

The Journey of Righteousness

Alrighty well good to see you all. If you have a bible, turn with me to **Matthew 5**. If you are new around City Church, we are about **six weeks into** a series on the *book of Matthew* in the bible. We are also now **three weeks into** something called the “sermon on the mount”—one of the most famous and well-known teachings Jesus ever gave. And *in* these teachings, Jesus just talks a lot about what life looks like for followers of Jesus on planet earth.

And the **passage** we’ll cover in it today is a very **pivotal one**. Because today, Jesus lays a foundation for what he’ll unpack, really, for the remainder of the sermon. **Which means most everything we’ll talk about, from now until mid-November or so as a church, is working out the implications of this passage we’re about to read.** So obviously, I want us to make sure we grasp what is being said here.

And to help with that, I want to **pose two questions** for us to consider. I think these two questions help us frame up what Jesus is about to discuss, and get into a similar headspace to where he was at when he spoke these words. And here are the questions:

- **What does it mean to be a good person?** And second...
- **How good is good enough?**

First, **what does it mean to be a “good person”?** **Every single person** who has ever lived, whether they realize it or not, has had a **functional answer** to that question. Follower of Jesus or not. Religious or not religious. The *Republican* party has a set of answers to that question. The *Democratic* party has a set of answers to that question. *Younger* people have an answer to that question. *Older* people have an answer to it. People who live in *Alabama* have an answer to it—which is shocking, because I was raised as a Tennessee fan to believe that there *weren’t any* good people in Alabama. But apparently there are and *they* have an answer to this question. The reality is that we *all* have a functional answer to that question.

And we *also* have **certain measurements** in our heads for **how good is good enough**. We have people and *types* of people who do and don’t make the “cut.” There are varying levels of whatever definition of “goodness” we operate by. And we have a tendency to approve of the people that *do* make the cut, and to *disapprove* of the people who *don’t*. Or bare minimum, look down our noses at them from time to time.

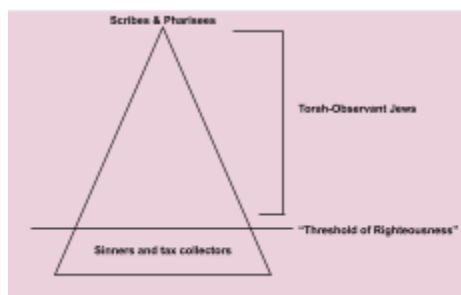
Every single one of us does this. Even the person out there who says “well I don’t think *there is* an objective measurement of *goodness* in the world and I think we all just have to define *goodness* for ourselves.” By saying that, you are *doing* the thing you’re claiming no one should do. You’re saying, effectively, that “a good person is someone who doesn’t *impose* their version of goodness on other people.” Do you see this? No matter who you are, no matter what your belief system, we all have functional answers to these questions.

And we *operate out of those answers* on a regular basis. You’d be surprised how many of the decisions you make on a day-to-day level, involve you drawing on what your definition of a good person is. *We go about romantic relationships like we imagine a good person would go about romantic relationships. We do our job like we imagine a good person would do their job (at least when our boss is looking). We spend and save and budget our money like we imagine a good person does those things.* We draw on our answers to those questions probably far more often than we realize because a lot of the time we’re doing it subconsciously. But suffice it to say, **your answers to these questions are absolutely central to how you go about your life.**

Now I bring all of that up because **people in Jesus’ day also had functional answers to those questions.** For at least a lot of them, a “good person” was someone who adhered to something called “the Law.” Not just *any* law, but rather *the Law* found in the first five books of our bible—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy (*some things you learn in bible drill growing up just never go away*). In those five books, you will find 613 commands. The first ten you have probably heard of—the *Ten Commandments*—but then there were 603 more after that. And they covered everything from how you worship, to how you bathe yourself, to how you treat your neighbor, to how you cared for the poor and the oppressed. And a “**good person,**” at least in the average *Jewish* person’s mind, **was someone who lived in obedience to all 613 of those commands.** That made you, to borrow *their* language, “righteous.” It made you a *good person*.

And their answer to the *second* question, “how good is good *enough*?” would be that **you had to at least be more righteous than a group people called the “tax collectors and sinners.”** Tax collectors were the political *traitors* of the day, those who sold out their fellow countrymen to work for the oppressive occupying government. And “sinners” were people who lived obviously sinful lifestyles: sex workers, prostitutes, thieves, and the like. **“Tax collectors and sinners” were decidedly unrighteous, so if you wanted to be considered a good person, it was thought that you had to at**

least do better than *they* were doing. So it helps me a little to plot this out **visually**—maybe it doesn't help you at all, in which case feel free to disregard it—but for me it helps to visualize it with something like this:



So this was **how the average Jewish person** at the time thought about the world. If you wanted to be *righteous*, you had to at least do better than the **sinners and tax collectors**. They were *below* what we might call the “**threshold of righteousness**” (which side note—would be an awesome 80s band name). But *most* people operated somewhere in here, within the broad category of **Law-observant Jews**, and at the very pinnacle of “righteousness” was this group of people called “the **scribes and the Pharisees**.” These were people who studied and read the Law for a *living*—so it was just assumed that they had *obedience* to the Law pretty much on lock. This, more or less, was how a first-century Jewish man or woman understood the idea of righteousness.

And I *show* you all that so that you can understand how **Jesus**, in this passage, is about to **turn all of that on its head**. **Jesus shows up, and completely interrupts and transforms this worldview. And in the process, gives us *his* own definition of what it means to be a good person: what it means to be *righteous*.**

So let's take a look and see how he does it. Start with me in **Matthew 5**, v. 17:

This is Jesus talking, and he says: [17] “**Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.**”

Jesus mentions the “Law” and the “Prophets.” So the **Law** we already defined—the 613 commands. And then the **Prophets** were the people in Israel's history that were sent by God to call people *back* to the Law. Jesus says, “*do not think* that I've come to abolish those things.” Now that's an interesting way to start, right? Because for Jesus to **tell people “not to think”** something would seem to imply *what? That people might be inclined to think that*, right? **If I stood up here this morning and started my teaching off by**

saying “now *do not think* that I have stolen money from the church...” that implies that I am *concerned* something that I have done might make it *seem* like I have stolen money from the church. And don’t worry, I haven’t. So *genuinely*, do not think that :)

But you see my point right? For Jesus to say this, means that he *suspects* some people might think he *is* doing away with the Law, or the Law, and the prophets. And if you keep reading through the gospels, sure enough, you’ll actually come across quite a few times where Jesus was accused of breaking, violating, or disregarding the Old Testament law. Jesus approaches the *Sabbath* differently from his contemporaries. He approaches purity laws and regulations differently. He does things that, at times, seem like he *is* disregarding the Old Testament Law.

But Jesus *here* wants to clarify that misunderstanding. Jesus says, “that is not the nature of my relationship to the Law and the Prophets: I haven’t come to tear it all down, but *rather* to *fulfill* it.” Now at the end of our time, we’re going to come back to that idea—that Jesus is the *fulfillment* of the Law and the Prophets. Because that is massively important, not just to how you read this passage, but to how you read the entire bible.

But before we do that, I just want you to see how *emphatic* Jesus gets about not coming to *abolish* the Law and the Prophets. Continue with me into v. 18:

[18] For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. [19] Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

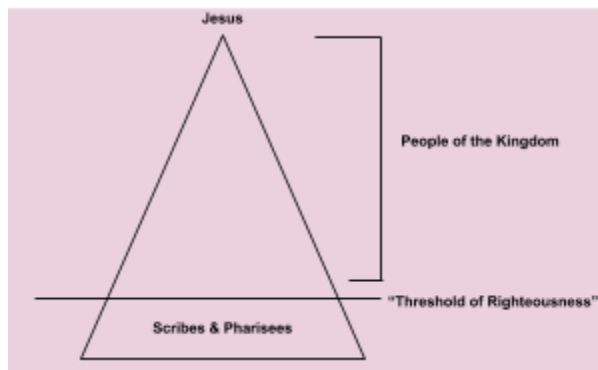
So Jesus *is passionate* about this. He says “not a single *iota or dot* of the Law will pass away from the Law.” So brief nerd alert, but I think this really helps us get how insistent Jesus is being: most literally here, Jesus says “not a jot or a tittle will pass from the Law” (wanted to be really careful in how I pronounced that *second* word so as to not have to fire myself). A *jot* was the smallest *letter* in the Hebrew alphabet. It was tiny—would look something like an apostrophe to us. And a *tittle* is a mark even *smaller* than a *jot*—it’s a tiny pen stroke that distinguishes one letter from another. So Jesus is saying “**not even the tiniest detail of the Law will be tossed aside. Not a bit of it. I did not show up on the scene to do away with the slightest detail of the Law and the Prophets. They still are our guide to help us discover what a righteous life looks like.**”

And **therefore**, Jesus says, anybody who says “oh don’t worry about the Law—it’s not a big deal, you don’t have to concern yourself with that”—Jesus says *that* person will be called *least* in the kingdom of God. But anybody who *does* them—anybody who lives out obedience to the Law—and teaches others to do the same, that person will be called *greatest* in the kingdom of heaven. Those are strong words.

But **in case they weren’t strong** enough, next he just goes in for the kill. Look with me at v. 20:

[20] For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Now, I want us to spend **a good bit of our time** on that verse. Because in many ways, that’s **what this whole passage has been building up to**. Jesus saying that ***in order to be a part of the kingdom of God—God’s way of doing things in the world—your righteousness will have to be greater than that of the scribes and the Pharisees.*** This helps us see precisely how *different* Jesus’ view of righteousness is from how most people thought about it at the time. To help you see it visually, let’s look back at our previous chart for reference **[old chart]**. That’s how most people thought. **Here** is effectively what *Jesus* just said.



So he says it’s **not the sinners and tax collectors** that you have to do better than—it’s the ***scribes and the Pharisees***. Now remember: those people were at the *top of our chart earlier*. They were seen as the *pinnacle* of righteousness—and Jesus just made *them* the *baseline*. Or technically, not even the baseline—*below* the baseline. Quite a different way of looking at the world, right?

So a couple things here. First, and don’t miss this: **Jesus is implying that the Pharisees and scribes will not enter** the kingdom of heaven. They’re *out*. By saying

that *kingdom* righteousness must exceed *theirs*, Jesus is implying that *theirs* was not enough. That was a *bold* statement to make back in the day. Imagine someone coming along today and saying, “unless you’re at least a better person than Mother Teresa, you won’t make it into heaven. Sorry.” The Pharisees were seen as the *most* righteous, the most moral, the most upright—and here Jesus says, “yeah you’re at least gonna have to do better than *them*.”

Which, second, if you’re paying attention, *should* raise the question: **what (in the world) about the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees wasn’t enough for the kingdom?** In what universe is *their* goodness, not good *enough*? What about it was lacking? Well I think one good place to answer that is **Matthew 23**. We’ll put it on the screen here in a second. In these couple verses, I think Jesus clues us into what was so *insufficient* the “righteousness” of the Scribes & Pharisees. So take a look with me at **Matthew 23, v. 27-28** up on the screen:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also (and make sure you hear this next part) outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

So I think that **last sentence tells us a lot** about the scribes and Pharisees: *outwardly*, they *appeared righteous*. But in reality, they were full of hypocrisy and *lawlessness*. Lawlessness being the polar *opposite* of the image they presented to *other* people. So **here was the problem with the “righteousness” of the scribes and Pharisees: it was only skin-deep**. It was an *act*. The scribes and Pharisees only *appeared* to be “good people.” But their goodness had no staying power, no real, lasting impact—they were only as “righteous” as they *had* to be to fool those around them. That was where it stopped.

And so it would appear that what Jesus is saying is that **if you want to be a part of the kingdom of God**, that **your goodness will have to be more than skin-deep**. You will have to be marked by something *more* than just *apparent obedience* to the Law. Jesus is not trying to create a group of people who look one way *on* the surface, and a completely different way behind closed doors. He is not interested in hypocrisy.

So there’s a guy named Dallas Willard, whose book on the sermon on the mount is probably one of my favorites. In that book, he put it this way and I found it really helpful:

he said the Law is **not the source** of righteousness—it is the **course** of righteousness (it rhymes, so that’s how you know it’s true). But the *core problem* of the scribes and Pharisees was that they saw the Law as the *source* of righteousness. They saw it as *giving them the status of righteous*. For them, it was a box to check. They would see a law on the books like “do not steal,” and went “cool—I’ve never stolen anything, so I am officially *righteous* in that regard. No need for further consideration. Good for me—I’ve arrived at *righteousness*.” Righteousness was a *destination* for them.

But here’s the thing: **righteousness wasn’t meant to be a destination—it was meant to be a journey**. The Law was meant to point us in a direction towards the type of people God designed us to be. It was meant to point us on a *trajectory*—on a *course*—towards righteousness. Think about it like this: why do we have stop signs? Well, the simplest answer is “so that people stop at them.” That’s correct. But at the same time, they are there to **help us realize that there are other people on the road we’re traveling**. If there were never any stop signs, we would continue about our way, never really noticing that there are other roads intersecting with our road, other people who need to get *onto* or *across* the road we’re on. Other people that need to *walk across* the road we’re on. A stop sign is a *command*, but it’s also a prompt to *consider* things that we probably wouldn’t have considered if it weren’t for the stop sign. Does that make sense?

So **apply that same thinking** to the Law. When I hear *the Law* say “do not steal,” it does in fact mean “do not steal.” And if I steal, I am *guilty*. But here’s what it *also* should do: it should make me *stop and think about* the type of *posture* that would lead to me stealing things from people. **So what types of things might that be?** Well for starters, it might be inviting me to consider that **not everything belongs to me**. That life is not all about me and therefore not everything I see and like should be mine. It also could be inviting me to remember that, to use Jesus’ own words, “**life does not consist in the abundance of my possessions**.”¹ That having all the stuff I want to have does not actually lead to a better, fuller life as a result of having it. It also is likely inviting me to consider that **my actions have consequences**—that taking something I want without asking means that the other person now *doesn’t* have something that they might need. We could go on—but there are all sorts of things that the command “do not steal” invites us to *stop* and consider as a result of the command.

¹ See Luke 12:15

But here's what I want you to see: **if you only see righteousness as a destination**—like the scribes and Pharisees did—**you will very likely miss all of that.** If you just think “the Law says not to steal; I haven't stolen anything; so *check,*” you could be technically obeying the Law, and simultaneously miss the entire point of the law. **You could never steal a single thing, and still think everything you come across should belong to you—still be envying people who have it. You could never steal a single thing, and still believe and operate as if “life consists in the abundance of your possessions.” You could never steal a single thing and still not learn that all of your actions have consequences; that your greed and selfishness impact other people in substantial ways.**

And that's what the **scribes and Pharisees had become experts** in doing: technically obeying the Law, and simultaneously missing the entire point of the Law. **They were doing the equivalent of coming to a complete stop at the stop sign, and then plowing into the car that was supposed to go before them at the stop sign.** And Jesus is saying that type of obedience will not be sufficient in the kingdom of God. He is not trying to create a kingdom of people who technically obey the Law, and simultaneously miss its entire purpose. That is *not* what his kingdom is about at all.

But when you see the Law correctly, it sets you on a trajectory—on a course—towards righteousness. It sets you on a path towards the type of human that God designed you to be. And that in turn will generate within you a deeper, better-than-*surface-level* righteousness that *exceeds* that of the scribes and Pharisees. Does that make sense?

So let's think a bit about how this might play out today. Let's **bring it into modern day** and see what it looks like. Because while it may look different for us, I think at times we are guilty of doing the same thing the scribes and Pharisees often did, just in different ways. Let me try to give you a few examples.

Let's start with a law straight out of the *Old Testament*: **the tithe.** So there's an Old Testament principle called the “tithe,” where God's people were to give the first 10% of their income to be used for God's purposes. 10%, right off the top, goes to the kingdom of God. But the Scriptures are very clear about the fact that the *reason we should do that* is because it is a simple reminder of the fact that *all* of our money and resources belong to God in the first place. That he provides all of them, he has provided us with a means to make income in the first place—so it should be a no brainer to give *at least* 10% back to him directly.

But here's the reality: **you can give 10% of your money to God, and still not be operating as if your money and resources belong to God.** Right? I mean, if I've got enough money, I could probably give *half* of it to God and still not be living as if my money and resources *belong* to God. You can faithfully tithe your entire life and still not be honoring God with your money.

But what if you let the tithe start you on a *trajectory* of honoring God with *all* of your money? What if on the first of the month, before you paid any other bills or made any other purchases, you sat down and said "alright—10% is going to Jesus. I'm going to go ahead and cut that check, make that transaction, whatever. But I know that's just a *start*. So I'm going to send that money off, but I'm also going to be on the lookout all month for the *other* ways that the Holy Spirit might be inviting me to honor him by leveraging my resources for the kingdom. I'm going to be looking around constantly for *other ways* that God might want to make use of my money. That right there is a righteousness that *exceeds* that of the scribes and the Pharisees.

Okay I'll give you another one, this one is a *New Testament* "law," so to speak. Ephesians 5:18 says **"do not get drunk,** for that leads to *debauchery*." Essentially, the overuse and overconsumption of alcohol leads to all sorts of other unhelpful, and sometimes destructive, behavior. As anyone who has ever been drunk or witnessed the actions of a drunk person can attest to. You can end up making a fool of yourself, misrepresenting Jesus, making really unhealthy decisions around sex and sexual expression—all sorts of things can start happening when you get drunk.

But **let's say you're completely on board** with the "do not get drunk" thing. You're straight-edge, maybe you're a complete *teetotaler*—maybe you abstain from alcohol entirely. Or maybe you just have great self-control, and you're able to go out with friends, and even when they're drinking and getting drunk, you just have one or two, and you're good. Let's say you're good on the "do not get drunk" command. But here's the reality there: you can never get drunk at all—and still give into what the Scriptures call *debauchery*, right? You can be entirely sober and still make all the same bad decisions as people who aren't sober. You can live in technical obedience to the Law, and yet miss the entire point of the Law.

But **what if instead,** you let that "law" (do not get drunk), point you on a trajectory towards an entirely different kind of life. A life where you live for something bigger than just fun weekend after fun weekend. A life where you take sexual integrity seriously—not because you're a prude, but because you have a crazy high view of sex formed by what the

Scriptures teach that sex is. **What if you gained the reputation, not just for being “that guy or girl that doesn’t get drunk when they go out with us,” but rather “that guy or girl that lives a life I wish I knew how to live.”** *That* is a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees.

I’ll just give you one more. Another *New Testament* “law” is that if we are followers of Jesus, we should prioritize **attending church gatherings**. That’s Hebrews 10, that we should “not give up the habit of meeting together” as God’s people. Now, the fact that you’re here right now, and the fact that many of you are here more often than you’re not, means you have technically *fulfilled* that requirement.

But remember: it’s **not a destination, it’s a journey**. So the *reason* the Scriptures instruct us to “not give up the habit of meeting together” is because these types of Gatherings are *one way* that we show our *commitment* to each other’s lives. So if you’re here every single Sunday, but the rest of the week you don’t even think a bit about the other people who are a part of this community, you’ve still missed the point. Or if you’re here every Sunday, but take little to no interest in contributing to the lives of other people here, you’ve missed the point. If you’re here each Sunday, but you can’t be bothered to overlap your life with other followers of Jesus during the week, you’ve missed the point. If your attitude is “show up on Sundays, and then I’m pretty much done with these people for the rest of my week”—that means you have technically obeyed the “Law,” and yet simultaneously missed the entire point of it.

But **once again, what if** you let your attendance at these Gatherings put you on a trajectory of integrating your life fully with other followers of Jesus throughout the week. What if every Sunday when you walk in, you used this as a reminder to pray for the other people who show up here too. What if every Sunday, you made it your goal to seek out and encourage two people in this room with the truth of who God is and who they are. What if each Sunday as you sit and listen to the teaching, you were thinking not only “how does this apply to me and help me?” but also “how might this be helpful to *this* person in my LifeGroup, *that* person in my life?” That would be a righteousness that *exceeds* that of the scribes and Pharisees.

Are you **seeing how this works**? When we understand the true purpose of the “Law”—whether that’s Old Testament laws or New—we allow them to be far more than just boxes we check. We allow them to put us on a trajectory towards becoming the types of human beings God created us to be. We allow them to be our guide on the journey that is *true* righteousness.

So once you understand this, you start to see how **it wouldn't even make sense for Jesus to be "abolishing"** the Law and the Prophets. He didn't show up to do away with the type of righteousness they point to. **Jesus didn't come to do away with the type of life the Law and the Prophets prescribed—he came to live the type of life that they prescribe.** When Jesus says that he "fulfills" the Law, he means that **he came to be the type of person that the Law and the Prophets were trying to generate in us all along.** He came to *display* the type of life that they described.

And the Scriptures tell us that he **did that for at least two reasons:** 1) so that we could have a living, breathing example of the types of people we are called to be and be able to learn from it. But also 2) so that **Jesus' own righteousness could stand in our place before God.** 2 Corinthians 5 says that "he who knew no sin, *became* sin for us, that we might *become* the *righteousness* of God." When Jesus died on the cross, he not only paved the way for us to become righteous people—he *made us* righteous in the eyes of the Father. So now, when the Father looks at us, he doesn't see us as people trying to be righteous and miserably failing (which, let's be honest—is how it probably looks a lot of the time). He doesn't see us that way—he sees us as *already* righteous because of Jesus' work on the cross. We are given that status, and then given the ability through the Spirit to become more and more *like that* over time.

So the truth about true *righteousness*—true *goodness*—is that it can really **only come as a byproduct.** If your goal in life is to be a *good person*, you will either end up crushed, exhausted, or faking it. Those are the only options. But **when you come to know**—and as you *get to know*—Jesus, righteousness and goodness will begin to happen as a byproduct. **By getting to know Jesus, you will see and discover what the true purpose of the Law was to begin with. You will see and become the very righteousness that the Law and the Prophets describe.**

So my prayer is that we together would have an **unwavering commitment** to being and becoming **Jesus people**, and let *him* lead us on the journey that is righteousness together.

Let's pray.