you!!!*”

- D. **Lesser to Greater Formula:** In each section of the passage, Jesus provides one or more examples of *seemingly lesser infractions* and how *they are actually equivalent to the greater infraction* prohibited by the law. For example, to lustfully look upon a woman (not your wife) with sexual desire for her, is equivalent to adultery.

Why do you think that Jesus used this device??

Jesus employs this technique *to demonstrate that the law is broken in a man’s heart* just as much as in his outward actions.

Let’s turn now to the contrasting statements:

1. **Anger: Matthew 5:21-26**

Let's back away from this passage for a moment and pull out the overall message that Jesus is giving us here.

The big picture message here is tied to the sixth commandment of Exodus 20:13; "Do not murder". However, as we noted above, in each of these statements, Jesus goes beyond a strict, legalistic interpretation of the Law and takes it to the heart of what God intended from the beginning. Murder doesn't "just happen". It is an outward flow from an inward rage which precedes it!! Jesus is amplifying the importance of where our hearts truly stand in relation to those around us.

So, let's dig into this passage a bit. *We discussed above the form that is used with these statements. Tell me how you see these in this passage.*

First we see the familiar *"You have heard that it was said to those of old,"* followed by *"But I say to you". Is Christ saying that the OT law was incorrect??*

No!! Notice that Jesus is not saying *"The Law says do not murder,,,,,,. But I say,,,"* Jesus is talking about what the teachers of the Law have taught concerning this commandment. They have not taught the true intent of the Law!! So, he is contrasting them by expounding on what was truly meant by the commandment in the first place. If we do not allow anger to take root in our hearts, then the natural outflow will be lives that do not commit murder!! Even greater than this, we will live lives characterized by harmony and positive relationships with those around us.

Note that Jesus references judgment four times in v.21-22. *Why do you think he does this??*

Some have tried to explain these references as some form of increased level of punishment. That is to say that there is some sort of increasing severity of punishment. Most teachers disagree with this type of interpretation. Instead, we are seeing Jesus using repetition as a device to drive his point home!! We do this today. We stress, repeatedly things to our children or in sermons when we really want our listeners to pay attention.

Next, let's look at the second way that Jesus is stressing the importance of reconciling personal differences: *Tell me what you see.*

Look at v.23-24. The personal act of worship of bringing one's sacrificial offering to the Lord is the highest and most important form of individual worship that the Jews practiced. It was the heart of their personal connection to God as individuals. Yet Jesus is saying that when there is division between you and another person, to put aside even the act of individual worship and go make amends with that person!!

A side bar note is often discussed around this verse. It revolves around concepts of "*murder*" vs. "*kill*". English translations of v.21 use both of these terms. *What do you think is the more accurate translation and why??*

The more accurate interpretation is "*murder*". The OT Law did not prohibit the notion of "*kill*" another person. The death penalty is specifically prescribed in numerous places in the Law. One such example is Leviticus 20:2. Remember, the target OT passage Jesus is focusing on here is Ex. 20:13. In this verse the Hebrew term רִצַּח (*ritsach*) is employed. This term is used in eight other verses in the OT. Every place that this term is used, the context of the message is the intentional murder of another person. Additionally, in each of these verses, the Greek translation of the OT (LXX) uses the Greek term $\phi\omicron\nu\epsilon\acute{\upsilon}\omega$ (*phoneo*) which also means to slay or murder. Here in v.21, Matthew uses this same Greek term. As such, the meaning is clearly intentional murder of another, which is consistent with the sixth commandment in Exodus 20:13.

We are going to stop here for this lesson. In the next session we will complete our examination of the remaining five contrasting statements of Matthew 5.

Literature Cited

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² Hagner, Donald A. *Word biblical commentary: Matthew 1-13*. Vol. 33A. Texas: Word Inc., 1995, 99.

³ D. A. Carson. *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World An Exposition of Matthew 5 -10*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books. 1987, 31.

⁴ Stott. 63-64.

⁵ Stott. 73.

⁶ Stott. 71-72

⁷ Stott. 74-75.

⁸ Stott. 76-77.

⁹ Carson. 42.