

# True Righteousness

(Matthew 5: 17-20)

In our study of the Sermon on the Mount we have been observing how Jesus begins this teaching by talking about the character of a disciple and then moves into a detailed discussion of the disciple's conduct. The beatitudes describe succinctly, in eight proverbial-like sayings, the character of a disciple. Jesus then gives two word pictures that capture the character of a disciple when he says we are the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world."

As we continue through this chapter Jesus is getting ready to move from discussing the character of the disciple to the conduct of the disciple. But before he does this he needs to clarify how the disciple is to read and apply the Old Testament. In verses 17-20 he does just that. Here we read:

17"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. 18"For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. 19"Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20"For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.

## **The lasting validity of the Old Testament (5:17-18)**

The Law and the Prophets was how Jesus and his contemporaries referred to the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament. Jesus affirms in this verse the lasting validity of the Old Testament. He says it is the revealed will of God for his people until the end of this age brings a consummation of all that God has purposed. The two "until" clauses in 5:18 are both saying the same thing. They emphasize the lasting validity of the Old Testament. The phrase "till all is fulfilled" at the end of verse 18 shows us Jesus understood that the end of the present age will not come until every thing revealed to us in the Old Testament finds its fulfillment.

Of course there are many things foretold in the Old Testament that found their fulfillment when Jesus came 2000 years ago. The centre piece of this was Jesus' death

on the Cross. The detailed sacrificial system presented to us in the Old Testament anticipates Jesus' crucifixion. There are countless references in the Old Testament that teach the necessity of death and the shedding of blood to atone for sin. Because these Old Testament sacrifices anticipate the Cross we no longer express the necessity of forgiveness through temple sacrifices. Rather Sunday by Sunday we celebrate the fulfillment of these sacrifices in Christ's atonement on the cross. Thus, this commandment from the Old Testament is no longer legally binding as a practice. Nevertheless, the Old Testament principle of penalty and payment for sin remains valid and needs to be taught and understood as God's will."

Jesus confirms the full authority of the Old Testament as Scripture for all ages, even down to the smallest components of the written text. Those components are the "smallest letter" ("jot") of the Hebrew alphabet and "the least stroke of a pen" ("tittle"), which most likely refers to a serif, a small hook or projection that differentiates various Hebrew letters.

### **Doing and teaching the commandments (5; 19)**

In verse 19 Jesus builds on what he has just said by saying that his followers are to have the same view of the Old Testament that he has. The consequences of one's treatment of the Old Testament are immense. The rabbis recognized a distinction between "light" and "weighty" Old Testament commandments and advocated obedience to both. Light commandments, what Jesus refers to as "the least" are those such as the requirement to tithe on produce (see. Lev. 27:30; Deut. 14:22), and weighty commandments are those such as profaning the name of God, misusing the Sabbath, or refusing to enact social justice (Ex. 20:2-8; Mic. 6:8). Since the Old Testament remains the valid expression of God's will, even down to the "jot" and "tittle," Jesus likewise demands a commitment to both the least of the commandments as well as the greatest .

Jesus directs his comments specifically to his own followers. The "least" and "great in the kingdom of heaven" are those who have responded to his announcement of the gospel of the kingdom. Jesus drives home the binding authority of Scripture. Since he does not "abolish" the Law and the Prophets but fulfills them (5:17), his disciples likewise must not "abolish" or "break" the commandments but must instead practice and teach them (5:19). Jesus clearly states how his disciples are to conduct themselves with regard to the Old Testament as he now fulfills it. The entire Old Testament is the expression of God's will, but it is to be obeyed and taught from the perspective of how

Jesus "fulfills" it through his interpretation of its intent and meaning. A disciple's status in the kingdom of heaven accords with whether one trifles with the revealed will of God or one obeys and teaches it as truly the Word of God.

### **The Righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees:**

Having presented how he and his followers are to understand and apply the Old Testament Jesus then goes on to warn his disciples not interpret and apply the Old Testament as the scribes and Pharisees were doing at that time. In order to understand Jesus' criticism of the scribes and Pharisees we need to know something about who they were. And to do that we need to go back 300 years before Jesus lived.

300 years before Jesus the Greeks had emerged as the new world empire. They were no longer content to conquer the world militarily as they had under Alexander the Great.

The Greeks were crusaders for a way of life marked by intelligence beauty and pleasure. Power and money were not enough for them. They were missionaries for something we might call humanism. They wanted to convert people to a way of life where the mind and body could be celebrated and developed to their full potential. They were persuasive and highly successful and had impressive conversion statistics. Within a hundred years of this initiative the world became Greek. Greek language, Greek schools, theatre, art, and Greek games were found almost everywhere. The Greek gods were provided as a colourful backdrop and were the sponsors of the Greek enterprise.

While this Greek crusade was widely successful throughout Mediterranean basin, the Greeks hit a hard core of resistance in Palestine. Large number of Jews refused to be converted

Jews were a people who said that God had revealed himself to them, made a covenant with them and given them commands. They had no faith in the human as such. Their faith was in God. Their God who was a jealous God who fiercely rejected man made substitutes to his revealed justice, love, mercy and salvation.

To put the human in place of God was blasphemous to the Jews and so they resisted the Greeks. However the Greeks were not use to taking "no" for an answer. Civilization not Salvation was the key to living well. They used pressure by instituting law that the prohibited Sabbath Keeping and circumcision. They even went so far as

to killing Jews who would not convert to the Greek ways. The more the Jews rejected the more the Greeks used force.

It was this pressure that turned Jews into Pharisees. The word means the “separated ones.” They were a fierce resistance fighting party who defied the commands to repudiate God’s covenant and the Greek brain washing propaganda which stated the more energy devoted to God, left less energy to be devoted to being truly human.

Although the Pharisees were a small group statistically, their influence was great. If it had not been for them Judaism may have been eradicated completely by the Greek zeal for civilization. It was the Pharisees who preserved and reinforced Jewish identity when it was most needed. They were Jews at their passionate and loyal best. Because this Greek pressure was so total and all encompassing the Pharisees response was also total and all encompassing. They couldn’t compromise on one thread of detail unless the lose thread begin to unravel the rich tapestry of radical and uncompromising obedience to God.

As the decades and centuries past they developed many rules and customs. By the time Jesus comes on the scene this accumulation of rules and customs had become a rigid exterior armour among many of the Pharisees. Yes, Jewish identity had been preserved but after 300 years it was more external than internal. Jesus called them hypocrites, something that will come up later in the Sermon on the Mount. Indeed it is in Matthew’s Gospel that we get a detailed critique of the Pharisees. In one place he puts this hypocrisy vividly when Jesus says to them “You are like white washed tombs. Pure on the outside, but inside full of dead man’s bones.” They wanted to look good, believed they were good and far better than other Jews

Added to this they had become small minded, obsessively concerned and preoccupied with the minute details of Jewish identity.

Their early days had begun well as they challenged the arrogance of the Greek mind. They had a vision of God and God’s law far larger than anything the Greek missionaries could imagine. They countered the grandiosity of the Greek Vision with God’s throne established in the heavens.

By the time of Jesus they had lost the vision of the kingdom of God. Instead they were obsessed with dress, behaviour and ceremony that defined what it meant to be a Jew.

Imagine yourself moving into a house with a huge picture window overlooking a lake with a grand view of the mountains beyond. Majestic snow capped mountains with a beautiful view of a lake in the foreground. You have a ring-side seat before all this beauty. Cloud formations, wild storms the entire spectrum of sun illuminated colours on the rocks, trees, water, wild flowers are awe-inspiring. At first you are captivated by this view. You sit, you stand you stare amazed at the beauty of what lies before you.

One day you notice some bird droppings and get out the get bucket to clean the window. A couple of days later a rainstorm leaves water marks on the window. Two days later friends bring over their six kids whose sticky fingers have left smudge marks all over the window. No sooner have you said goodbye to the guests than out come the bucket and squeegee. You have become so proud of this window that you have fallen in love with it. It is such a large window and you are amazed at just how many foreign objects can attach themselves to that window. Keeping the window clean becomes an obsessive, compulsive neurosis. You construct a scaffold inside and out. You go to Canadian Tire and buy buckets and squeegees of different sizes in order to assist you in making sure that window is kept clean. You have to get to all the difficult corners and heights. You have the cleanest window in North America but it has been years since you have looked through it. You have become a Pharisee.

Because of this slow change over a few hundred years from interior passion to exterior performance this shift of attention from the majesty of God to house cleaning for God the Pharisees were not as a group very attractive. They were in touch with their heritage and studied the scriptures. But Jesus says in verse 20 that this is not to be the kind of righteousness that marks one who is following him. Jesus saw what had become of the Pharisees and so he warns his followers to be careful. To become what they are. Yes they knew the Bible but in being house cleansers for God they have lost their vision of God and cannot enter into the Kingdom of heaven because of this distortion.

### **So what does this mean for us. What is the application?**

We are to be people of the word. Many Christians are content to read only the New Testament. They find the Old Testament cumbersome and difficult to understand and so they end up staying away from it. But if we are going to be followers of Jesus we

are to have the same view of the Old Testament that he had. We are to study and practice it carefully and apply to our own lives what it teaches. If, as Jesus said he came to fulfil the Old Testament, then we can only read the New Testament description of this fulfillment with understanding if we know the 39 books that anticipate Jesus' coming.

To aid you in this there is a book on our web site called Adventure Through the Bible. Each chapter of this book gives an overview of each of the Bible's 66 books. Not only are we to be people of the word as those who know the biblical story from Genesis through Revelation we are to do what the word says. But the question is how are we to apply it?

We are to take Jesus' word to the Pharisees as a cautionary warning for those of us who take the Bible as God's authoritative word. In wanting to ensure that people are reading the Bible and applying it to their lives, we can lose sight of the God presented throughout the sixty six books of the Old and New Testaments.

As a church supportive of Essentials and as a priest committed to what Essentials represents we can all too easily become God's 21<sup>st</sup> century housekeepers. With Paul may we never lose sight of the Lord as we engage in this struggle for the truth of God's word to be applied in the church today.

Paul never lost sight of the view of God's majesty replacing it with a concentration on the window. Listen to how he describes the glory of God:

<sup>33</sup>O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!<sup>34</sup> "For who has known the mind of the Lord? or who has been his counselor?"<sup>35</sup> "Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?"<sup>36</sup> For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:33ff).

He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. <sup>16</sup>It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen. (1 Timothy 6.15)

Paul's contemplation upon God took his breath away. May such contemplation do the same for us so that we never lose sight of the one in whom we live and move and have

our being.

Last week Ruthy gave us a pictorial illustration of how a person can come into a relationship with Jesus Christ. This week I want to build on that illustration with another that shows how the word is applied to the life of a disciple. It is called the "Inside-Out transformation of Jesus' Disciples to become like him" because our righteousness is not be like the Pharisees. Theirs was an outer righteousness that left them feeling proud and superior to others. Ours is to be an inside out transformation that begins with the heart.

The "inside-out" nature of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom life can be illustrated by thinking of his disciple as concentric layers that eventually penetrate to the core of the person. We are "soulish persons," which indicates that we are a complex of immaterial and material realities. Our outermost layer consists of social relations. What I know first I about a person are the relationships I share with or see the person engaged in. The next inward layer is the body, including what the person wears, how she carries herself, the way she talks, what she looks like, and so on. The next inward layer is the mind of the person. The mind is where the person reasons, considers emotions, and experiences spiritual realities. Then the innermost core of the person is the heart, which includes the person's will and spirit.

The gospel Jesus preached was energized by the Spirit of God, penetrating through social relations and the body to the mind of the listener. Jesus' teaching, logic, and appeal to the person were all at odds with those of the religious leaders who opposed him. At the same time, the Spirit of God convicts and draws the person, yet the forces of evil try to persuade the person that Jesus' gospel message is a fraud. The battle is waged in the mind, but the war is for the heart. If the person says "yes" to Jesus in the will of his or her heart, the Word of God energized by the Spirit penetrates to the heart, bringing new covenant transformation—justification, regeneration, and renewal of life. The person has become a disciple of Jesus and entered the kingdom of heaven.

This attempts to illustrate what Jesus meant when he said that 'unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20). The innermost core of the disciple has experienced new covenant transformation, which includes justification (declared righteous before God) and the beginnings of sanctification (the experience of personal growth in righteousness). This far surpasses the righteousness of the scribes and

Pharisees, which was external and self-produced.

As the disciple continues to respond obediently to the Word of God taught and preached by Jesus and energized by the Spirit, the newly transformed heart directs the transformation of the person from the inside to the outside. The heart-will of the person in the power of the indwelling Spirit directs the renewing of the mind (see Romans. 12:1—2), the disciplining of the body (see 1 Corinthians 6:12-20), and the purifying of social relations (see 1 Corinthians. 5:9-13; Hebrews. 10:24-25) so that the disciple says "yes" to God with his or her entire "soulish person." The disciple bears the fruit of the Spirit in a life given to God that is being transformed to be like Jesus.

The schematic that follows attempts to illustrate these truths. This is the process of discipleship, in which the truth of the gospel sets a person free to become Jesus' disciple. As he or she continues to compare the words of the world to the words of Jesus, the person is truly free to grow in discipleship to Jesus (John 8:31-32). The Spirit of God takes up residence in the life of the disciple, producing Christlike characteristics, including especially love (John 13:34-35) and the fruit of the Spirit (John 15:7-8). As we look at the Sermon on the Mount unfold, this schematic will help us to appropriate Jesus' teaching and promote growth to be transformed more and more like him.

True righteousness grows as we allow the inside out transformation that Jesus' teaches bring to life the whole of the Scripture. It will be to a consideration of this topic we will turn to next week as we look at the principles Jesus presents to us in how we apply the teaching of the Old Testament to our lives.

# Inside-Out Transformation of Jesus' Disciples to Become Like Him\*

## (1) The Gospel and the Spirit.

The Words of Jesus' Gospel, energized by the Spirit, penetrate social relations and the body to the mind. The battle rages in the mind of the would-be disciple, but the war is for his or her heart.

## (2) The Obedience of the Would-Be Disciple.

The heart-will makes a decision for or against Jesus. As the heart says "yes" to Jesus, the truth of the Word of God energized by the Holy Spirit penetrates to the heart, bringing regeneration and setting the person free to become Jesus' disciple (John 8:31-32).

## (3) Transformed to Love As Jesus Loves.

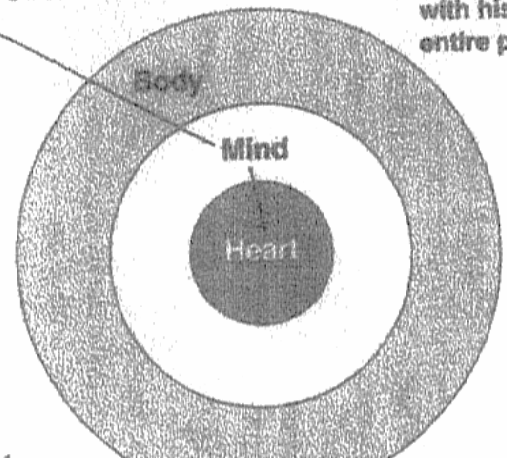
The regenerated heart is the beginning of the transformation of the disciple into the image of Christ, particularly to love like Jesus loves (John 13:34-45). The Spirit-indwelt heart directs the inside-out transformation process of mind, body, and social relations.

## (4) Becoming Like Jesus in Our Entire Person.

**Soulish Person**  
(social relations, body, mind, heart)

The disciple says "yes" to God with his/her entire person

Social Relations



Body

Mind

Heart