

Surpassing Righteousness

In October of 1909, Vancouver, British Columbia, purchased its first motorized ambulance. They spent \$4,000, which would be more than \$100,000 today. Just hours after rolling out on the streets, the ambulance had its first patient. Motorized vehicles were pretty new back then and not many people were all that skilled in steering them. So, Vancouver's first ambulance patient was a tourist from Ohio who was run over by the ambulance. ⁱ

As we make our way through this sermon of Jesus, we might begin to feel like that "tourist from Ohio." That which we think is supposed to save our lives - (a sermon by Jesus!) - becomes the very thing that seems to endanger our lives! So, what is this sermon really about?

In politics, I think we are all aware that there is a "left wing" and a "right wing." Generally speaking, the left-wing loves change, new ideas. The right wing generally loves unchanging truths that have proven themselves over centuries. Well, the same is true in theological circles. The theological left loves this sermon because in it they think that Jesus challenges the "old rules," making up new ones. For example, He repeatedly says, "You have heard that it was said," then, He quotes an Old Testament law and says ... "But I say to you ..." In fact, one left winger said, "This is all the gospel I need."

However, the gospel, as it is defined in 1 Cor. 15, technically is not in this sermon. The apostle Paul defines the gospel this way:

Now I would remind you ... of the gospel I preached to you ... that Christ died for our sins ... that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day ... so we preach and so you believed. (1 Cor. 15:1, 3, 4,11)

Nowhere in this sermon does Jesus explain how we are saved. So, if you're basing your relationship with God on this sermon, you're in big trouble. This sermon does NOT present the whole gospel.

But I also don't fully agree with some right wingers because some of them say that since the gospel isn't clearly explained in this sermon, then Christians can ignore it. But that can't be. Why? Because in Matt. 5:1-2, it tells us to whom Jesus was preaching. It says...

... he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them ...

Who is Jesus teaching? His disciples! So, this sermon is for everyone who calls him or herself "a disciple of Jesus Christ." Pastor Warren Wiersbe says this:

... the Sermon on the Mount ... has definite application for us today ... I have always felt that Matthew 5:20 was the key to this important sermon:

For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. The main theme is true righteousness. The religious leaders had an artificial, external

righteousness based on law. But the righteousness Jesus described is a true and vital righteousness that begins internally, in the heart. ⁱⁱ

So today, first we need to examine ...

I. The What of this "Surpassing Righteousness"

The goal of every religion is for the followers of that religion to be in a right relationship with whatever they consider to be their god. So, how did Israel's God say they could be in a right relationship with Him? In Deut. 6:4-6, God told Moses to tell the people:

"Hear O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart."

So, where does the God of the Bible say a relationship with Him starts - with your actions? No! No, your right relationship with the God of the Bible begins internally in your heart and soul, and from there your rightness with God, your righteousness, flows out through your strength, your might, into your actions.

But the Pharisees and Sadducees read this exactly backward. They said that righteousness, right standing with God, depended FIRST upon your actions! The name Pharisee means "separated one." From this name you get an idea of how they went about fulfilling the task of becoming righteous before God. They did it by separating themselves from lawbreaking. They were so dedicated to this that they didn't think it was sufficient just to follow the 613 laws God gave; they added many, many more, which they called a "hedge around the law." So, for example, rather than just living with the law of keeping the Sabbath holy by not working, they came up with 39 specific things you could NOT do on the Sabbath. They then appointed themselves as the enforcers of both the Law and the Hedge Around the Law. They weren't just the moral police, they were the food police, fashion police, work police, rest police, weekend police, weekday police, and every other kind of police you can imagine. They truly, truly believed that if they themselves and everyone else in the whole country would just externally obey all the laws, no matter what was going on inside of them, then God would bless their nation. And Jesus fully understood the Pharisees' definition of righteousness as being external. That's why He said to them:

"... you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean." (Matt. 23:25-26)

Don't forget this statement! This is the key to understanding the Sermon on the Mount! Now, Jesus makes it clear that He's not against external actions. He states in our passage today:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished." (Matt. 5:17-19 NIV)

What Jesus is doing here is giving the true definition of "righteousness." This sermon begins with the beatitudes. What's the big idea in the Beatitudes? "Blessed are the poor ..." in what - finances, housing, externals? No, "in spirit," (internally) "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." "Blessed are the pure in ..." what? Actions? No, "in heart (internally), for they will see

God." Jesus is defining righteousness in a new way, not divorced from actions, but centered internally, beginning with a righteous heart. That is why, when He goes on to illustrate this new principle, He talks about sin not as something only external (murder, adultery) but as being centered or rooted internally as hatred or lust.

Jesus said, "I did not come to destroy the Law but to fulfill it." What did He mean? Think of it this way: if I wanted to destroy an acorn, I would place it on a rock, take a hammer, and smash it. That would be the end of the acorn, right? But if I plant the acorn in the ground, the acorn in a sense is gone, but in another sense it is transformed, it is "fulfilled" in the oak tree that grows from it.ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus did not destroy the Law by what He taught, He fulfilled the Law by showing us the way to become righteous in God's eyes. Which leads us to our next and possibly our most important question today:

II. How Can I Experience This Surpassing Righteousness Myself?

Some conservative Christians today have looked at this sermon and concluded, "Okay, so this is a New Law! Only this Law is even tougher than the Old Law! It's not just what we DO that can get us in trouble with God, it's also what we THINK! So, we've got to double our efforts to control what Christians think!" This has produced the kind of legalistic churches who have trained a 21st century battalion of Pharisees to police every aspect of your life, including your thoughts! Is that what Jesus had in mind with this sermon?

No. Jesus isn't writing a new Law, He's pointing to a NEW WAY, the only way to obey the OLD LAW! Jesus already said: (Matt. 5:20 NIV)

"... unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."

The people hearing this knew that no one could surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees if righteousness were only external, because those guys were fanatics! The Law said that a devout Jew should fast once a year. The Pharisees fasted twice a week! The Law said that devout Jews should tithe their income. The Pharisees tithed their spices! They believed that external righteousness was what God commanded and it was through self-discipline that they could produce it!

But again, they missed Jesus' point. His point was that self-discipline was NOT the path to a right relationship with God because self-discipline alone won't produce spiritual fruit in your life. Jesus was saying, "Don't start by focusing on the fruit, the external. Start by focusing on the root, that which is unseen, the internal, in the heart. If your heart is right, then by the power of the Holy Spirit, you will produce righteous fruit. But if your heart is wrong, your fruit will be all wrong!"

In Matt. 5, Jesus gives a practical example of this. He points to the root of anger. He says:

"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 ... and whoever says, 'You fool' will be liable to the hell of fire." (Matt. 5:21-22)

What is He saying? He's explaining the connection between the interior sin of anger and the exterior sin of murder. Murder is not an isolated action. It's the outcome of unrighteous anger. Unrighteous anger is the root of murder. It's like dandelions or any other

weed in your lawn. If you just pick off the dandelion flower, will that solve your problem? We all know it won't. You have to dig out the root. If you don't get the whole root, the weed will be back. And if you don't deal with the dandelions at all, will they disappear on their own? No! They'll completely take over!

But Jesus is not giving us landscaping advice. He's giving us the solution to even the most serious problems in our culture today like murder. Do you see it? Jesus is teaching the eternal truth that unresolved, unrighteous anger is the root of murder. This has been confirmed by secular studies. A 2012 analysis by psychiatrists at Oxford University compared studies of angry, impulsive personalities and found that such people have "substantially increased risk of violent outcomes."^{iv} In this country, Dr. Jillian Peterson, professor of Criminology at Hamline University in St. Paul, MN., who was the principal investigator on a three-year grant from the U.S. Department of Justice focusing on understanding the life histories of mass shooters, had this to say concerning the most recent shooters such as the one in Uvalde Texas. She writes:

There is this consistent pathway. Early childhood trauma seems to be the foundation, whether violence in the home, sexual assault, parental suicides or extreme bullying. Then you see the build toward hopelessness, despair, isolation, self-loathing, oftentimes rejection from peers ... [then] the hate turns outward.^v

An FBI study of school shooters found this same link between deep-seated anger and disrespect in the home leading to violence in and eventually outside the home.^{vi}

What is Jesus' solution to break this chain of events from anger to violence? You've got to dig out the root. Jesus says in this sermon that digging out the root of anger is so important that we should disrupt our public or private worship to address the internal sin of anger ...

"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." (Matt. 5:23-24)

In Mark 11:25, Jesus speaks of the problem of anger and private worship:

"And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."

This issue of digging out the root of anger is so critical, it comes before prayer or worship.

So, how exactly do we do this? How do we pull the anger out of our hearts by the roots? Well, the truth is, we can't. We have to ask the Master Gardener to do it for us. We can't fulfill the Law by discipline! But the Spirit can fulfill it when He takes control of our hearts! That's what Paul explains in Gal. 5 where he's warning about relying on external actions to produce righteousness. He specifically mentions the external action of circumcision and says:

Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, (as a means of being made righteous in God's eyes) Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. (Which no one is capable of doing!!!) You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law, (by externals) you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. (Gal. 5:2-5)

Do you see it? Do you see the HOW of Surpassing Righteousness? It's not by discipline, not by effort; it's by surrendering every day to the Spirit within. And what does that look like?

Watchman Nee, the great Chinese evangelist of the 19th century, would travel through rural China preaching. After he preached through a passage, he would rip that page out of his Bible and leave it with the people. It was the only way for them to have any scripture.

After returning to one rural town after many months, a man came to him with a problem.

He said to pastor Nee, "It has been my habit to have a cup of strong drink after my evening meal in the winter months. Sometimes, I would drink too much. After becoming a Christian, we would pray as a family after dinner as you taught us. But when I would drink, I found I could not pray. Resident Boss would not let me! Eventually, the Resident Boss inside me would not let me have that drink! I read the Scripture you left but it said nothing about this. What should I do?"

Watchman Nee, recognizing that this dear man was under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, said to him: "Very good brother, you should always listen to Resident Boss!" ^{vii}

Surpassing righteousness begins inside you with a surrendered, fruitful heart. Then, your healthy, fruitful heart will reveal itself in fruitful, obedient, external actions.

A number of years ago, a ten-year-old boy walked up to the counter of a soda shop, climbed up on the stool and asked the waitress, "How much is an ice cream sundae with hot fudge?"

"A dollar fifty," she said. (The price shows how old this story is). The boy reached in his pocket, pulled out a handful of change and started counting. The waitress rolled her eyes and frowned impatiently. The boy squinted up at the waitress and asked, "How much is just a plain dish of ice cream?" "\$1.25," she said with even more irritation.

The boy counted his coins again and said, "I'll have the plain ice cream, please." She brought back the plain ice cream and the boy gave her a \$1.25 ... in change. After he left, she came to pick up the dish and found a twenty-five cent tip. The boy had enough for the hot fudge sundae, but he ordered the plain ice cream so he could leave a tip.^{viii} Can you see his fruitful, obedient, loving heart?^{ix}

What are people seeing in your heart these days? If you're a Christian and you listen very carefully, what is "Resident Boss" saying to you right now? What are you saying to Him? Let's pray.

ⁱ Chuck Davis, *The Chuck Davis History of Metropolitan Vancouver* (Vancouver: Harbour, 2011)p. 64

ⁱⁱ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Loyal* (Wheaton: Scripture Press, 1980), p.32

ⁱⁱⁱ The acorn idea is from Wiersbe's book, *Loyal*, p. 36

^{iv} www.thetrace.org/2016/06/anger-mass-shooter-profile-gun-violence-prevention/

^v www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/05/27/stopping-mass-shooting-q-a-00035762

^{vi} [www.fbi.gov/The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective](http://www.fbi.gov/The-School-Shooter-A-Threat-Assessment-Perspective)

^{vii} Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, inc., 1977), pp.199-200

^{viii} Pat Williams and James D. Denney, *Mr. Littlejon's Secrets to a Lifetime of Success* (Revel, 2000), p. 80