

Exceeding Righteousness
Deuteronomy 30:15 – 20; Matthew 5:21 – 37
Sunday, February 16, 2020

There's a movie called *Office Space*, a comedy about all the ridiculous things that people take so seriously in the workplace. One of the main characters is Joanna, who is a waitress at TGI Friday's-style restaurant. She and all the other employees are required to wear uniforms, and on their uniforms they have to wear buttons, pins, or other fun decorative items that they call pieces of flair, because they add flair to the uniforms. Each waiter and waitress is required by the restaurant to wear 15 pieces of flair, so Joanna has 15 pins on her uniform. She doesn't even know what they *say*. She's just doing it because she *has* to.

In one scene, her manager calls her over and says, "I need to talk about your flair." Joanna says, "Really? I have 15 buttons on." "Well, 15 is the minimum," he says. "Now, it's up to you whether you just want to do the bare minimum. Brian, for example has 37 pieces of flair." "So you want me to wear more," she asks. "We want you to express yourself," he says. "So if you want me to wear more, why didn't you just make the minimum 37," she asks. The manager says, "If you think the bare minimum is enough, then okay. But some people choose to wear more, and we encourage that."

It reminds me of when my grandparents were building their home in Florida 60 years ago. My grandfather would get off of work each day and go to the construction site. The builders were gone for the day, and my grandfather would go around the house and hammer in extra nails everywhere that they had already put nails earlier that day. They had done enough to be up to code, to pass inspection, to satisfy the law, but he wanted the house to be stronger.

Jesus is talking here about the Jewish law, the 613 commandments that the people of Israel have to live by to be *righteous*, to be in right relationship with God. And Jesus is saying, “This is just a starting point. It’s the bare minimum. It will get you up to code. But just following the law, satisfying the requirements and doing enough to get by, isn’t enough. You need to *exceed* the law.” Because you can satisfy all the requirements, do all the things you *have to do*, and still not have your heart or your life transformed. You can follow all the rules and still not be truly *righteous*, living in right relationship with God and with other people.

Last week Jesus said that our righteousness has to *exceed* that of the scribes and the Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders who strictly adhered to the law, but did so without compassion or love for their neighbor. This week Jesus gives us a few examples of what that exceeding righteousness might look like.

First, he says, “You’ve heard it said, ‘You shall not murder.’ *Thou shalt not kill*, you know that law; you know how that works. But that’s just the starting point. That will get you up to code. I say to you that if you have anger in your heart toward someone else or if you insult someone else, it’s just as destructive and harmful as killing them.”

It’s *easy* not to kill someone. For the most part, that’s pretty easy. We can do that. It is much *harder* to overcome your anger and work through the problem with this person that is causing you to be angry in the first place. Don’t just “not kill” someone. Strive to have mercy and compassion and love for your neighbor so that you can be at peace and have true harmony between you. *That* is what it means to be *righteous*.

Then Jesus says, “You’ve heard it said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ You know *that* law. You know how *that* works. But that’s just the starting point. That will get you up to code. I say to you that if you even *look* at someone else with lust, then you’ve *already* committed adultery in your *heart*.” You see, Jesus isn’t just dealing with the *action* here. He’s getting to the *root* of the problem. What’s at the root of adultery? Lust. What’s at the root of murder? Anger. Let’s deal with *those* things before they lead to something *worse*.

You can *not kill* someone, but still not be in right relationship with them, because there is anger in your heart. You can *not commit adultery*, but still not be in right relationship with this person, because in your heart you are objectifying and dehumanizing them, not seeing them as a child of God, created in the image of God, a brother or sister in Christ, capable of loving and being loved. We’re just seeing them as an object to act upon for our satisfaction.

It’s the same thing with what Jesus says here about divorce. He says, “You’ve heard it said that whoever divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.” According to Jewish law, a man could divorce his wife for pretty much *any* reason, or no reason at all, and he doesn’t need his wife’s consent. It’s just one day, all of a sudden, boom, we’re divorced. But the man had to give her a certificate stating the reason *why* he divorced her, so she could show that to a potential *future* husband, to at least be able to say, “See, I didn’t cheat on him. I was a faithful wife.”

So Jesus says, “You know that law. You know how that works. But that’s just the starting point. That will get you up to code. I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for unchastity, causes her to commit adultery.” Now, this hits close to home for some of us, because a lot of us have *experienced* divorce, whether ourselves or our parents or children or friends. So let’s unpack this a little bit. What Jesus is talking about here?

In Jesus' time if a woman was divorced, regardless of the reason, chances are, no other man would want to marry her, because she had already been with another man. And in that time, it was not commonplace for a woman to have a job that paid enough for her to survive on. She could try to go back to her parents and ask them to take care of her, and they may or may not be *able* to take her back in and provide for her. But even if they did, once her parents died, she was back on her own again. So, a woman who was divorced had no real means to support herself. She essentially had two options: she could *beg* for a living or she could become a prostitute. The *men* came out of the divorce just fine. But for the women, divorce was like *social death*. No one wanted you, you were a burden for someone else to take care of, and you had no real way to provide for yourself.

So what Jesus is saying here is about *protecting* women – people who had no real protection – ensuring that they don't just get thrown out, cast aside by society, and lose their *worth* as human beings. Jesus is trying to protect those who don't have any rights, because that was essentially the goal of this law in the first place. He's saying, "You can't just divorce your wife for any reason. You can't *do* that. You can't *treat* people that way and do whatever you *want* to them. You have to see this other person's *humanity* and respect them as a human being, as a child of God, loved and honored by God, so *you* should love and honor them, too."

This is what Jesus is doing in all of these (with murder and anger, adultery and lust, and divorce). He's challenging us to go deeper and see the humanity in each other. To look at this person who is the object of our anger or our lust and find empathy and understanding and *love* for them; to see them as a human being, as our *brother*, as our *sister*, a child of God, created in the image of God; and to see the implications that our actions have on them. Jesus calls us here, not just to

satisfy the law and be up to code, but to let the spirit of the law be written on our hearts so that we are moved to compassion and grace.

And so the question for *us* in all of this is twofold. First, where in your life do you need to deal with anger or lust or some underlying issue that is keeping you from being in right relationship with someone else? What Jesus says here is, “Fix it. Take care of it. Don’t wait until it’s too late to do something about it. Make it right within yourself, and then go make it right with that other person.” It may be scary or painful or hard to do, but Jesus calls us here not to what is *easy*, but to do the hard work of living in love. So that’s the first question for us. Where *in you*, in *your life* do you need to address the things that are keeping you from being in right relationship with others?

The second question that rises out of what Jesus says here is: who are the people who are objectified and dehumanized and cast aside in our world, in our lives, and how can we be moved to compassion and grace, to find empathy and understanding and love for them, so that we see their humanity and treat them like the children of God that they are? Who are the people who have no voice that God is calling *us* to speak up for today? Who are the people who have no protection who God is calling *us* to protect?

For Jesus, the law is not just about following a set of rules. It’s about being drawn into a deeper awareness of the humanity of the people around us and a greater love for our neighbor. You could be following all the rules, but if that is not leading you to a greater love for your neighbor or for the poor and oppressed and suffering among us, then what is it worth? Jesus wants the *spirit* of the law to be written on our hearts and minds.

Next Sunday is Transfiguration Sunday, when we hear the story of how Jesus revealed his glory to his disciples on a mountaintop. And so the lectionary next week (the calendar of assigned scripture readings) takes us away from the Sermon on the Mount before we get a chance to finish it. And I think there's one more thing in this chapter that we still need to look at. Jesus goes on to talk about turning the other cheek and loving your enemy. And then at the very end of this chapter he says, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." What do we do with *that*? Is Jesus telling us that we should never mess up, never make mistakes? I mean, all of this is hard enough without the added pressure of Jesus telling us that we need to be *perfect!*

We tend to think of perfection as meaning "no mistakes." You never slip up. You get everything right. That is what it means to be perfect. If a pitcher in a baseball game doesn't allow any hits and doesn't walk any of the batters from the opposing team, they call that a *perfect game*. In school if you don't miss a single answer on the test, you get a 100, and that's a *perfect score*. But think about it this way. In a baseball game, a pitcher might not allow any hits and might not walk any batters, but say he throws a wild pitch that goes over the catcher's head. He makes a *mistake*, but it's *still* considered a perfect game. And maybe you get every answer right on your history test, you don't *miss* anything, but you spell a word wrong. You made a *mistake*, but you *still* get a 100, a perfect score.

We can make mistakes and still be perfect. Because the perfection that Jesus is talking about here has *nothing to do with not making mistakes*.

Jesus is calling us here to love the people we *don't* get along with *the same way* we love the people we *do* get along with. To treat the people who *aren't* nice to us *the same way* we treat the people who *are* nice to us. To treat our *enemies* the *same way* we treat our *friends*. And the

reason we *do* this, Jesus says, is because that's exactly what *God* does. He says God makes the sun rise on the evil *and* on the good. They *each* see a new day. God gives life to *each* of them. God makes the rain fall on the righteous *and* the unrighteous.

Jesus says that God loves the good *and* the bad; those who love God *and* those who don't. God loves them all equally. God's love is the same across the board. There is no variation in it. God is *perfect* in God's ability to love. So for Jesus to tell *us* to be perfect *like God* means that *we* should strive to love *everyone* the *same*. The good and the bad. Our friends and our enemies. Those who make it easy and those who make it hard. Love them all the same, equally, evenly, across the board. *That* is what Jesus is talking about here when he says to be perfect. Instead of thinking of perfection as never making a mistake in life, Jesus shows us a perfection that is based on loving and treating everyone the same.

Jesus hung out with the good, faithful, religious people *and* the prostitutes and tax collectors and sinners; the people everyone else hated. He loved *them* the same as he loved *everyone else*. No partiality. No favoring. Perfect love. And *that's* the love that God has for *us*. Even when we mess up and make mistakes and make an absolute wreck out of our lives and our relationships, God's love for us does not waver. God loves you with a *perfect love*. A love that is patient and kind and self-sacrificing and eternal. And we are called to emulate that love and share it with others. *That* is our *challenge* as followers of Jesus. To love, not just when it's *easy*, but when it is very, very hard. Because when love is *hard* is when love is *needed* the most. And the people who are the hardest to love are often the people who need love the most.

Righteousness is not about being *perfect*, and it's not about being *right*. It's about *living in right relationship*, in wholeness and harmony and love with God and with each other. And *that* is what Jesus is calling us to here.