

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT – MATTHEW 5-7

A Different Kind of Righteousness Given and Lived

Matthew 5:20

Faith Church of Linden

By Daniel Patz on June 7, 2026

MATTHEW 5:20 (ESV)

“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. (19)

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

— Matthew 5:20 (ESV)

INTRODUCTION

We come again this morning to some heavy truths — as we do each week in this sermon. And they speak on to the difference between life and death, light and darkness, real and fake. I pray that God would help us to see. “Unless...you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

One of the great struggles we all face is this: we can know things intellectually, theologically, doctrinally — we can say we believe them, be confident we know them to be true — and yet they do not bear fruit in our lives. We do not live in such a way that shows we really believe them, that we really trust and put our hope in them. We have not demonstrated that they have mastered our hearts — that this is not just an intellectual thing, but a conversion, a radical spiritual operation done by Christ and His Holy Spirit in us.

Last week we ended with a question: why does Jesus require a different kind of righteousness altogether? This morning we answer it. And the answer has two parts that belong in a specific order.

A righteousness received as a gift. And **a righteousness lived** — which is the fruit of the first.

The Pharisees had neither. And verse 20 names them specifically because they are the most vivid example of what this greater righteousness is *not*. So that is where we begin.

1. WHY THE PHARISEES HAD IT FUNDAMENTALLY WRONG — AND EVERYONE ELSE

When the crowd hears Jesus say that His disciples must have a righteousness that *exceeds* that of the scribes and Pharisees, they are stunned. The Pharisees are the most visibly righteous people in the land. They have given their lives to the study and keeping of God's law. If they fall short — who can possibly make it?

That is exactly the question Jesus wants us to ask. Because the Pharisees, for all their discipline, had it fundamentally wrong. And not just in the details. At the root.

The root is this: their view of God. Their blindness. **God was small and they were large.** They did not see God as He truly is. And because they did not see God rightly, they could not see themselves rightly — and they could not see His law rightly.

When you see God as He actually is — holy, infinite, searching every thought and motive — the only response is Isaiah's: "*Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips.*" (Isaiah 6:5). Or Job's, after all his arguments, when God finally speaks from the whirlwind: "*I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent.*" (Job 42:5–6) The one who is saved comes to God and they mourn over their sin...they become poor in spirit.

The Pharisees had reduced God to a size they could manage and a law they could satisfy. They were comfortable. Satisfied with themselves. That is the tell. A true sight of God produces poverty of spirit — the very first Beatitude. The Pharisees were the inverted image of the Beatitudes.

Five failures. All from one root.

a) External over internal

Their phylacteries were wide. Their prayers were long. Their fasting was conspicuous. Matthew 6:5: they loved to pray at the street corners *that they may be seen by others*. The audience for their religion was the people around them, not the God above them. The word **hypocrite** comes from the Greek theater — an actor playing a role. Matthew 23 says it plainly: "*You clean the outside of the cup... but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence... You are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones.*" Beautiful surface. Death inside.

Where is the gap between how we appear on Sunday and what is actually happening inside us?

b) Ceremonial over moral

They measured a tenth of their mint, dill, and cumin with precision — and neglected justice, mercy, and faithfulness. Matthew 23:23–24: "*These you ought to have done,*

without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!” They perfected what was easy to measure and abandoned what was hard to fake.

We go to church, read our Bibles, check the boxes — and walk past the person with a real need because stopping would make us late, or dirty, or inconvenient.

c) Self-satisfied

Luke 18 — the Pharisee stands in the temple and prays: “*God, I thank you that I am not like other men... I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.*” He is not praying. He is filing a report. He measures himself against the man beside him and finds the comparison reassuring. The tax collector cannot even lift his eyes: “*God, be merciful to me, a sinner!*” Jesus says that man went home justified. Not the Pharisee.

Where have we stopped being surprised by grace because we feel we have earned a certain standing before God?

d) Self-glorifying

Matthew 23:6–7 — they loved the places of honor at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, the titles, the greetings in the marketplace. Their religion served their reputation. Luke 16:15: “*You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.*” What the crowd applauded, God found repellent.

Where do we arrange our Christian lives so that the right people see the right things about us?

e) Man-made rules above Scripture

Matthew 15 — their traditions had grown large enough to override Scripture. The *Corban* practice allowed a man to exempt himself from caring for his aging parents by declaring property dedicated to God — directly violating the command to honor father and mother. Jesus names it: “*And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?*” They had added so much to God’s word that they could appear to keep it while avoiding what it actually required.

We have our own versions — unwritten rules, tribal markers, cultural Christianity that quietly displaces the plain weight of what Scripture requires.

The Wall We Cannot Climb

Here is the thing about every one of those five failures: they all share a hidden assumption. **The assumption that the wall can be climbed.** That with enough discipline, enough precision, enough religious effort — you can clear the canyon. You can make it on your own terms.

That is what the Pharisees believed. And it is the default assumption of every human heart toward God. We are wired to want to earn our standing, to manage our record, to build a case for ourselves. We overestimate our own ability and we underestimate God's holy standard.

But that is precisely what the law was never designed to do. Paul writes in Romans 3:20: *"For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin."* **The law is a mirror, not a ladder.** It does not give you a way up — it shows you where you stand. And where we stand, before the holiness of God, is the same place Isaiah stood: undone. God is big and you are small. Christ is holy and you are not.

The law was given to drive us to poverty of spirit — to empty our hands of our own righteousness so that we can receive another's. The Pharisees looked at the law and concluded they were doing well. They looked at sinners and felt good about themselves. That conclusion is the most dangerous thing a person can believe. It means you will never look for the Savior, because you have not yet understood that you need one.

We need a righteousness we cannot produce.

2. THE NATURE OF THE GREATER RIGHTEOUSNESS

So what is this **greater righteousness** Jesus requires? Jonathan Pennington defines it well: *whole-person behavior that accords with God's nature, God's will, and God's coming kingdom.* Not just the hands. Not just the words. The whole person — thoughts, motives, desires, and actions — integrated, consistent, and aimed at God.

Jesus Himself gave us the summary when a Pharisee tried to trap him: what is the greatest commandment?

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

— **Matthew 22:37–40 (ESV)**

If we loved God with all our heart — undivided, whole — we would fulfill all the law. Every commandment is a specific expression of what that love looks like in a particular situation. And if we truly loved God, we would love our neighbor too — not as a duty we

resent, but because we love the God in whose image our neighbor is made. For His glory, not our own.

True righteousness is doing the right thing for the right reason. The Pharisees sometimes did the right things. But the reason was wrong — their own glory, their own standing, their own sense of having met the bar. The right thing done for the wrong reason is not righteousness. It is theater.

And this is where we must be honest. None of us can sustain love for God as the engine of our obedience by willpower. You cannot manufacture that. A heart that loves God that way — genuinely, from the inside out — has to be given. Which is why this righteousness is, first and foremost, a gift. We will come to that fully in the third point.

But here is what we can say about its *nature* now: it is the righteousness the Sermon on the Mount has been describing from the very beginning. The Beatitudes painted the portrait. Blessed — flourishing — is the one who is poor in spirit, who mourns over sin, who hungers and thirsts for righteousness, who is pure in heart. That is not a checklist to perform. That is the **shape of a person who has been made new**. And the rest of Matthew 5 will show us what that life looks like in the concrete details of daily obedience. Even on into 6 and 7.

Verse 20 is, in a real sense, the **thesis** of the Sermon on the Mount. Everything that follows is Jesus showing us: *here is what the greater righteousness looks like in practice*

A Framework for Matthew 5:21–47

Before we look at the rest of the chapter in the coming months where he gives the six examples, let me give you four principles from Martyn Lloyd-Jones that run beneath all of them — not as a new law code, but as the shape of the life being described:

When it comes to righteousness lived out – a whole hearted righteousness and obedience to God’s law:

- **Spirit, not letter only.** The law was always after the heart behind the action — the intention, the motive, the love or indifference underneath.
- **Thoughts, motives, and desires matter equally.** God knows your hearts (Luke 16:15). The law reaches as far in as there is anything to reach.
- **The law is positive in its aim, not merely negative.** Every prohibition has a positive at its heart. Do not murder is a call to love and protect the image of God in every person.
- **The goal is knowing God, not keeping score.** The question at the end of the day is not: did I avoid the wrong things? It is: was God supreme in my life today?

You will see all four at work in each of the six examples.

3. WHERE IT COMES FROM: JUSTIFICATION, NEW COVENANT, AND SANCTIFICATION

We have seen what the greater righteousness is not — the Pharisees' performance. We have seen what it is — whole-person, love-motivated, aimed at God. Now the question that everything depends on: where does it come from?

It comes from Christ. Entirely. And it comes in two movements that are distinct but inseparable.

First Movement: Justification — Righteousness as a Gift Received

2 Corinthians 5:21:

“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

— 2 Corinthians 5:21 (ESV)

This is **justification** — *the act of God by which He declares a sinner righteous on the basis of Christ's work alone, received through faith alone.* Jesus, who knew no sin, became sin for us. He took what was ours — our guilt, our condemnation, every failure to love God with our whole heart — and He bore it on the cross. And His righteousness — His perfect whole-person obedience, His complete love for the Father — is credited to everyone who trusts Him.

This is the righteousness that gets you into the kingdom. Not yours — His. Not performed — received. Romans 8:1: *“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”* The wall has been climbed. The canyon has been crossed. Not by you — by Him, for you.

The Pharisee never sought this because he thought he didn't need it. They overestimated self. He (Pharisee) was climbing the wall himself. Every one of us who trusts our own righteousness is making the same mistake. The law was given to show us we cannot make it — to empty our hands so we can receive what Christ offers freely.

Second Movement: Sanctification — Righteousness as a Life Lived

But justification is never alone. The one who receives the gift is also being made new. This is **sanctification** — the ongoing work of the Spirit forming true righteousness in the life of the believer, from the inside out. It is God's work in us making us more holy little by little.

This is what the new covenant promised. Ezekiel 36:26–27: *“I will give you a new heart... I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes.”* Romans 8:3–4: God sent His Son so that *“the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”* Not fulfilled by us — fulfilled *in us*. God’s initiative all the way.

And here is the heart of how it works. The Spirit does not produce this righteousness in us abstractly or mechanically. He produces it by keeping Christ in view. 2 Corinthians 3:18:

“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”

— 2 Corinthians 3:18 (ESV)

As we behold the glory of Christ — His grace, His love, His sacrifice, His beauty — we are transformed into His image. The Spirit does not work around Christ or alongside Christ. He works by fixing our eyes on Christ. The righteousness being formed in us is the righteousness of Christ Himself, applied to our hearts by the Spirit who continually holds Him before us.

This is what makes new covenant obedience entirely different from Pharisee obedience at its root. The Pharisee obeyed to *earn* God’s love. The believer obeys *from* a love already given — 1 John 4:19: *“We love because he first loved us.”* Gratitude and love are the engine, not fear and performance. John 15:5: *“Apart from me you can do nothing.”* But abiding in Christ, the branch bears fruit.

The Righteousness Lived Is Evidence, Not Grounds

And here we must be precise. The righteousness lived — the fruit of sanctification, the whole-person obedience the Sermon on the Mount describes — is **not the grounds of our salvation**. It is the **evidence** of it.

It does not get you into the kingdom. It shows that you belong there. The fruit proves the tree. Jesus closes the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7 with exactly this: false prophets are known by their fruit. Bad tree, bad fruit. Good tree, good fruit. The tree is not made good by its fruit — the tree is revealed by it. True disciples of Jesus, true children of God, bear fruit. Not perfectly, not without struggle — but really, genuinely, in a way that is growing.

So the order is everything. *First*: righteousness received as a gift — Christ’s righteousness credited to you by faith. This is justification. This is what gets you in.

Then: righteousness lived — the Spirit of Christ forming true obedience in you from the inside out. This is sanctification. This is what shows you are in.

The Pharisee tried to produce the fruit without the root. He tried to live the righteousness without receiving it. And so everything he produced was artificial — beautiful from a distance, hollow up close.

CONCLUSION

We began this morning with a question: do the truths we know intellectually actually bear fruit in our lives? Have they mastered our hearts? Are they evidence of a radical spiritual operation done by Christ and His Holy Spirit in us?

Verse 20 presses that question into the open. A greater righteousness is required. No entry without it. But it is not a wall you climb — it is a gift you receive, and then a life that flows from it.

Christ is the hope of everything here. He is the one who lived the greater righteousness perfectly in your place. He is the one whose righteousness is credited to you by faith. He is the one whose glory, beheld by faith, transforms you into His image by the Spirit. He is the vine; you are the branch. The fruit is real — but it comes from abiding in Him.

If you do not yet know Christ: the gift is open to you today. He is not asking you to clean yourself up first. He is asking you to come empty-handed, poor in spirit, and receive what He has done. That is the door into the kingdom. It has always been the door.

If you are a believer: Do you know that you have been given his righteousness as a gift to be received! Do you rejoice in it? Do you look to Christ for help and ask for His help? look at your life — not to earn something, not to measure up to anyone's standard, but to ask honestly: is there fruit? Is the Spirit at work? Is God becoming larger and self becoming smaller? Is the righteousness lived flowing from the righteousness received?

That is the evidence that the gift is real. That is what the rest of this sermon will keep showing us. But for ever look to self – look 10 times to Christ! When you look to self and grieve over your sin – that is most likely the Holy Spirit! Rejoice and look to Christ! He promises to help you! The kingdom is for the poor in spirit...the Kingdom is for those who God is growing to have a righteousness that exceeds the Scribes and Pharisees.

Gift first. Life second. Christ in both.