

An Eye for an Eye: What does True Righteousness Look Like?

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[0:00] Thank you, everyone who led here in singing. What a joy to be here today singing praises to King Jesus.

It's such a joy for my wife and I, Carol's right here in the first seat, to be here with you all this morning. And just a quick introduction.

We're both from Brazil, Belo Horizonte is the name of our city. My father, about 15 years ago, he started a ministry called Escali, which aims at equipping, training lay Christian leaders and pastors in Brazil.

And that's what we feel called to continue doing. That's why we're here having our education at Trinity. I know Dr. Tully is not here today, so I feel a little bit more off-campus.

And it's a great privilege to be here with you all today. And I would like to invite you all to open your Bibles to Matthew chapter 5, Matthew chapter 5 and verses 38 to 42.

[1:18] I'll ask you to please leave it open there for a second. And I just want to situate us on where this text is located. You know, chapters 5 to 7 of Matthew are a collection of the Sermon on the Mount, which is Jesus' most famous teachings.

But however famous it is, there's also lots of confusion about what it means and how we should relate to it. It doesn't take a long time for anyone who's reading through these chapters to see that the Sermon on the Mount paints a picture of a way of life, which is totally upside down to us. The meek inherit the earth. The persecuted rejoice. The enemies are loved. This is not at all how the world around us operates.

It's foreign to us both conceptually, like how could I even begin to think about living life this way? And practically, how can I begin to take steps towards this?

But this is what God's kingdom is like. It is what true righteousness looks like and what men and women were ultimately made for. And it is what a blessed life looks like.

[2:40] And as we read Jesus' words and meditate on them, we're deeply confronted with truths that go against every inclination of our bodies. There's a disconnect between the way of life in God's kingdom and what we often desire.

Isn't there? I know that's how I feel sometimes. And if you've never been confronted or convicted by the teachings of Jesus, you really need to evaluate if you're being honest to your life or to the text in front of you.

So what is the point of the Sermon on the Mount? Is it just Jesus' way of frustrating us with things that we can't ever do? Or is it actually a way that we can live our lives? So I believe we can summarize what the Sermon on the Mount is with three statements.

First, it is a declaration of what true righteousness in God's kingdom look like. It's Jesus' big manifesto of what people will look like in this kingdom.

How they will talk to each other. How they will walk. How they will interact. What kind of community it is. But the Sermon on the Mount is also like a big mirror that makes us look at ourselves and compare our way of living with true righteousness.

[3:57] Chapter 5, verse 20 says, For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you never enter the kingdom of heaven. Verse 48, You, therefore, must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Strong words from Jesus that really makes us sit back and reflect, How do I compare to the way of life in God's kingdom?

And lastly, the Sermon on the Mount points us to a fulfillment in Jesus. Matthew 5, 17, Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets.

I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. And to make the point clearer, the sermon ends with this note, And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at His teaching, for He was teaching them as one who had authority and not as the scribes.

So, having this big picture, let us now read this text and how Jesus is accomplishing all that in these few five verses that we're going to read right now. So, follow along with me.

[5:03] Matthew 5, verses 38 to 42. Matthew 5, verse 39.

We have all probably heard this text or parts of it several times growing up, right? And even if we didn't go to church, we know that we're supposed to give the other cheek.

Many of us have used this text to say that in God's kingdom, there is no place for punishment, justice, or violence of any kind. Others have taught that this text is about nothing more than not giving revenge.

But as we'll go on, we'll see that vengeance and retaliation are only part of the issue. And Jesus is trying to get to the heart of where these things actually come from. So, as we go over this text, we'll spend most of our time first trying to gradually understand, with all the examples that Jesus is giving, what is true righteousness in this text and how we compare to it.

And then, finally, we'll spend the last minutes of this sermon seeing how this text points us to Jesus as the fulfillment of all righteousness and why that actually is good news for us as God's people.

[6:47] So, what is true righteousness and how do we compare to it? Jesus begins this passage by quoting a part of the law that God had given to Israel through His servant Moses.

Verse 38, He says, You have heard that it was said in the law, an eye for an eye and a two for a two. Now, I don't know about you, but many times I forget that even though the law of Moses was something pretty far removed in the past, for us, it was already very ancient even in Jesus' day. I sometimes have the tendency to think that all the characters in the Bible are just like people living in different villages, as if Jesus could say, You know, Moses, when he came with those two big pieces of stone, he told us a good story.

You know how it goes. Here it is. But that's not at all the case, right? They live centuries apart. And just as it is for us, it was also hard for them in Jesus' day to keep fresh in their minds what was the true intent of the law.

That's why in verses 21 to 48 in this chapter 5, Jesus says it several times. You have heard that it was said this, but I tell you that.

[8:06] It's not as if Jesus is saying that the law is useless and they're not correct anymore. He's just trying to address the issues of people's current misunderstandings of the law and to show them what is the true righteousness that it pointed to.

So what's the correct understanding of an eye for an eye and a two for a two? It sure sounds very violent, to say the least, right? However, if we go back to the text on the law that addressed this issue, we'll see that far from being something the law was encouraging people to do, this phrase, which was intentionally easy to remember, was placed as a limit to the extent of punishment a crime should have.

It was a provision in the law, much like the provision of divorce, which became allowed in some cases because of the hardness of people's heart. And this provision was supposed to restrict vengeance and to limit vindictiveness.

The question was, have you been wronged by someone? And if so, whoever wronged you will be punished. And the punishment, it must fit the crime.

You can't put a person in jail for stumbling on your foot, and we're not going to let someone who robbed your house just go away with a written warning. Instead, it will be like an eye for an eye and a two for a two.

[9:36] So, for example, Leviticus 24, 21 says, Whoever kills a person shall be put to death. The punishment fits the crime. Verse 22, You shall have the same rule for the sojourner and for the native, for I am the Lord your God.

This was a law for the land of Israel and all of those in it. It was supposed to be applied not by the person who received the crime, you see, but by the government officials, by the governors, or sometimes called princes or elders of the people.

And they were supposed to make this judgment based on the evidence of two or three people.

That's what the law said, and it was commonly summarized in an eye for an eye and a two for a two.

Now, fast forward several hundred years, and how were the people in Jesus' day actually practicing this law? Instead of limiting it to the court of law, they were applying this principle without thinking about any intention of justice and righteousness.

They didn't care if there was an investigation or not, witnesses or not. They just thought of this law as a concession to take vengeance into their own hands. They thought, Okay, he got a chicken for me, so I'll go ahead and grab two from him, and then three, and so on and so forth.

[10:58] Things just piled up without any control because they didn't care for justice. Then what does Jesus say the citizens of God's upside-down kingdom should do instead?

Beginning of verse 39, But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil. For him, when it comes to our relationship with other people, it's not up to us to offer the proper retribution to evil.

And please hear me well here. Jesus was not saying, forget about all that punishment and forget about retribution. People should do just whatever they want whenever they feel like it.

No, not a chance. The law was intended for good. What Jesus is saying is that we don't take vengeance into our own hands. The governments and authorities are the ones set up by God to do so.

Romans 13, 4 says that the human's authority are the servants of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Not us. Even more than that, the Bible says that God is the ultimate retributer.

[12:12] 1 Corinthians 3, 17 says, If anyone destroys God's temple, that is our body, God will destroy him. Do you see how this language fits with the goodness of retribution that the law was actually pointing to?

But when it comes to our daily lives and our personal interactions, we should have a certain orientation about life that does not seek to repay offenses and that does not desire to preserve our honor and our pride at all costs.

So we got the principle down. Do not resist the evil person. But the question then comes, how does that look like in real life? And that's why Jesus wants to make it clear with four different examples of how we should apply it.

And as we go along, we'll get a better understanding of what Jesus means by not resisting the evil person. Because that is only part of the picture of what true righteousness is in this text.

And the examples are set up in such a way that we're supposed to look at each of them and ask ourselves, how do I compare to this? Verse 39 again, second part of it now.

[13:27] If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, give him the other also. We tend to think of this as a physical attack, right?

Slap on the cheek. But if we read carefully, he says on the right cheek. That may not seem like much, but it means it wasn't a full right-handed slap, not a sounding and impactful, hurtful slap to the face, but an ironic, humiliating slap with the back of the hand.

It was the kind of thing that you would do to make the person feel like the scum of the earth. It was an assault on the person's honor. And what does that look like for us today?

I mean, a slap on the face is still pretty humiliating. But our lives are filled with things usually that are much more subtle and much more nuanced that are nevertheless damaging to our honor.

Sometimes it can be as obvious as a boss yelling at us across the room for everyone to hear. Or a joke that someone tells to the whole group about a flaw that you have.

[14:39] sometimes just a look, depending on how it's done and by whom it's done, can be very humiliating and hurting deep down on our pride.

I'm certain that we have all experienced this to one degree or another at some point in life. And how do we typically respond? With a strike back at their honor.

Right? We don't absorb the blow, much less give the other cheek. No, we need to make things right again. It almost seems like a socially accepted idea. Right?

Think about a random guy at the end of his bar fight story saying, I just didn't let my kid think I was a loser. Or think of the response of her friends after a girl says what was her sarcastic reply to the inappropriate comment she heard at work.

Yeah, girl. You showed him. has become socially accepted and valued. And unfortunately, this socially accepted practice has infiltrated many of our own families.

[15:53] Our very houses. Whenever we feel attacked by the words of our spouses or of our parents, these are the people that we know most intimately.

Right? We know what ticks them. We know what could hurt them back. It's easy to vindicate ourselves and the family because we can hurt them back.

Instead of doing that, Jesus tells us to show no concern at all for the maintenance of our honor. Give the other cheek. Give them grace instead of any payback that you're thinking of giving and that you're able to give.

Verse 40. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. Now, the tunic was someone's first layer.

In my case, it's this shirt underneath. And the cloak was the outer layer. So, in other words, he's saying, if anyone wants to sue you for your shirt, let him have your coat also, or something like that.

[17:01] And I want to emphasize that he says if anyone wants to. Because if they actually do sue you for your shirt and win your shirt, which is not something common here, but it was more back then, you don't just give your coat.

But if they're threatening you to sue you for something small like a shirt and they're using that to provoke you to anger, then show that in your heart you could do even more than that.

Like your coat, for example. we all have the tendency of thinking, are we supposed to literally do this?

Right? And we proceed to try to draw a line of where good is good enough. Hey, Jesus, this is the most I can do. But that's not the point that Jesus is aiming at.

So, imagine for a second that you're preparing your wedding. I don't know how many of you have gone through that. My wife and I went through that. A couple years ago. In Brazil, we usually have big weddings.

[18:05] At least compared to what I've heard is the common here in the US. So, we really need to make sure that we count exactly how many people are coming because otherwise we'll pay more for the buffet, which is the most expensive part.

Imagine that you're at the final stages of your preparation, you and your wife. And one day you're in the middle of a random family gathering that you're having and your cousin turns to your wife out of the blue and just says, so, since you brought your little girlfriend or your little boyfriend to my birthday party a couple years ago, I'll just bring some of my friends to your wedding.

That's okay, right? This is a clear challenge to you. Much like the one who wants to sue someone else for their shirt, the situation just begs the answer.

What are you going to say about that? Your cousin obviously wants to see you and your wife lose your mind over this. Now, imagine instead of saying, no, what's wrong with you?

You guys responded as if this person didn't just offend and expose you in front of the entire family. Imagine instead that you said, you know what, cousin, I know there aren't going to be too many people that you know there and it's really just our goal that everyone has a good time.

[19:32] So yeah, definitely bring as many friends as you want. I don't want you to be feeling left out. Now, I don't know if Carol and I would have the composure to have that kind of answer if this actually happened to us.

But if I were the imaginary offender in this case, the cousin, I would have no idea how to respond. Right? I would be puzzled and surprised. Like, how can someone be so loving?

And Paul says in Romans 12 that this type of loving response puts burning coals on the heads of our enemies. They are now the ones ashamed and probably convicted by their own selfishness. now, again, how do we compare to this kind of righteousness? How do we compare to this kind of really it's not a big deal type of attitude to the offenses and threats against us?

Verse 41, And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. It was a common practice in the Roman Empire for soldiers to ask random civilians to carry their military equipment for them. [20:50] Of course, there was no other option. You could only obey. But the most they could ask for was one mile. Now, we don't have to be experts in the culture of that time to know that the Israelites didn't like the Romans very much.

I mean, they invaded their country, taxed them, and abused them in several ways. So, you can imagine how they felt about these mile-long heavy lifting. Now, how do we deal with those who have authority over us, especially when things seem to go against us in a discomfoting way? Are we more inclined to submit and endure with patience and grace, even if it seems unfair at the moment? Or are we too concerned with reclaiming our rights to even think about submitting, let alone walking the extra mile?

Again, it's not about making little rules for every situation where we can't ever deviate from them, but it's a matter of the heart, a desire and posture of fighting against all inclination that tell us to fight back and to hold our ground when we feel attacked by others in our pride.

And with the examples we've seen so far, we can start to sketch out a better understanding of what true righteousness is in this text. You see, it's not really just about not resisting the evil person, as verse 39 seemed to indicate, but true righteousness abandons sinful impulses of self-preservation.

[22:33] What do I mean by that? Not only are we to let go of vengeance, but all sinful, that is, all the wrong impulses towards self-preservation.

By implication, there are such things as good impulses of self-preservation. Right? It's good for a mother to protect her life and health so she can take good care of her kids, whether it be her life from the attacks of others or her health from fat, trans fat, fat trans, I don't know how to say that. You know, eating well. It is not good, however, for a mother to yell at a stranger who cut her off in traffic so her daughter will see her as the strong independent woman she always dreams for her kid to be.

That's not the type of impulse to preserve. Of course, too, we should all be concerned for justice and for those who are abused and afflicted.

Isaiah 1.17 says, Seek justice, defend the oppressed, take up the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow, and so on. And these things are especially relevant here in the U.S., and I don't want to downplay them at all.

[23:57] But the question is, what are you really trying to preserve or fight for? Are you standing for those who are suffering justice or just for your personal honor and in some twisted way making everything about your pride and your personal self and pride?

The point is simple to understand but is so hard to apply. What heart inclination are you going to listen to before your next step?

Is it one that simply wants to reclaim your honor, your time, your energy, your rights, your self-esteem, your social status? Don't listen to that anymore. Verse 42.

Give to the one who begs from you and do not refuse the one who wants to borrow from you. Now, what does this verse have in common with the ones that came before it?

It does not follow the same pattern of if this, then that. And it's not really about vengeance like the previous ones. So, what brings all these verses together? What do they have in common?

[25:12] If we look closely at these examples, we'll see that in all of them, without exception, the controlling impulse from our sinful nature is to fight to preserve something.

Think about it. The person who slaps back instead of giving the other cheek isn't really trying to hurt the other person in their face but to put them back on equal grounds of honor.

The heart is begging to have its treasured honor back. The one who fights back against those who want to sue them do not necessarily want something from that person but they want to say, hey, I'm no pushover.

I don't care if it's a shirt, a blouse, or even a sock. I will not let you go out there as if you're somehow above me. The one who resists the inconvenience of walking the mile requested is saying in his heart, why me?

Why am I always the one who needs to put up with this kind of stuff? Ask Steve or Pastor Mike or something. Don't ask me. And finally, of the one to whom people are asking and to whom they want to borrow from, what are they seeking to preserve?

[26:32] Money. Right? I mean, they think, it's my money after all and I can do with it whatever I want. And if you're going to get any money from me, you better give me a pretty good reason why I should trust you and I will treat you like you're beneath me the whole time until you pay me back every cent.

Obviously, just like the other examples, this does not mean that we must give money to everyone who asks every time. demanding this is making the same mistake as the person who says that there is never space for retaliation and justice just because Jesus told us to give the other cheek. We are instead supposed to have a certain view of our money that is not striving to preserve it at all times just for the sake of it or for the love of it.

We are to be generous people. on the other hand, it's not because someone asks for money. That money is what they need or even what's the most loving thing to give them.

Right? Let's say it's summertime and you're eating outside at one of the restaurants downtown and a disheveled man smelling like alcohol comes up to you and asks for five bucks to get something to eat.

[27:50] In this instance, how does want to obey what Jesus is requiring in verse 42? What is the best way to help this man? Is it to give him the cash?

Well, here's what you could do. You could say to them, sir, I'm not going to give you any money but I'll do something better. Just pick something off the menu here and I'll buy it for you. In doing so, you obey Jesus by not refusing the one who's asking and you avoid unwisely contributing to something that might be harmful to the person that is alcohol.

You help him without hurting him and that's true righteousness. So, you see, this whole section is not just about not giving vengeance or revenge and at this point it's clear that true righteousness also does not stop at abandoning the sinful impulses of self-preservation.

true righteousness also embraces a lifestyle of mercy and grace. Mercy does not give what the person deserves.

The person who offends you deserves punishment. You don't give that to them. Grace gives even when they don't deserve it, especially because they don't deserve it.

[29:12] Our offenders and those who beg from us are not entitled to anything from us, but we give it to them anyway. As imitators of God himself who does the same thing for us.

As Jesus will say in a few verses, love your enemies so that you may be sons of your fathers, that is, imitators of your fathers. For he makes his son rise on the evil and on the good, and he sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

So, what Jesus is saying in all these five verses is that true righteousness both abandons sinful impulses of self-preservation and it also embraces a lifestyle of mercy and of grace.

And I think we can all agree that in one degree or another we all fall short of this. So, with that in mind, we come to our second and final point. How does this teaching point us to Jesus as the fulfillment of all righteousness and why is that good news for us?

So, friends, the thing about these early chapters of Matthew's gospel is that when we look at the Sermon on the Mount, we're only getting a glimpse of the whole story.

[30:28] We're taking a peek at the guest room when he's building this whole house in the book. He's inviting us, Matthew, the author of this gospel, to continue reading so we can fully understand what Jesus means with being the fulfillment of the law.

If you remember a few verses earlier, verse 17, he said, do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. We need to understand that Jesus was the center of everything that God's law pointed to.

In fact, Jesus was such a turning point to the way people needed to see and relate to God and his law, that he said things like this throughout the whole sermon.

You heard that it was said, this thing on the law, but I tell you, this is no ordinary teacher, and Matthew makes it clear by the end of the sermon just how unlike the other teachers of Israel Jesus was.

The crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them with one who had authority. What kind of authority is this? What does it do?

[31:38] What is it for? Matthew wants us to keep reading. On chapter 9, Jesus is going to heal the paralytic, and the reason why he does that is, verse 6, so you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.

Likewise, chapter 10, verse 1, Jesus gives his apostles authority to drive out impure spirits and heal every disease. And if we keep reading, later on we'll see Jesus suffering without taking revenge into his own hands and dying a shameful death though he lived a sinless life.

But by his authority he defeated the grave and raised to life as he said he would. And right before he went back to the Father he said to the apostles, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Not just authority to teach, to heal, to cast out demons, but all authority. Go therefore by his authority and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Teaching them to observe all that I have commended you. And behold, I'm with you always to the end of the age. So for Matthew, the pathway towards true righteousness is not first and foremost to strive to be a citizen of heaven.

[33:07] By ourselves, any such effort is vain. As we've seen today looking at this text and as we know from experience, true righteousness is only found in the one who holds all authority, even to fulfill the law and even to make disciples out of people like us who once lived according to the values of this world and not of his kingdom.

And the my friends, we are the benefactors of this authority. He's making disciples of all the nations to this day.

He has not abandoned us, but has included us into his kingdom. If we by faith desire to be his disciples. And he will remain with us always to the end of the age.

And that is a reason for great hope. especially for those of you who like me have been at times actually discouraged by a text like this.

Not because it's hard to understand, you see, but because it's so difficult to live out. The way of life in God's kingdom is so beautiful.

[34:19] But for me, it seems so distant at times because of how poorly I compare to it. But then I'm reminded of this promise. the one who has all authority and who is the fulfillment of all righteousness has called me himself and guaranteed that he will be with me always to the end of the age.

That's what gives me confidence to wake up every morning to follow his footsteps. And what gives me confidence at all to preach this this morning. So friends, as we conclude, I really want us to read one last text as we wrap it up.

You can open it with me or not. It's 1 Peter 2, 21-24. It's a really important text and the echoes to our passage in Matthew 5 are just too obvious to ignore.

So let's read the words of the Apostle Peter who wanted to encourage those Christians who were suffering under persecution to remain faithful to this teaching and maybe it served as an encouragement for us too.

1 Peter 2, 21-24 says, For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example so that you might follow in his footsteps.

[35:43] And look at the example he left to those whom he called. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return.

When he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. Friends, things don't go unnoticed in God's kingdom.

God takes vengeance for us so we don't have to take it. And thankfully, he's much more just than we'll ever be. Verse 24, he himself bore our sins in his body on the cross that we might die to sin and live for righteousness.

By his wounds you have been healed. What a blessed hope. Friends, isn't it amazing that we can be assured that our wounds have already been healed?

In Christ, we can find forgiveness of our sins and all of our unrighteousness. Christ died for us so that we might die to sin and to enable us to, in fact, live for righteousness, which we can't without him.

[36:55] Because of the nature of our calling and what Christ has done for us, we can abandon sinful impulses of self-preservation and embrace a life of mercy and grace.

And this can be true for any of us if we only take up his calling with faith and follow him. It is for this that we have been called, to follow his footsteps.

And that's why he healed us, to be like him. And he empowers us to do so by his abiding presence with us. That's what a blessed life truly looks like.

Not what the world has to offer with all of its advertisements and career plans and diets and exercises and retirements in Florida. No.

True righteousness in Christ. That's the blessed life that I want for myself, for my family, for each of us today, and for God's people worldwide.

[37:59] And I hope you want it too. Let's pray. Dear God, we are both convicted and encouraged by this message, Lord.

Thank you because you have not left us for our own efforts. But you have empowered us, Lord, through your Holy Spirit in us.

Jesus' presence with us. To live in a life of true righteousness. It will not be perfect here, Lord. We know that. But we know that you're working with us.

And one day, you'll bring us back to glory with you. Where we will, in fact, forever reign in righteousness with you. Thank you, Lord Jesus.

Help us to live out this life today as we walk out. And be with us, Lord, because we need you. In Jesus' name. Amen. Thank you.