

Getting to the Heart

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[0 : 0 0] Over the past few weeks, of course, we've been talking about righteousness. And so I thought it would be useful to do a bit of recap. And what I've done is, my graphic design is really of high standard, but I've done four PowerPoint slides just to illustrate what I think we've been learning about righteousness.

So if you look on the first slide, the first diagram shows what I think is a common view of what many think of our own righteousness. Namely, we think we're better than others.

True, God's righteousness, as you can see there, is higher than ours. And there may be a few people between that and us, maybe Mother Teresa or someone like that. But by and large, we like to think we're better than most.

The truth is, of course, on the next slide, that actually our righteousness, all of our righteousness, falls so far short of God's that any differences between us is not really worth comparing.

See all those little lines close together at the bottom? It's like arguing, you know, between our grades being 0.4% or 0.5% who is better when, you know, the pass rate is 50 and God's righteousness is 100%.

[1 : 1 3] It's not worth bothering, is it? Now, the good news, of course, is that Christ bridges that gap. Christ gets 100% righteous. And so, with his credit given to us, we attain to that 100% that God has at the top.

Now, I know many of you already know this and you are thankful for God's grace in your lives and likewise I am and that we are saved as a result. But, as we turn to daily living, I think sometimes we then mistake God's grace into thinking that means his righteous standards are now lowered for us.

So, on the next slide. So, we see the arrow as though God's standard comes up to where we are. But, that's not true, is it? Because God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

And so, are his standards. What was holy is still holy. And that has to be the right thing, isn't it? Because it can't be otherwise just because Jesus died.

You know, just because he died all of a sudden, lying is okay? That doesn't make sense. Besides, if we do think like that, then we are saying that God's character has changed.

[2 : 3 1] And so, actually, that's not good for us because any assurance we had that his promises wouldn't change, in particular our forgiveness of sins, is not guaranteed, is it? Because if we think God's character changes.

And lastly, if God can change his standards, then why did Jesus have to die in the first place? Why couldn't God just have lowered the standards for us without him dying? So, it has to be, then, that God's righteousness hasn't changed.

It remains right at the top. And Christ's righteousness' death doesn't lower his standards for us. Instead, on the next slide, what Christ's righteousness does is he raises us up, vicariously, of course, so that we meet God's standards.

But it's Christ doing it on our behalf, not our own doing. Hence, we saw last week that Jesus said that our righteousness needed to exceed that of the Pharisees if we are to enter the kingdom of God.

So, if you think about this, it's Christ's righteousness. It's like this huge volume of water that floods a harbor. And we're all these little boats that rise to the top with the water to reach the high water mark.

[3 : 41] And so, as we continue today, what Jesus is doing is describing what this high water mark looks like. Now, in his day, the Pharisees, the teachers, they would have interpreted the law to set the standard for all Israel.

They would even try to demonstrate that they could meet it themselves. But now Jesus says that they have got it wrong. In some instances, they missed the intent of the law.

So, yes, they obeyed the letter of the law, as we read the Ten Commandments today, but they did not get to the heart of what God desired. They failed to observe the true spirit or intent of the law.

At other times, sadly, the Pharisees and the teachers used or misused the law. Instead of using it to do what God intended, they used it to avoid the true purpose of the law.

And we'll see that in the second two examples. But first, let's deal with the first two. We're in the first, verses 21 to 26. The Pharisees missed God's desire for true peace.

[4 : 47] So we read, You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to the judgment. But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.

Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, Raka, is answerable to the court, and anyone who says, You fool, will be in danger of the fire of hell. Now, you'll see that there's actually a lot of detail tonight.

And so we won't be able to delve into every little example and tease out the intricacies of it. But what I want to do is just do a broad brush and see certain patterns instead.

And so in each example, you will see that Jesus uses the phrase, You have heard it said. And what Jesus is referring to is not the law itself, but rather the interpretation of the law that is left wanting.

So yes, Scripture does say this or that, but Jesus is criticizing the way it's been applied. So today, as we heard read, one of the Ten Commandments is that you shall do no murder.

[5 : 50] That's right. And the law even stipulates that the punishment, there will be punishment depending on what the situation, precise situation is. But Jesus tells them now that how they've applied it doesn't go far enough because they've missed the intent of the law.

They've concentrated just on physical murder. When that commandment was first given to reflect God's desire for his people to live in peace with one another.

And murdering someone is simply the worst and most obvious manifestation of that breakdown of peace. But there are other ways, and I'm sure you can all imagine that, where we can break peace without murdering people.

Let me give you a global example. So the war at the moment in Ukraine. Russia's physical invasion of Ukraine, which is now a year old, sadly, was simply the end result of what has already been a fractured relationship between the two countries for a number of years, isn't it?

Remember Putin annexed Crimea in 2014. He's been fueling divisions between the ethnic Russians in Ukraine and the Ukrainians down in the eastern region, hasn't he?

[7 : 07] And so this invasion merely made obvious the peace that has already been broken for some time. Now, if we look at the verses here, it's helpful to realize that when Jesus says not to be angry or to call someone raka, which means fool, he's not saying that we can never be angry.

There are other parts of Scripture, for example, that says, in your anger do not sin. So it's possible to be angry without sinning, but Jesus here is referring to that type of anger that involves hating on someone or showing contempt for them.

Now, you might think that if this is what really God's intent for the law is, then why wasn't God more specific in the Old Testament about this? Why didn't he, for example, not just say that murder is bad and need to be punished, but hating as well or calling someone a fool?

Why isn't that punishable? Well, I think it's because God's intent for the law is sometimes things that are only known by the person and God, isn't it?

It's what's in the heart. And you can't really judge from the outside whether someone is truly hating or not. And so while this is God's true standard, it's impossible to really enforce, is it?

[8 : 20] And also, I think it's also impossible for us to meet, isn't it? Even if there was a way to judge, I think if God was to enforce it, then we would all fail, wouldn't we?

Sooner or later. And all of us, instead of sitting here, would find ourselves in prison. So, I think then, that's the reason why God has not made that the standard, but rather something that's a bit more clear-cut that can be enforced.

And yet, God's judgment will come, isn't it? Because that is God's true standard. And as I said earlier, we only escape the judgment because of Jesus' righteousness. And yet, even though we are forgiven, it doesn't mean God's standard has been lowered or waived.

But rather, He calls us to aspire, to live to that, to live so that God's desire for true peace occurs and is practiced amongst us.

So, Jesus gives the ensuing instructions. He says, Therefore, if you're offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, here, it could be that you've done something wrong and you've realized that something's against you, or your brother has something against you and it's not clear, but either way, leave your gift there in front of the altar.

[9 : 38] When you realize that there's a conflict occurring, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First, go and be reconciled to them. Then come and offer your gift. And so, what Jesus is saying is that even if it's the other person that has done the wrong thing, once you realize that, you know, that there is a breakdown of the relationship, take the initiative to reconcile.

And, you know, we often expect that if you're the one who did the wrong thing, you need to come up to me and say sorry, or you need to make the first move. But Jesus is saying that he wants us to so desire peace that we would forgive, forego that right, and rather take that first step to be reconciled, whoever might be in the wrong.

And of course, a lot of times in conflict, you know, both parties are wrong one way or the other. Do it before you even think about coming to God with your gift because your gift being a symbol of peace with God, if that's so important to you, then you need to show it by making peace with your adversary first.

Likewise, verse 25 goes on to say, Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison.

Truly, I tell you, will not get out until you have paid the last penny. And so again, Jesus here is encouraging us to be proactive in pursuing peace through forgiveness and reconciliation.

[11 : 09] He's saying, don't wait until you have to be dragged before a judge. Because when that happens, when you come before a judge, what the judge does is dispense justice, isn't it?

He doesn't dispense grace. And so what Jesus is saying is that reconcile now where there's an opportunity for forgiveness and grace before you come before a judge and all you have is justice.

And really, that is in a sense what God offers us as well, is it not? We have the opportunity, God has given us the opportunity to be reconciled with him now by his grace.

He's already offered it, and we are to accept it in Christ Jesus. And so we ought to take that offer of grace now, isn't it? Rather than wait and then wait for judgment day when what is available then is only God's justice.

And yes, when we see others facing injustice or even when we ourselves feel unjustly treated, the thing we long for is justice. And a lot of the world is focused on that.

[12 : 18] But I have to say, in the end, what we really need is God's grace and not justice, especially when it comes to our own lives. Because we are not sinless, are we?

And God graciously offers that to all of us now, to you, if you have not put your trust in Jesus. Don't wait until you get in front of God in his heavenly court.

Because by that time, the only thing that's going to be meted out is God's justice. All right, let's keep going. And the second example here is where we see God's desire for purity.

So verse 27 reads, You have heard that it was said, same phrase again, you shall not commit adultery, but I tell you that anyone who looks for, looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Now let me say here again that our God-given sexual desires are not impure. They are God-given. But we need to know that in his wisdom, God designed for them to be satisfied physically only in the context of marriage.

[13 : 29] And that's because only then does it affirm the dignity of humans. And it properly signifies and celebrates the union of marriage between a man and a woman.

It rightly forms then the basis for procreation. With everything else, all other sexual activity actually dehumanizes the persons involved.

People may have a good time, but what they do is they dehumanize themselves, distort God's image of how God has made them in his image.

And that's why it's called impure. And again, while adultery, that physical act, is the most overt sign of this, all other forms, like lust with the eyes, pornography, and such like, are also impure for the same reason, that it defiles and distorts God's purpose for creation.

So for example, when we lust after another person with our eyes, what we've done is turn that person into an object. We've objectified them and therefore dehumanized them for our own selfish desires.

[14 : 37] And the same goes for pornography. So some of you will realize that when David confessed to his adultery in Psalm 51 and verse 4, and it's on the slide, how did he pray?

He said, against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil. That's because he realized his sin wasn't just against Uriah or Bathsheba, but it was against God, wasn't it?

Who created each and every one of them in his image. And David defiled that with his adultery. And so serious is this, that Jesus now then says in the next slide, if your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away.

It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

Now again, Jesus here isn't being literal. Otherwise, I don't think I'll have any limbs. This is hyperbolic language, isn't it? But he's using it to show just how serious adultery is.

[15 : 44] Now, I think these verses can be applied more widely to all forms of sin, but because it's right here in this context, I think Jesus has a particular focus on adultery. And so, his word is this, don't make light of any form of adulterous impurity.

Lust of the eyes is as bad as physical adultery. Both are so serious that Jesus wants us to stop it. And that again is a contrast, isn't it, to our culture today.

Because nowadays, if you look on the news, no one gets shocked, do they, by adultery. It's almost par se. They might roll their eyes and then they move on.

If you look at all the movies and whatever documentaries that cut out of Hollywood and the like, they celebrate, don't they, rather than condemn or criticize all forms of sexual impurity or perversion.

And so, for us as a church, this is really one of the things that we stand out, don't we? And that's why Jesus called us to be light of the world. Because biblical sexual ethic is just so different from the world, particularly in the Western world now.

[16 : 57] And, as a result, we'll be hated for being faithful to it. Alright, I want to just draw to close these two examples here by saying, whilst Jesus only does these two examples and we only have time to look at two, I think if you go back to all the other commandments and indeed all the Old Testament and look through it, you'll see that actually what Jesus says here is not meant to be limited to just these two examples.

Rather, he's trying to give us a principle to follow that actually we need to look with all of God's word at not just the letter of the law but the intent of the law. So, for example, let me just give you one very quick one.

The commandment, do not steal. Now, I'm sure many of you, maybe not all, but many of you don't shoplift. I can't presume.

Alright, so I'm hoping most of you don't shoplift. But what else is tantamount to stealing? You know, stealing time from your employer, perhaps?

Using other people's things without asking them first? Just think about it. Alright, now with the next two examples, Jesus points out that sometimes the Pharisees can misuse God's law in such a way as to avoid the true purpose of the law in the first place.

[18 : 20] So, the first example here is divorce. And, although it's related to adultery, I think the shift of the focus here is now going from God's desire for purity to His desire for faithfulness.

So, in verse 31, Jesus says, it has been said anyone who divorces his wife must give a certificate of divorce. Now, if you want to look it up, that law is in Deuteronomy 24, verse 1.

But in there, Moses intended for this law to actually be used as a concession, something to be used as a last resort. He didn't put it in there to approve of divorce in the first place.

Rather, it stipulated that if a man were to divorce a wife for whatever reason, as a last resort, then she must be given a certificate to protect her.

Because, in those days, if she were to be divorced without a certificate, then there is a risk that she'll be left without a home to be unable to remarry.

[19 : 21] and the certificate was actually to then allow her to remarry another lawfully. However, by the time of Jesus, the law had been so twisted that it was being used to make divorce easy and legal.

Not rare and difficult, but easy and legal. Which is the exact opposite, isn't it, of what God really wanted. So, instead of being used rarely as a last resort, it was common for a man then to use it as an instrument of convenience.

Well, Jesus says in verse 32, but I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife except for sexual immorality makes her the victim of adultery. Anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

And so, you see here that God's focus or desire is for faithfulness, to keep a marriage together, and for a man and woman to remain faithful to each other. So, yes, sexual immorality, if that occurred, I think it's an exception because Jesus says then, well, in that case, the sexual immorality is the thing that broke the faithfulness in the first place.

Sadly, therefore, you know, divorce is permissible. But even here, I think Jesus is saying you may divorce. You don't have to. Because if you continue to remain married and resist divorce, it actually mirrors God's own faithfulness to his people Israel.

[20 : 50] Because God chose not to break his covenant with Israel, didn't he? Even though they sinned. And in the Old Testament, God describes it as adultery. Likewise, Jesus sacrificed for his bride, us, the church, even though we were far from blameless and pure.

And so, if you persist with a marriage, then you are actually mimicking God's own character. Now, I'm not saying here that, you know, in this current sort of environment where there are issues around domestic violence and all that, that you never divorce, all right?

This is not the last word on divorce, but Jesus' point here is that we mustn't make divorce too easy for ourselves. We must try our utmost to remain faithful to the one that we've been married with or without a certificate, with or without sexual immorality.

Now, notice just out of interest as well that the divorcing of the wife actually makes her the victim of adultery. It's not that she, even though she will then commit that act with another husband, she's actually the victim, isn't she?

Now, of course, today this law in Deuteronomy chapter 24 doesn't apply to us, although I think we still go to a family court and get it and out or whatever, but the principle is the thing that's important, isn't it, that we need to look to, and that is God's desire for faithfulness is to be of utmost importance, so much so that unfaithfulness of any kind equates to adultery, and Jesus has already said just how serious that is to the point of figuratively gouging our eyes and cutting off our arms.

[22 : 37] So have a think again, for those of us who are married, we may not have physically committed adultery, but are we faithful, or do we start, you know, entertaining other sorts of relationships that actually breaks down the trust and faithfulness in our marriage?

Now, similarly with oaths, I think Jesus applies a similar logic in verse 33. Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.

And again, the original purpose of this law was good. God's desire for truthfulness was the purpose, and the law was to ensure that if you made an oath of any kind, you're meant to fulfill it.

But again, by Jesus' time, the Pharisees again started to come up with all sorts of rules, you know, to grade just how binding certain statements and oaths were.

So, a promise without an oath was considered not as binding as one with. And there's some writing that says that if you swear by Jerusalem, that was less binding than if you swear toward Jerusalem.

[23 : 49] Technicality there, but, oh, you know, big difference. I mean, the lawyers, all you lawyers there would have had a field day giving advice, I think, in those days. But what's the effect?

the effect was the opposite of what God desired, is it? It was to dilute God's simple desire for truthfulness. Because what God wanted was simply don't lie, full stop.

No caveats, no ifs and buts, isn't it? I don't know whether many of you are following Survivor, but Survivor is all about truthfulness, isn't it? The contestants are always working out who they can trust, who's telling the lies, you know.

And so recently, one contestant, Sean, he actually swore to Simon on his children's life, that he would take Simon to the merge. And then all of a sudden, Simon goes, whoa, he's got to really be telling the truth now.

Notwithstanding that we all know everyone lies on the game. But that's not what it ought to be like for us, isn't it? Because now Jesus calls it out and he says, let your yes be yes and your no be no.

[24 : 57] And so he says, but I tell you, do not swear an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is God's throne, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.

All you need to say is simply yes or no. Anything beyond this comes from the evil one. Now again here, Jesus is not saying you can never take any oaths, so if you go to court and you have to swear in the Bible, he's not saying that you can't do that.

Elsewhere in the Bible, God does make oaths himself. But the point here again is that we're not to be hedging our bets and saying this or that and being economical with certain words in order to get out of being truthful.

There's only one standard for us. We're meant to be absolutely truthful about everything all the time. Yes, let our yes be yes and our no be no.

Now I don't mean to caveat this, but when you play a game of cheat, I think you can do that, okay? But apart from that, let your yes be yes and your no be no.

[26 : 10] And again, it's serious stuff, isn't it? And I guess we all know it, don't we? If you talk to people and you get to know people, after a while you know who are trustworthy and who are not.

And those who are, you can tell, you know, when they talk, you just believe them and you will take them on their word. But someone who is always shifty with the truth, it doesn't matter, does it?

If he then comes around and says, oh no, this time I'm going to swear that I'm going to say the truth, you're not going to believe that person, are you? Well, I hope you don't, but your track record, your character comes true, doesn't it?

And so Jesus is saying, let your yes be yes, speak the truth, don't try and conceal it, don't try and twist the truth, because if you do that, that last sentence there is a warning, isn't it?

You're actually doing the devil's work. And if we recall, all the way back in Genesis, what was the very first lie? It was between the serpent and Eve, wasn't it?

[27 : 06] Did God really say you can't eat the fruit? Da, da, da. Hiding the truth from others is what the devil does, isn't it?

And so we do that, we're doing the devil's work. All right, so those are the four examples, but I think in sum, what I want to say is that Jesus here in these examples is simply urging us to desire to obey God's law as he intended.

That is, let's aim for the high water mark. Let's not settle for just going through the motions where our heart is not in it, or try and twist the purpose of God's law and deceive ourselves into think we're obeying God when actually we're not.

Now, of course, we need to remember that we don't do this to achieve our own righteousness because Christ does that for us. And no matter how far short we've fallen, and I know we've all fallen short, we can still keep coming back to God, leaning on Christ's death and righteousness in order to be forgiven.

God's death and we don't do it to be forgiven. We can be assured of our salvation, we mustn't then stop obeying the law. It still matters, doesn't it?

[28 : 20] Why? Because, firstly, it matters for God. His word reflects his character. And so we say we love him, then we want to please him and bring joy to what is on his heart, what he truly desires.

And secondly, because we do that, then we show where our heart truly is. That we desire, we aim for that high watermark willingly.

Not because we're forced to, not because we have to show others that we're so good. We do it because we want to have the same desires that God has. We're aiming to be like Jesus, and ultimately we're aiming to be like God himself.

We want to have the same heart, don't we? that God does for his world and for ourselves. And that's why later on we will get to Matthew 5 verse 48 where Jesus says, Be perfect therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect.

And even though we may not always get there in perfection all the time, yet let's aim for that so that we can please God. Let's pray. Now before I pray, I might just pause and give you a chance to reflect, I've gone really quickly, but just think over those four examples again and see if you do need to come before the Lord in confession and repentance.

[29 : 43] There will be a time for confession later on, but just make a note of anything that you feel like God has spoken to you about, whether it's about hating someone, whether it's about lust with the eyes or adultery, whether it's about being unfaithful, whether it's about being untruthful.

So I'll just pause and let you reflect and then I'll pray. Father, give us a pure heart that we may pursue the commands of Jesus in a way that truly pleases you.

Help us not to simply go through the motions or to make light of your holy laws, but give us your spirit and his power so that we may be perfect, even as you are perfect.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.