

OUT-RIGHTEOUS

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Matthew 5:20-37

What if you were the sort of person who always tells the truth? People know this about you. Your word is your bond. You don't need to swear on a stack of bibles; you don't need to invoke the name of God to back you up; you don't need to qualify your statements with "may God strike me dead," or my favorite, "I'm lying, I'm dying." You simply speak and people know it is so.

Or, what if you are the sort of person who always seeks to repair any broken relationships you might have with other people? You are never one to "unfriend" anybody. You always seek to forgive. For you, the relationship takes a higher priority than your own ego.

Or, what if you are the sort of person who is faithful in all of your relationships—you are dependable and constant, you are honest and trustworthy, you are never looking around for a better relationship?

Or, what if you are the sort of person who treats everyone equally as a person of value, that no one is considered lesser or disposable? What kind of person would you be?

The answer to all of these is that you would be the sort of person that Jesus demands that his followers be. You would be the sort of person that makes God's kingdom visible to the world.

Today, we are in our third week of looking at Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. The sermon begins when Jesus retreats with his disciples up a hillside and he sits with them to teach about the kingdom of heaven. First, Jesus offers the Beatitudes—those nine proclamations that each begin with the word "blessed"—*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

After that, Jesus teaches that he has come as the fulfillment of the Law. The Law, of course, is the Law of Moses as found in the Torah. It was the central fixture of the Jewish faith. The Pharisees, he says, they keep the letter of the law and call themselves righteous. You, he says, must do better. You must out-righteous the Pharisees. You do this by embracing the spirit of the Law for that is where you will find the kingdom of heaven.

Anyone hearing this would have been shocked. It is common knowledge that no one can out-righteous the Pharisees. They keep the Law better than anyone. But Jesus says, no, they keep the appearance of the Law. They keep the Law just 'good enough.' You can do better. You can go deeper. You can keep the law as God

intended. You can keep the Law in such a way that it changes you, that it reveals the kingdom of heaven in this world.

Our reading today is an elaboration of how to be out-righteous. Jesus is challenging his followers to stretch themselves beyond the standard expectations of their faith, to stretch beyond their spiritual comfort zone. To do this, Jesus offers four examples of how to exceed the demands of the Law. Each of these examples is introduced with the statement, *you have heard how it has been in the past*, and Jesus addresses four prohibitions regarding murder, adultery, divorce, and oath-taking.

With the first he says, *You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, You shall not murder*. This, of course, is one of the pillars of the Ten Commandments—Do not murder. It is pretty straightforward. And anyone who makes it through the day without murdering someone can declare with all sincerity, “I kept that Law.” But Jesus extends this command beyond murder saying that when you are angry with another person, you should seek to reconcile with them. Anger has a way of killing a relationship and when a relationship dies that person becomes, as we say, “dead to us.” Build the relationship, don't murder it. Not killing is not enough. We must nurture all relationships.

With the second extension he says, *You have heard that it was said, You shall not commit adultery*. Jesus knows how damaging adultery is not just to the people directly involved but to those around them—their community, their families. Jesus redefines adultery beyond the act itself all the way to its intent. He says, *Any man who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart*. The Pharisees can say “I did not commit adultery,” but if that person is living out a fantasy in their imagination then they are not living in the kingdom.

Jesus' third prohibition addresses divorce. He says, *It was also said, whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce*. According to the book of Leviticus, to gain a divorce, a man needed to provide his wife with a certificate of divorce and it was done. His rationale for demanding the divorce could be as thin as her burning his supper. Jesus says that while divorce may be permissible, unless the woman is guilty of unfaithfulness then the man is causing the woman to commit adultery. Furthermore, *Any man who marries a divorced woman [also] commits adultery [himself]*. This divorce allowed a person with power (always the man) to easily dispose of someone with less power (the woman). People are not disposable. Relationships are to be nurtured, not murdered. Divorce allows for the easy destruction of a relationship and it brings injury to the weaker party.

Lastly, Jesus says, *You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord*. People then, like today, would swear oaths to give weight to their statements. But the implication is that if you must swear an oath it is because your word has been

tainted by previous lies. Try this on, Jesus says, instead of swearing an oath just tell the truth. Always. The kingdom is where the truth always flourishes. It is where we are truthful in our dealings with one another and in our relations with one another.

Jesus gathers with his followers at the beginning of his ministry to warn them that this is the ride they are about to get on, this is the life they will lead, this is what he expects of them. They are to choose healing over anger, faithfulness over lies, justice over abuse, and truth over presumptions.

These expectations can be exhausting—living this way goes against our natural inclinations. But that is why we are here as a church, to worship God and to work together, learn together, to practice building relationships together, to practice forgiveness together. And it will be exhausting until it becomes part of who we are, until, as it is said “It is written on our hearts,” until it is baked into our DNA.

The Law says, love your neighbor. Jesus says, love your enemy. If you are compelled to go one mile, then go two. If someone begs from you, give to them. Jesus isn't just challenging his followers to be better in their faith, he is directing them to be disciples within community, to be shapers of their community.

Each of these extensions of the Law involves other people and how we live in community. Being righteous is not how one treats God, it is about how one treats others in God's name. Jesus is calling his people to be lights in the world, shining out God's glory.

In doing this, we are not just doing good deeds, we are doing God's work. We have been empowered by God's God's spirit (Isaiah 42). We have been blessed. We've been made salty. We have been set apart. We have God with us, teaching, guiding, pushing us, giving us strength, making us God's agents of change.

Knowing all this, what sort of person do you choose to be?