

True Righteousness

Matthew 5:13-20, 43-48

FIRST THOUGHTS

Many times, people want to know God's will, but they try to carry it out on their own terms. They impose human values and behavior on His Word. Instead of embracing Christ's righteousness, people pursue what seems right or makes sense to them. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught His followers to go beyond rituals and to live out true righteousness in Him. As you study this session, consider what it means for you to be salt and light in the world and how you can submit to King Jesus by living out His plans for you each day.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

As His ministry attracted people from all over Israel, He withdrew to a nearby mountain. There, He focused on equipping His followers so they could portray the way of life that should be normal for believers. What they heard was revolutionary. It upended many of their long-held beliefs about what God expected of His kingdom citizens. Rather than repeating conventional wisdom, He shared God's wisdom. Instead of relying on human ideas about the law, He explained God's actual intentions for the law.

KEY DOCTRINE *Evangelism & Missions*

It is the duty of every child of God to seek constantly to win the lost to Christ by verbal witness undergirded by a Christian lifestyle, and by other methods in harmony with the gospel of Christ.
(See John 20:21; 1 Thessalonians 1:8.)

Jesus's goal was to help people be salt and light in a needy culture. For so long, God's people had depended on external rituals associated with the Mosaic law rather than embracing the spirit behind the law. Jesus illustrated what being kingdom citizens meant in the practical experiences of life. He didn't come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it by embracing a higher law, the law of love. Jesus sought to help His disciples not only understand true righteousness, but also to live it out through kingdom behavior.

INFLUENCE YOUR CULTURE (MATTHEW 5:13-16)

Jesus taught His followers to be the **salt of the earth**. In Jesus's day, salt was valued not only because it gave flavor to food, but also because it preserved food. In this passage, the "earth" did not refer to the physical planet or to a worldly viewpoint. Instead, it reflects human habitation and relationships. To be the salt of the earth involves protecting society from putrefying. Christians should influence culture by reflecting kingdom values.

Salt cannot accomplish its function if it loses its saltiness. Jesus noted that if **salt should lose its taste**, it could not be **made salty** again. If believers lose their effectiveness because of sin or spiritual neglect, they will not fulfill their God-given purpose.

In another analogy, Jesus called His disciples **the light of the world**. Notice, He did not say "*a light in the world*" but "*the light of the world*." We are not one of many sources of illumination in a darkened culture. By revealing Christ, who is the ultimate Light of the world, we help people experience light and life in Him (John 8:12).

Such light **cannot be hidden** any more than a **city situated on a hill**. If we have the light of Christ within us, people will see it. It's undeniable. Similarly, lamps give light to a room. It would be foolish if someone **lights a lamp and puts it under a basket**. Doing so defeats its purpose—and creates a fire hazard! Instead, the light is placed **on a lampstand**. It was then placed on a stand to help the light reach around the room. Thus, it provided **light** for everyone **in the house**.

Jesus said believers should let your light shine before others. We don't do so to get favorable attention, but to bear witness to the Source of the light. Christians are called to live in a way that allows people to observe our **good works** and **give glory to** our heavenly **Father**.

OBEDY YOUR FATHER (MATTHEW 5:17-20)

Some of Jesus's listeners believed that He opposed the Mosaic law. On the contrary, He asserted that He did not come to **abolish the Law or the Prophets**. By "Law" Jesus referred to the instructions God gave Moses in the first five books of the Bible, known as the Pentateuch or the Torah. "Prophets" meant the writings of the four major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel) and twelve minor prophets (Hosea-Malachi). The Greek word translated "abolish" means to dissolve or destroy. Jesus intended neither to diminish the law or to eliminate it. Instead, His mission would **fulfill** all of God's Word, completing it to the fullest extent.

With the word **truly**, Jesus strongly validated the authority of the Scriptures. He left no room for equivocation. One day, **heaven and earth** will **pass away**, but God's Word will endure. Just as God is eternal, so His Word is eternal. As a result, Jesus warned against violating even **the least of these commands** or leading **others to do the same**. The term **breaks** meant more than simply going against a command. It included the idea of disregarding it completely.

Jesus criticized the way **scribes and Pharisees** portrayed God's Word. These leaders took pride in their own **righteousness** based on the law and traditions. They thought a right relationship with God could be earned and maintained by human effort. But Jesus urged His disciples to seek a righteousness that **surpasses** legalistic dependence on man-made rules. God is not interested in ritualistic righteousness. He requires faith in Jesus.

The scribes and Pharisees paid lip service to God through traditions and rituals, but their hearts lacked love for Him or others. Such a low view of God and misplaced trust inevitably prevents individuals from entering the **kingdom of heaven**. True righteousness comes through faith in Jesus, which leads us to embrace the spirit, as well as the letter, of His Word.

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES (MATTHEW 5:43-48)

Jesus reminded His followers of familiar sayings: **You have heard that it was said**. Yet, injunctions against murder and idolatry, as well as admonitions to **love your neighbor**, only told part of the story. In God's kingdom, loving neighbors falls flat if one chooses to **hate your enemy**. This approach appeals to human nature, but it fails to reach the level of true righteousness.

To introduce the kingdom's new paradigm, Jesus underscored His own divine authority, **But I tell you**. Instead of hate, Jesus instructed His disciples to **love your enemies** and to **pray for those who persecute you**. We might claim to love our enemies, but it's harder to pray for people who intentionally harm us. Yet, Jesus's teaching wasn't rooted in some vague theological theory, but from a heart that would forgive those who crucified Him.

Loving one's enemies does not make us God's children but demonstrates our relationship with Him. Because we belong to Him, we act differently. As our Creator, the Father takes an active role in the lives of all humanity. He **causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good** and **sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous**. Through what is known as God's "common grace," He intentionally chooses to bless every person. So, to love like He loves, we must imitate His grace. We must show love and concern for all people—even those who oppose and oppress us.

Jesus acknowledged that it's easier to **love those who love** us. This approach is no different than the actions of unsaved people around us. It offers no genuine **reward** in this life or the next. Likewise, developing loving and respectful relationships solely with people who are like us and agree with us reveals nothing **out of the ordinary**. We look like everyone else instead of embracing a life that sets us apart as God's people and points others to Him. Jesus told His disciples to **be perfect . . . as your heavenly Father is perfect**. Here, the idea of perfection relates to moral qualities and behavior, but it also suggests spiritual maturity.

Next Week – Treasure, Matthew 6:19-34

