

The Righteousness of the Kingdom ó Part II
(Matthew 5:23-48)
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Note: The text below was prepared for oral delivery rather than for publication in print. As such, be aware that sentence fragments are intentionally used and that this document has not been edited to correct the errors in grammar, sentence structure, etc.

Today we will continue our study of the Sermon on the Mount, so be turning once again to Matthew Chapter 5. You may recall, we were in a section of the sermon, (vss. 21 through the end of Chapter 5, vs. 48), in which Christ elaborates extensively on the extent of the law ó of just what is required for any who would enter heaven. Now this section is launched from the backdrop of verse 20 where Christ said, *“For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.”* Now as we saw previously, by fast forwarding to the summary verse at the end of this section, verse 48, we see that this indeed speaks of the perfection required for entrance into the holy presence of God and heaven itself. We need a perfect righteousness. God’s law, summarized by love God supremely and our neighbor as ourselves, must be perfectly satisfied, both in precept and penalty. And nothing other than Christ’s own obedience unto death meets this standard.

So we will pick up today where we left off ó here in this section where Christ elaborates on the extent of the righteousness required ó the title of today’s message being “The Righteousness of the Kingdom ó Part II.” You may recall from Part I of this series that I believe the clear and most important message to be taken away from this section of His sermon is this ó Christ is communicating: “You are in need of a righteousness you cannot produce. But there’s good news ó that’s why I am here.” This is the summary of what Christ is communicating in verses 21 ó 48 and I think that it will be helpful to your understanding if you will keep this in mind as we complete our study of this section. “You are in need of a righteousness you cannot produce. But (Christ is relating) there’s good news ó that’s why I am here.” As He said in verse 17, that’s what I came to do ó to fulfill the law and the prophets in perfect obedience to the Father.

Now we see in this section of the sermon, verses 21 ó 48, 5 subsections, each of which contains the phrase, in some form or another, **“Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time,…”** as we saw in vs. 21, followed, as we saw in vs. 22, **“But I say unto you,…”** So throughout this section, Christ is exposing and refuting their error ó their take or spin on the law as it had been handed down, amended, or added to by the oral traditions of the scribes and Pharisees and their forefathers. The Pharisees had taught that sin was only in the outward act. They had contaminated the Scriptures with their own oral traditions, and Christ proceeds to set them straight.

Now the first sub section of this passage on the righteousness of the kingdom includes verses 21 ó 26 which deal with law’s demands as it pertains to murder, anger, and reconciliation. Now in Part I we only looked at verses 21 ó 22 that deal with murder and anger. And so, we’ll pickup today in verse 23 where He addresses the related issue of reconciliation.

B. RECONCILIATION (5:23-26) C

Mat 5:23 C Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; {24} Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. {25} Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. {26} Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.

After having shown how that the sin of murder includes not only acts of murder but also thoughts of anger and malice that arise over personal offenses and conflicts, Christ now goes on to show two things C

(1) The performance of religious practices and duties can neither absolve us from sin, not even the sin of murder which includes anger, nor can it replace our duty and responsibility to love our neighbor as ourselves. God=s law says, **“Love God perfectly, and love our neighbor as ourselves.”** This command forbids even the thought of anger or malice towards our neighbor, and when we fall short in this, no amount of religious activity will remove the guilt and the defilement of this sin. The law says, **“Do and live;**

disobey and die. So Christ here again is stressing the fact that we need a righteousness we cannot produce. Sin must be dealt with, but nothing that proceeds from our persons will accomplish this. Our only hope is in the righteousness of another – the Lord Jesus Christ.

We need to remember that religious practices and duties were required and commanded, under the Old Covenant. The people were required to bring gifts and offerings to God, but they were required to bring these with the right thoughts, attitudes, and motives. If the thoughts, attitudes, and motives were wrong these things became ***vain oblations***. That's what God called them, speaking through the prophet in Isaiah chapter 1, saying, ***“Bring no more vain oblations”*** that word meaning vain offerings – describing the incense as an abomination unto Him. You see, their offerings became worthless sacrifices, gifts, vain offerings whenever the people thought that these practices and gifts recommended them to God or contributed to their acceptance or to any part of eternal salvation. These things were ordained and given by God to the people – but to point them to Christ for all righteousness and life. These things also became worthless whenever the people thought that such practices replaced or made up for their lack of obedience in the way of love to their neighbor. So the second thing Christ is showing here follows the first:

(2) It is important that we seek to reconcile with our neighbors, to express our love in deeds and not think that religious activities and practices can relieve us of our responsibility in these areas. Verses 23 – 24 concern the person who comes to perform his or her religious duty (in this case the offering of a sacrifice at the temple altar) but who has offended his brother. Christ shows them that it is far more important that he be reconciled to his brother than that he discharge his religious duty. Religion becomes sham and pretense if we believe that by our participation in it, we can dismiss our sin – in this case, the person having behaved so poorly that his brother has something against him. This is in keeping with what James wrote in James 1:26, saying, ***“If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man’s religion is vain.”*** Now we all fall short, but the evidence that the religious activity is a sham is in thinking that one can get some sort of relief from their sin by attending to these religious activities, even those ordained by God. As an example, we're commanded to not forsake assembling ourselves together – to worship

together. But your attendance today in church does nothing to absolve you from your sins in any of these areas. To think otherwise exposes the vanity of your religion.

Now Verses 25 ó 26 deal with one who is in opposition to another as in a lawsuit. It may be referring to one to whom you owe a debt, one who has a just claim against you. Christ teaches it is imperative that we make good on our debts and treat this person right. Again, religious duties and practices will not make up for such behavior. As commanded, we are responsible to do unto others as we would have them do unto us.

Now it is important to remember that even our best efforts in these areas still fall short of the righteousness we need in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. We are all sinners, even those who do their best (or better than others by comparison) in these areas of love and duty. Our best efforts at love cannot put away sin, and they cannot make up any part of that righteousness by which God is reconciled unto us and by which we are made citizens of the kingdom of heaven. God does not grant us any part of the inheritance based on anything that proceeds from us. God will only find our fitness for eternal life and glory based on the righteousness established by Christ and made the sinners by imputation. And believers discover that they are fully redeemed and brought into His kingdom based solely on His righteousness before they even make any effort to obey in any of these areas. Now, realizing this, as motivated by grace and gratitude to God, we ought to make sure to make it our business to treat each other as we want to be treated, and we ought to be ashamed when we do not.

Now on that point, let me digress just a moment and share some thoughts that were impressed upon me in my study of this section on the righteousness of the kingdom. As we consider our responsibility (as the scriptures command) to walk worthy of our vocation as believers ó meaning those to whom God has graciously granted faith and repentance so as to have seen the impossibility of our measuring up to God's standard of holiness in any area ó seeing (for example) that we are all murderers in heart, men and women who fall so miserably short of the law of God's perfect love toward Him and toward our neighbor. Now while knowing this, we might be tempted to think, "If my compliance with God's will in any of these areas is of no meritorious value, then striving to obey really isn't as important as I once thought it was." Well that thinking exposes our sinful depravity. Even the tendency to justify our sinful actions (or find relief for them) simply

because we know that personally we don't come close to measuring up to the perfect standard of righteousness ó well, this tells on us.

We might be tempted to become comfortable with our sins (our conscience soothed over) as we essentially pit 2 truths against one another ó the truths that we're (1) responsible to strive to obey and comply with God's revealed will, but (2) totally unable to meet God's standard of obedience that penetrates to the heart (thoughts and motives) in any area. But we should recognize that our inability does not exempt us from our responsibility.

We may sometimes reason that since we can't meet the standard, that our character and conduct really doesn't matter ó or perhaps imagine that it just isn't that big of deal. I'm convicted that this kind of thinking is a product of our remaining sin ó for it implies that the only good reason to really strive to be obedient to our God and Father would be if we get something out of it. What a selfish and base motive! Though those God has given an understanding to may know better, such thoughts suggest that the only valid or compelling motive for me to really seek to comply with God's will would be one that is self-serving ó either legal or mercenary. That is, we only perform it in our own self interest ó either to avoid punishment or to gain reward ó whether before men, or before God. You see ó this is a reflection of how dearly we love our selves and that kind of thinking is sinful as it is diametrically opposed to God's requirement to love Him, perfectly, with all our heart, soul, and mind, and our neighbor as our self.

Even among us who profess to be delivered from the bondage of sin, free in Christ, as undeserved objects of His mercy and grace, we sometimes find that the gratitude, that should be stirred up in us for having received such unspeakable riches, is sometimes so weak that it would appear to be inferior by contrast and insufficient to adequately stir or prompt us to strive to live and daily act in accordance with God's revealed will for our lives. When we're so tempted, let's not persist with such sinful thoughts of ingratitude but rather tap into the spirit of thankfulness that springs from the believer's heart when he remains focused on things above ó on what our Lord and Savior has done for us in justifying undeserving, ungodly sinners such as us.

Well, thankfully God does graciously shed abroad His love in the hearts of His people. And if you, a sinner like me, are able to seek to live in

conformity to His will from that motive of gratitude to any degree at all, thank God for it as a product of His love and grace. We are sinners. But sinners saved by His grace are also kept there by His power and grace. We who love Him can only truly do so, because He first loved us.

Well, this only magnifies our need for a righteousness totally outside of ourselves. And the righteousness we need is none other than that which Christ wrought out in His perfect obedience unto death, in complete and full satisfaction to God's justice on behalf of all He represented — for all whose sins were charged or imputed to Him so that He might redeem them at the cross — pay the debt owed for all their sins — including murder, adultery, and every other sin found in our naturally and desperately wicked hearts. And in turn, what great news: That God imputed (reckoned to the account) of everyone He represented, the merit of that very finished work — His perfect obedience unto death — His righteousness — the righteousness of God!

II. ADULTERY AND LUST (5:27-30) C

Mat 5:27 C Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: {28} But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. {29} And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. {30} And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.

This, of course, is a reference to the seventh of the Ten Commandments. The oral tradition which the Pharisees taught claimed that a person was guilty of adultery only if he committed the outward act. Christ shows them that even the thought of lust in the heart makes a person guilty of the sin of adultery, and, therefore, he is not a DOER of the law. Again, this shows that we are all sinners in need of salvation by God's free and sovereign grace.

Verses 29-30 are difficult verses. Therefore, as you might imagine, I discovered that there were many different interpretations, some bordering on the ridiculous side of things. But we can know that Christ did not mean us to take this literally as if He were commanding us to mutilate our bodies. This would be contrary to His own teaching about sin. Christ makes it clear

that our sin springs from within, the heart. It's the outcropping of who we are ó sinners. In Matthew 15:19, Christ said, "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications..." etc. Sin is not something we can get rid of by outward remedies. It is a legal and spiritual problem and it takes a legal and spiritual cure.

Plucking out our right eye and cutting off our right hand would not get rid of the sin. If we plucked out our right eye, our left eye would still look lustfully. If we cut off our right hand, the left hand would still act sinfully. Mutilating our bodies will neither remove the guilt and defilement of sin nor cleanse the heart, so obviously Christ is speaking figuratively. He is not suggesting that we should literally mutilate our bodies or that this is the cure for the problem.

We must remember Christ is speaking to self-righteous legalists who were doing their best to attain righteousness and life by their efforts to keep the law. We must remember that He is showing them the main purpose of the law towards sinners B to slay sinners from any hope of pardon, forgiveness, salvation itself, based on their best efforts to keep the law. Therefore, if any are seeking to attain righteousness by their law-keeping, then whatever causes them to offend or sin must be removed. He employs a figure of speech here (hyperbole or exaggeration) to show how far a person who is seeking righteousness by his efforts to keep the law should be willing to go. Anything that hinders such a person from yielding perfect obedience to God ought to be cut off. If the mind were pure, the eyes and hands would follow suit. The blame is not with our body parts. It is with us because of who and what we are ó sinners who come into this world with desperately wicked hearts (minds, affections, and wills in opposition to God by nature). Since it is our minds which cause us to use our eyes and hands so readily and easily in the enticements of sin, then we should recognize that we could not attain the righteousness of the law even if we did pluck out our eyes and cut off our hands. But the point here is this: If plucking out our eyes and cutting off our hands would take care of the problem, we should be willing to do it.

This reminds me of what Christ told the young man in Matthew 19 when He presumed to have kept the law from His youth up. Now while Christ literally doesn't command us all to sell everything we have and give it all to the poor, in that discourse, that's precisely how far He told that young man he must take it. And in so doing, He exposed the foolishness of such self-righteousness, in imagining that he actually was capable of meeting God's

holy standard of righteousness in this area of loving his neighbor as himself. See, the problem is with the guilt and defilement of sin. The problem is with the heart, and the only cure is to have the guilt and defilement of sin totally removed and be given a new heart. The only thing that will do this is perfect satisfaction to law and justice found only in the obedience and death of Christ, made yours by God's judicial application of that to your account.

The bottom line is this: It would be ridiculous for any sinner to pluck out his eye or cut off his hand, but not as ridiculous as a sinner to seek justification and life, to attain or maintain salvation, based on his efforts to keep the law ó that is, based on the false notion that any condition or requirement whatsoever might be met by the sinner so as to contribute one iota to his or her salvation. Why cling to the idea that you must contribute something to make the difference, even one iota, when Christ said He came to fulfill every jot and tittle? As we've seen, that's what a jot is ó an iota, the smallest letter of all. And not only can you not contribute one iota ó there's not one jot or iota left to be done! And I'm glad.

III. DIVORCE AND ADULTERY (5:31-32) C

Mat 5:31 C It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: {32} But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.

Here Christ sets straight another false teaching promoted by the oral tradition concerning the issue of divorce and adultery. Actually, this section might best be considered an extension of the previous section since the subject here really is still the sin of adultery. Apparently they had come to believe that if a man divorced his wife, he was exonerated from any wrongdoing as long as he gave her a certificate of divorcement that would free her to marry another. This was not so according to the Old Covenant law. Divorce was never condoned under the Law of Moses; however, provision was made for it (an exception) in the case of a wife committing fornication. This did not absolve the parties involved. Those who married and divorced and then remarried, according to the law, became adulterers. Again, the reasoning brought about by the oral tradition displayed low views of sin and of righteousness.

Now if, with respect to adultery, we consider the spiritual application of this aspect of the law ó then consider that those whom Christ has taken as His bride (using biblical language) ó the bride speaking of the church, of all He redeemed at the cross, ó then think how wonderful it is that it can be said of all who are married to Jesus Christ, that notwithstanding all of our spiritual adultery (formerly trusting in a counterfeit Christ ó one the bible calls ðanother Jesusö), that notwithstanding that unfaithfulness, even our spiritual fornication, our Husband never put us away. If you get to thinking you can take some solace or comfort because youøve been able to refrain from the outward act of adultery, then consider the heart sin that gives birth to all sinful actions. The fact that the thoughts of the heart may not have broken out in your actions for this or some other particular area of sin, is not because youøre any different in nature. You see, the bible is clear ó we all come into this world at enmity with God in our minds. Yet, in Romans 5:8 weøre told that “... ***He commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.***” He bought us and took us to be His bride even then. And it goes on in verse 10 of Romans 5 to say, ð***For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, ...***” And the righteousness ó that He established in His obedience unto death and by which we were reconciled ó is an everlasting one. And on that basis, He never divorces us. Though adulterers in heart and spirit, He never puts us away. If youøre been shown the reality of your own sin, this is wonderful news!

IV. OATHS AND TRUTHFULNESS (5:33-37) C

Mat 5:33 C Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: {34} But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: {35} Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. {36} Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. {37} But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.

This language may be a little confusing, but we must understand its context. The issue here is truthfulness and honesty. By this time a whole legalistic system had been built around the issue of swearing oaths and what bound a person to tell the truth. It actually became a terrible code by which

people knew when they could get away with lying and deception and when they could not. There were many variations of what was meant by swearing upon this or the other, but in studying this, it reminded me of our modern childhood pranks when we would tell a lie with our fingers crossed behind our back as if that excused our dishonesty.

Later in Chapter 23 of Matthew, Christ calls them fools in describing how they swear by this and the other. He is showing here the high view of the law and how it binds us to be truthful in all things. There is no rationale, no justification by which we can get ourselves off the hook, so to speak, when we lie or do not keep our word. So Christ forbids such evil reasoning and shows them that, as the Psalmist wrote, God requires “...*truth in the inward parts.*” (Psa. 51:6)

V. PERFECT LOVE (5:38-48) C

Mat 5:38 C Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: {39} But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. {40} And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. {41} And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. {42} Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. {43} Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. {44} But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; {45} That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. {46} For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? {47} And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? {48} Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.

These words are spoken in the same sense of the passage I mentioned in Matthew 19. Just as Christ spoke to that self-righteous religionist who thought that he had kept God's law from his youth up, He is speaking here to the same kind of people, who either imagined that they were righteous enough to be called children of God, or who imagined that others, such as

the Pharisees, had attained such a righteousness. Here we see the strictness of God's law, not in requiring religious practices and duties, but in requiring perfect, continual love. This perfect, continual love requires us never to have any thoughts of personal vengeance, never to have the least thought of harm toward our worst enemies but, in fact, to do good and pray for our worst enemies.

If anyone seeks to attain or maintain salvation, if anyone seeks access to the kingdom of heaven, or to become a child of God, to be found in His favor based on his or personal character and conduct, or based upon any thing that proceeds from them ó any works of obedience or any requirement or condition they presume to add to the mix ó well, then hear clearly what is required C ***Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.*** @

As I said in the message preceding this one, there is a natural question that pops into your mind if God is pleased to bring you to understand the truth that a perfect righteousness is required. It goes something like this: òWhy, if that is really what is required, then how can anyone measure up ó how can anyone be saved?ö That question is posed at some stage by each and everyone who shall actually inhabit heaven as citizens of His kingdom. You must come to see the impossibility of being accepted before a holy God based on anything you can produce, anything done by you, or done through you or found in you ó and discover in the Gospel message that nothing (absolutely nothing) other than the righteousness of God found in Christ will suffice. I.e. ó His perfect satisfaction to God's holy law and inflexible justice.

All the religious ceremonies, all the reformations, all the rededications, all the tears of remorse, all the obedience that the most dedicated can muster up, cannot make up for any transgression or shortcoming in our failure to love God perfectly and our neighbor as ourselves. If we seek salvation based on our love, then we are debtors to do the whole law. It is true that this standard of perfect love is the goal for which all people, even lost people, should aim. We should all without exception seek to love our neighbor as ourselves, but we should never think that our best efforts to attain this goal could ever contribute to any part of salvation or our fitness for heaven. We truly need a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of

the best of men. We truly need salvation by God=s grace alone based on the righteousness of God in Christ without our deeds.

When Christ says here in vs. 48, “***Be ye therefore perfect...***,” He is reflecting on the fact that in the preceding verses, He had shown the impossibility of that perfection being found in me or you, the sinner. Considered then in context, the clear message is: “Be ye perfect in me ó the one who came to fulfill the law and the prophets ó the only one who ever walked on this earth, under the law, in perfect obedience.”

Some of you may have read the article that Jim put in last week’s church bulletin. I’m referring to the one written back in the 1800’s by a fellow named Samuel Trott, and near the end of that article, in reference to 2 Cor. 5:21, he commented on the language of this verse. That verse reads, “***For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God <out of> him.***” No ó He pointed out that it does not read we’re made the righteousness of God “out of” Him; but rather “***that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.***” My prayer is that all who hear this message might likewise find their perfection in Him, in agreement with the prophet Isaiah as he wrote, “***Surely, shall one say, in the LORD have I righteousness and strength:***” ó That’s the righteousness of His kingdom!

Footnote from the author: While this sermon was prepared and delivered by me, I often utilize the commentaries, study helps, and teachings of others to supplement my own prayerful study of the scriptures. Since this document was not originally prepared for publication in print, please excuse and recognize that it was unfeasible to properly identify and credit all of the various original sources used to develop the content herein. Ultimately, it is my sincere and foremost objective to accurately present the gospel of God's grace found in the only infallible source, God's word itself ó the Bible.

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