

Deep, Substantive Righteousness

Matthew 5:17-20

I don't really know anybody who says, "When I grow up I want to be shallow and superficial." No, about everybody I know wants depth and substance when it comes to the major pursuits of their lives – whether it's a career, parenting, or whatever.

A couple years ago we did a "Bring Your Pastor to Work Day." Anybody who wanted could invite me to join them in their workplace for a day. Quite a few people invited me to come see them in action on the job. I was so very impressed with the depth of knowledge (both practical and theoretical) and skill that people have in the workplace. I got to see people giving lectures, operating heavy equipment, doing construction work, landscaping, medical procedures, teaching preschool, etc. I know firsthand that when it comes to your careers, you are anything but superficial.

I've noticed the same thing is true even when it comes to hobbies or leisure pursuits. Some people have casual interests, but a lot of you are serious when it comes to your recreational pursuits. You have a vast amount of knowledge and experience when it comes to bicycles, motorcycles, scrapbooking, computers, football, gardening, or music. Your involvement is anything *but* shallow and superficial.

Given that we tend to cultivate depth and substance in almost every area of life, wouldn't it be a shame if our experience with God were shallow and superficial? Wouldn't it even be odd if our experience with Christ were the glaring exception when it came to depth and substance?

Today we are going to look at a passage of Scripture in which Jesus says that those who are apprenticed to Him will have a depth and substance when it comes to righteousness. In Matthew 5:17-20 Jesus tells His disciples that they will need to have a type of righteousness that surpasses that of the Scribes and the Pharisees. This is another passage that can give us a vision for how radically Jesus can transform our lives when we're apprenticed to Him.

We're in the midst of a sermon series on discipleship. Disciples are actually apprenticed to Jesus in order to learn from Him how to live their lives. Just like a person might enter into a plumbing apprenticeship to actually learn how to do plumbing, when we are apprenticed to Jesus we actually learn from Him how to live in the kingdom of heaven. We are currently studying the Sermon on the Mount (SoM) as the core curriculum of a disciple. The past couple of weeks we considered the beatitudes which describe who really thrives in the kingdom.

In August we considered Jesus' teaching about His disciples being the "light of the world." That message can be found on our web site. The idea is that just as Jesus was the Light of the World – radiating God's love and truth to people living in darkness – those who follow Jesus also shine like lights in this world. This concept is a good lead-in to the passage we're considering this morning, Matthew 5:17-20.

Before Jesus talks about His disciples' righteousness, He talks about His own *Jesus is God's deepest expression of righteousness. (5:17-18)*

17 "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill.

"The Law and the Prophets" was a common way of designating the Hebrew bible (what we call the Old Testament). The way Jesus expresses Himself in verse 17 reflects the fact that people accused Him of trying to abolish the Jewish Scriptures. This accusation is very understandable because Jesus challenged the way that the Jewish leaders of His day carried out their functions. Jesus challenged the man-made rules that had been built up around the Law. And Jesus made enigmatic statements about tearing down the temple and rebuilding it in three days. It's very understandable that Jesus would be accused of seeking to abolish the Law and the Prophets.

But Jesus wanted His disciples to know that He had no intention of abolishing the Law or the Prophets. To the contrary, Jesus says that He came to *fulfill* the Jewish Scriptures. Sometimes when we think of Jesus "fulfilling" the OT, we think only of specific predictions that have come to pass. But Jesus had a much more comprehensive type of fulfillment in mind. Jesus fulfilled the Hebrew Scriptures in the sense that He was *the deepest expression* of the Law and the Prophets. He *brought to fruition* everything that God promised in the Law and the Prophets. He was *the goal and culmination* of the entire Hebrew Bible.

The gospel of Matthew is written in a way that emphasizes Jesus as the fulfillment of the entire Hebrew Scriptures. It's fascinating the way Matthew saw Jesus' life as fulfillment. Matthew 1:1, for example, says that Jesus was "the son of David, the son of Abraham." These were two of the most prominent figures in the Old Testament. Jesus was the "son of David" in the sense that He was the descendant of David who would sit on the throne forever (2 Samuel 7). Jesus was the son of Abraham in the sense that He was the descendant of Abraham through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 11). Jesus expressed this calling when He told His followers to "make disciples of all the nations" – all the families of the earth. Jesus brought to fruition everything that was promised to Abraham and to David.

Jesus also "fulfilled" the Law and the Prophets in other ways. There is a sense in which Jesus recapitulated the history of Israel, being faithful where Israel was unfaithful. For example, just as Israel was God's "son" (Exodus 4:22) who came out of bondage in Egypt, Jesus came back to the Promised Land after Mary and Joseph had fled to Egypt for safety. Matthew's comment: This fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called My Son." Jesus *fulfilled* this historical event in the history of Israel because He too was God's Son who was called out of Egypt. Jesus recapitulated the history of Israel in other ways. Just as Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness. Whereas Israel gave in to her temptations, Jesus resisted His temptations. Israel was the disobedient son, Jesus was a faithful Son.

Then there are the many ways in which Jesus fulfilled the entire sacrificial system described in the Old Covenant. He was final sacrifice that paid for the sins of the people once and for all. Jesus is the High Priest who presented this very sacrifice to God. Everything in the Old Testament pointed toward Jesus and found its deepest expression in Jesus.

In a very comprehensive way Jesus fulfilled the Law and the Prophets. Jesus restates this idea very definitively in verse 18:

18 "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law, until all is accomplished.

“Until heaven and earth pass away” is another way of saying “never.” The smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet was the “yod” (KJV – “jot”); the smallest stroke was like the serif on modern fonts. In other words, not a single bit of the Law will pass away – and here’s the big qualifier – ***until all is accomplished***. In light of later biblical theology, we would say that Jesus “accomplished” or “fulfilled” all by His death and resurrection. When He uttered the words, “It is finished” from the cross Jesus was designating that everything was accomplished; He had done everything He had come to do.

And so now we read and apply the OT in light of its fulfillment in Jesus. The Old Covenant given to Moses has been replaced by the New Covenant in Jesus’ blood. You probably noticed that we don’t do animal sacrifices, we don’t keep the Sabbath (sundown Friday to sundown on Saturday), we don’t really care whether you wear clothes made out of two types of materials (see Leviticus 19:19). These are all regulations that are now obsolete because Jesus fulfilled the Law.

By the way, on Saturday, October 10th we’re hosting a Walk Through the Bible Seminar. It’s a very lively, interactive experience for everyone from small children up through adults. If you attend this seminar, you’ll walk away conversant with the main persons and events in the OT as well as a grasp of the whole flow of the Old Testament. This seminar will give you a better understanding of everything Jesus has fulfilled. There’s a table in the foyer where you can get more information and sign up.

Verses 19 and 20 tell us what will be true of those who are apprenticed to the One who fulfilled the Law and the Prophets.

Jesus’ apprentices will also exhibit deep, substantive righteousness. (5:19-20) As we read the next couple of verses, we need to keep in mind that Jesus is speaking to His disciples. It is generally agreed that Jesus is speaking about the commandments as we understand them in light of His fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets when He says:

19 "Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus entrusts to His disciples a body of teaching that reflects the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. We therefore have a heightened responsibility to both live it out and teach others to do the same. This statement anticipates Jesus’ command in Matthew 28 when He told His disciples to make disciples; you have to be a disciple to make a disciple. One aspect of making disciples is “teaching them to obey everything [Jesus has] commanded you.”

Jesus suggests that in the kingdom there will be a certain ranking or degrees of privilege in the kingdom when he speaks of being called the least or being called great in the kingdom. This makes us a bit uncomfortable because in our world such distinctions have the connotation of superiority and achievement – things that would be inappropriate when it’s all a matter of grace. Honestly, I don’t know how to eliminate the tension. I prefer to live with the tension and hear the heart of what Jesus is saying here. He is stressing the importance of believing it all and teaching it all.

There was probably an audible gasp when Jesus made the following statement (verse 20):

20 "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

In Jesus' day the Pharisees were the religious gold standard. The Pharisees calculated that there were 248 commandments and 365 prohibitions in the Law (one for each day). They had a rigorous type of lifestyle that was unattainable for the normal person. They fasted two days a week; they tithed from the smallest amounts of produce and income; they prayed out loud on the street corners; they had all sorts of religious gear that set them apart – robes with tassels, etc. And the scribes were scholars of the Hebrew Scriptures; they actually had the Hebrew Bible memorized. And everybody knows that whoever can quote the most Scripture is the most righteous, right?

And here is Jesus talking to His apprentices – fishermen, a tax collector, a future embezzler, etc. In the larger crowd (we know from 4:24 and 7:28-29) were people who'd suffered all kinds of diseases and demon possession; some were probably Gentiles (non-Jews). In other words, these were among the least-likely candidates for righteousness. And yet Jesus says, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." Why would Jesus say this? Jesus is so inviting in other places, yet here He seems to be making an unreasonable demand. Does anybody really have a chance at the kingdom of heaven? Jesus seems to have in mind entering the kingdom when it is fully and finally established as opposed to entering into the kingdom here and now through faith in Jesus.

Let me make a couple comments that put this statement into perspective. First, Jesus doesn't say that a person's righteousness is what will get you into the kingdom; He is only making a statement about the necessity of surpassing righteousness. In other words, Jesus is making a statement about the type of righteousness that His disciples will develop as they are apprenticed to Him. Just as Jesus fulfilled the Law and the prophets and had a righteousness that surpassed that of the scribes and Pharisees, those apprenticed to Him will embody surpassing righteousness.

And how does the righteousness of Jesus' disciples surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees? The short answer is that Jesus' disciples will have heart-righteousness whereas the Pharisees' righteousness was external. Read Matthew 23 when you have the chance. Jesus blasts away at the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites. He gave an analogy that helps explain. Imagine getting up from supper, taking your dishes to the sink and washing only the outside of the cup and the outside of the bowl; you then put them back in the cupboard to be used again. That would be disgusting wouldn't it? Jesus said that's what the Pharisees were like: "For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence." And, "For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness." (Mt. 23:25, 27).

By contrast, those apprenticed to Jesus exhibit deep, substantive righteousness (right behavior that reflects a right relationship with God). When you think about it, this is exactly what was promised in the new covenant. Let's consider two prominent examples from the Old Testament. In Jeremiah 31 we are told:

33 "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

We also read in Ezekiel 36:

25 "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26 "Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

The deep, substantive righteousness that Jesus demands isn't a function of our heroic efforts. Our effort and our will are involved to be sure, but deep, substantive righteousness is a function of God's commitment to transform us from the inside out. Our part is to enter into the kingdom through faith in Jesus and live as apprentices. Jesus' part is to produce this type of deep, substantive righteousness that God promised in the new covenant in Jesus' blood.

Beginning next week we're going to consider specific examples of this type of righteousness. In the rest of chapter 5 Jesus gives six specific examples of what He meant by "righteousness" that surpassed that of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus' disciples not only don't murder people; they put away their anger. Jesus' disciples not only don't commit adultery; they don't look lustfully on others. Jesus' disciples not only love their neighbors; they also love their enemies. That's the type of righteousness that Jesus demonstrated and so that's the type of righteousness that His disciples can display. This is important for us – Jesus wants us to experience the satisfaction of this righteousness. And this is important for those around us because He calls us to be 'the light of the world.'

The main "take away" from our passage today is not, "I better get busy so that I'm more righteous than the Pharisees." Jesus never expected people to produce this righteousness through hard work. Rather, the "take away" is to realize that as we are apprenticed to Jesus, He is able and willing to give us a righteousness that is deeper and more substantive than we ever imagined.

I've talked with a lot of people that feel spiritually inferior and pretty much assume that they'll never have the depth of experience with God that others have. Maybe today is the day you catch Jesus' vision for deep, substantive righteousness. Maybe today is the day you say, "Okay, Jesus, this type of righteousness is Your idea. As I follow You, would you build this righteousness into my life?"