

## **“FOLLOWING THE KING - 12”**

*Matthew 5:21-48*

Last time we were looking at this section of Matthew’s Gospel – apart from last week, that is, when David Coffey took us to some verses in chapter 6 – we were thinking about what Jesus says about *righteousness* and its relation to the Law. Righteousness is one of those words we use a lot without really understanding what it means, but we adopted a simple shorthand way of defining it as “the way God wants things done”. At the beginning of this Sermon On The Mount, Jesus has commended those who are desperate for that to be the case in their lives and in our world, and said that they will be blessed because of that desire: they will know something of the radiant satisfaction and joy of being part of God’s Kingdom people.

But he goes on to explain that you can’t get to that simply through keeping the Law. It’s not just enough to keep to the letter of the Law – to keep one’s nose clean, as it were – if we ignore what’s really behind it. After all, the Law is just a guide, really – a way of helping people to do what God wants, a framework within which righteousness can be pursued. The important thing is to look at what God wants, which people like the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law have lost sight of as they have got to the point where they see keeping the Law as an end in itself.

In the passage we’ve read this morning, Jesus expands on all that and gives some specific examples. It’s important to remember that these are just examples and Jesus is not dealing with the entire Law in these verses. But he looks at various commandments and laws and tries to tease out what they are actually pointing to. These are laws that God has given, but what does he really want people to do with them? What kind of attitudes are they pointing to? We didn’t read the entire passage this morning as that would have taken a bit too long, but you might like to have your Bible open on your lap so that you can see what we’re referring to here.

Jesus takes various commandments and rules with which his listeners – the newly chosen disciples who were starting to learn what life in God’s Kingdom, life as followers of Jesus was all about – would have been very familiar. Some of what Jesus uses as examples here are taken directly from the Ten Commandments – “*Do not murder*” and “*Do not commit adultery*”. Some of them are from the wider expressions and interpretations of the Law – the bits about divorce and oaths and retribution, for example. And one of them – the final, crucial one – concerns the foundation of it all and the way it had been twisted and abused by some people – “*Love your neighbour*”. The Jesus rounds the whole thing off with a powerful appeal to his followers to “*Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.*”

This is almost choral in its expression. Jesus uses repetition and a sense of rhythm and cadence as he makes his points here. You could imagine this being preached by one of those old-style black Pentecostal preachers who keeps coming back to the same little phrases and points again and again. In this short section, Jesus introduces his points – six of them – with the words, “*You have heard it said ...*” (With the exception of v31, it’s exactly the same little phrase in Greek as in English and in v31 it’s only a very minor variation.) The he goes on to say, “*But I tell you ...*” This is what you’re used to, this is what you’re told to do, he says to them. These are the laws – you probably know them off by heart – and, to be honest, they’re not too difficult to keep. But my question to you is, what are the attitudes behind them? What’s going on behind those squeaky clean exteriors? This is about the values and the attitudes that these laws are intended to develop. But most of the Pharisees – and, indeed, the rest of the population – were content just to avoid breaking the letter of the law, whilst their hearts and minds were full of all kinds of other stuff that was very unhelpful.

Rob Warner, in his book on The Sermon On The Mount, writes that, according to the way in which Jesus takes the Law and pokes about behind it, “*his followers should not be known primarily as ‘the people who don’t’, but rather as ‘the people who love’.* *The extravagant, inclusive tone of the Father should find practical expression in the lifestyle of discipleship.*” This is about living as God really wants us to, as he really intended us to. Tom Wright writes, “*Throughout this chapter, Jesus is not just giving moral*

*commands. He is inviting a whole new way of being human.”* It’s only when we stop and take seriously what this righteousness business is all about that we can really start to fulfil our potential, not just as followers of Jesus the Christ, but as human beings living as God wants us to.

We’re still talking in very general terms, though, aren’t we? What does this actually look like? Where’s Jesus actually taking us? Well, as we’ve said, he takes some specific examples and looks at what it’s really all about. Some people call this Jesus’ “intensifying” of the Law, but it’s not exactly that. It’s more of his opening up of the Law. I’d suggest that there are three broad areas here, so we’ll look at them in turn.

Firstly, Jesus talk about **anger, resentment and bitterness (vv21-26)**. The Law says that you shouldn’t murder anyone. Fair enough – most people haven’t murdered anyone. Most of us have probably never even hit anyone purposely. But I bet you’ve wanted to, haven’t you? Not long before I’d sat down to write this, I’d said to Sally about a person I’d been sitting next to at a meeting the night before, “I just want to give him a real good slapping!” Jesus knows that, by and large, an act of violence is the culmination of attitudes and feelings that have been building up for a while. You start off getting angry over something, then you might call someone a name – either to their face or, more usually, behind their back to other people. You’ve got to nip that in the bud, says Jesus. It’s no good saying that you keep the law because you haven’t killed him yet when actually the resentment and bitterness seething away inside you is have a far more corrosive effect on your relationship and on your life.

You may not have killed the person, but you’ve killed off the relationship. How can you come before God to worship him, knowing there’s all that anger bubbling away in your heart? Get it sorted! And make it a matter of urgency. I reckon resentment and bitterness are the things that are most destructive of Christian fellowship and you’ll find it in any church you care to visit. You’ll probably find it in any family – Christian or otherwise – that you choose to look at. It’s not just about keeping the Law – it’s about the attitudes that you are harbouring which the Law is just about managing to keep in check. Are you angry at someone? Have you got a root of bitterness in your heart? Jesus says, “*First, go and be reconciled to your brother ... Settle matters quickly.*” If not, it could be expensive, not necessarily in terms of court fees, but in terms of spoiled relationships, of wasted opportunities and of ruined witness.

Then he goes on to talk about **faithfulness and integrity (vv27-37)**. You may not have committed adultery or broken a solemn oath, he says, but watch out for the seeds of unfaithfulness – unfaithfulness to your spouse, unfaithfulness to those to whom you’ve made promises. Those of you who were here at the Keswick in Lichfield meeting last Saturday morning will have heard David Coffey talking about this in the context of the story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife. And we think, “How could it happen that a Christian cheats on his or her spouse? I’m glad it hasn’t happened to me.” Only this week I’ve heard of another respected Christian leader who has left his wife and four children for another woman, destroying his ministry, destroying seven lives, destroying any sense of trust that others might have in him. And we are shocked and saddened by it and assume it can’t happen to us. But Jesus says, it can happen to anyone because it starts with that seed of unfaithfulness that is planted by an unwise look or an unguarded comment.

President Jimmy Carter once famously told an interviewer that he had committed adultery in his heart for exactly the reasons that Jesus states here. He had looked lustfully at a woman – he’d thought about what it might be like to be with her rather than his wife. In a society where we are constantly bombarded with images of sex and seduction we need to be so careful what we’re looking at, what we’re reading, what we’re watching on the television, the DVD player, the internet. Jesus proposes a very drastic remedy. “If it’s causing you to sin, cut it off!” One of the great theologians of the early church, Origen, took this so seriously that he castrated himself. There’s a great black & white B-movie called *The Man With X-Ray Eyes* which climaxes with the main character going into a tent meeting where this verses is being preached on a gouging out his eyes. Most people would say that Jesus is using Jewish hyperbole here and he’s just exaggerating to make a point – but the point is, if you know you’re vulnerable, then avoid getting into that situation.

Because this is not just about sticking with your spouse, or keeping to your word. It's about what is behind that law. It's about faithfulness, trust and integrity. It's about not changing the contract after it's been signed or keeping the small print covered up. It's about steering clear of places where you'll be alone with a person of the opposite sex, about putting some safeguards on your computer, about keeping your eyes off the top shelf at the newsagent, about binning the book that's feeding your lust.

And then Jesus talks about **love and generosity and mercy (vv38-48)**. He talks about things that have become proverbial in our language, such as "*going the extra mile*". This is about giving more than you get, about letting your love overflow to others. There were plenty of opportunities within the Law to do things for others, not just to refrain from doing things, but once again, you could just stick at the bare minimum or you could get on and demonstrate what was really behind the Law. Jesus deals with retribution here – the old "*an eye for an eye*" principle, which was a limiting principle rather than a permissive one. But Jesus not only says that you shouldn't go further than this limit, but that you shouldn't even get that far.

And he takes the commandment which is at the very heart of the Law – "*Love your neighbour*" – and shows how people have used that as a limiting principle too, so that they think you need **only** love your neighbour and you can go on hating your enemy. Show love to those beyond your circle, even to those whom you might consider enemies. Pray for them – always a great way, I've found, to help overcome the bitterness and resentment we were talking about earlier. Jesus is saying, don't just soak up their hatred towards you, but do something positive towards them. Reach out and bless them. Show that you don't bear a grudge. And if you get to the point where you could exact revenge, don't! Show mercy. Why? Because this is all what we might call "value added" – it's going well beyond the letter of the Law and showing something of the spirit of love and compassion and hospitality and generosity that are at the very heart of God himself. It's something that need to be put into practice positively. It needs applying to our daily lives as followers of Jesus. I came across this quotation from Calvin Miller this week in an e-zine I was reading: "*Without application there is no sermon. Application is what gets the Sermon off the Mount and down into the valley where the toilers work out their days.*" Now that's hard – and we need God's help if we're going to get involved in that.

Did you ever have one of those Painting-by-numbers sets when you were younger? I often had them as presents from grandparents and aunts. The canvas had all the shapes on and you had a palette of oil paints with numbers that corresponded to the numbers on the shapes. Nearly all of my paintings, for some unaccountable reason, were budgerigars. But you could get advanced sets that were reproductions of Old Masters – a Van Gogh or a Gauguin. If you followed the numbers, the painting would be recognisable, but it wouldn't have that certain something that the original had. Jesus is saying here that those who keep to the Law and leave it at that are really just doing it by numbers. Those who want to demonstrate that certain something have to go beyond that, to ask for the help of God's Holy Spirit..

You see, we're not called simply to do the bare minimum, to follow the rules and be satisfied with that. We're talking here about the difference between boys' homework and girls'. When I was teaching, the boys would answer the questions and, probably, get them all right as often as not. The girls would answer the questions, get them right and decorate the margins or use different coloured inks and scripts. They didn't just do what was required of them, just what everyone else did – they went beyond that. And Jesus says here, what's the point of just doing what everyone else does? If you only love those who love you, if you only welcome those who welcome you – well, where's the excellence in that? The people he's been criticising do that. The pagans do that. Our example and inspiration is God. We should be aspiring to be like him.

And Jesus ends this section with this amazing exhortation, "*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect.*" What?? Be like God? And some of us may take refuge in David Coffey's assertion last weekend that there is no sinless perfection in this life – so there's no point trying, really. But this word translated "*perfect*" here is a Greek word that has behind it the idea of accomplishing a goal, or working

towards a particular target. It can mean “*without shortcoming*” and it’s the word Jesus uses to the Rich Young Man in *Matthew 19:21*, the word Paul uses in *Colossians 4:12*, the word James uses in *James 1:4* and *3:2*. But reading through the big dictionaries, I came across one way of expressing it which fits in just right with what we’re talking about in the chapters about righteousness, about doing things God’s way. One scholar says that this Greek word (it’s *teleios*, if anyone’s really desperate to know) can mean “*wholly in accord with God’s will*”. That’s what we’re called to be, “*wholly in accord with God’s will*”.

You see, we can keep all the laws, like the Pharisees did, like the Rich Young Man did, like even the pagans did, like so many people down the centuries have done, and still miss out on what this is all about, still miss out on doing things God’s way, in accord with his will. That’s because our attitude isn’t right, our heart isn’t right. As followers of Jesus the Christ, we need to show that “value added” quality, to show that our behaviour is the outcome of attitudes and values shaped by the teaching of Jesus himself. That quality will show – it will show as we are generous in sharing our time, talents, money, wisdom, knowledge, compassion with others, particularly those whom others people might consider enemies. It will show as we demonstrate faithfulness in our marriages, our business dealings, our relationships generally. It will show as we deal with our anger and get rid of those feelings of bitterness, anger and resentment. It will show as we allow God to shape our lives so that we are living in accord with his will.

It’s tough stuff. As I was finishing this, writing this last paragraph, I answered the door to someone and turning round, discovered a pile of post from a couple of weeks ago that had been hidden by someone’s bag thrown down in the porch. (I’m struggling with my resentment here!) On the top was this month’s copy of *Third Way* magazine and on the front a quotation from Ian Duncan-Smith. Whatever you might think of him as a person or a politician, these words serve as a great summary of this passage: “*It’s quite simple: either we are changing lives for the better or we’re not.*” Are you allowing God, through his Holy Spirit, to change your life for the better or not? And as he changes your life, is your life having a positive effect on the lives of others? If the answer to either of those questions is “No”, you need to go away and pray and read this passage through again and again until you get it! If the answer is “Yes”, you still need to keep praying and keep asking for God’s Holy Spirit to keep you at it.

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### **Questions for discussion**

1. How can we ensure that we don't keep getting angry with people? What should we do about those who don't want to be reconciled to us?
2. How do you interpret Jesus' words in *vv29,30*? How can we actually put that into practice?
3. Does Jesus' teaching on oaths mean we shouldn't swear on the Bible in court? What are the implications of this in our business world of contracts and legal agreements?
4. Can we really get through life without resisting an evil person (*v39*)? How? What about evil regimes such as the Nazi regime or Pol Pot's or Colonel Ghadaffi's?
5. How should we live our lives to distinguish ourselves from the "*tax collectors*" and "*pagans*"? Can we ever aspire to being "*perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect*"?