

**January 22, 2017**  
**Sermon Manuscript**

**Matthew 5:(1-16), 17-20, (21-30)**

<sup>1</sup> Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.

<sup>2</sup> And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: <sup>3</sup> "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup> "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. <sup>5</sup> "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. <sup>6</sup> "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. <sup>7</sup> "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. <sup>8</sup> "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. <sup>9</sup> "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. <sup>10</sup> "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>11</sup> "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. <sup>13</sup> "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. <sup>14</sup> "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

<sup>17</sup> "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup> For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>21</sup> "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' <sup>22</sup> But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. <sup>23</sup> So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, <sup>24</sup> leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. <sup>25</sup> Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. <sup>26</sup> Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

<sup>27</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' <sup>28</sup> But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. <sup>29</sup> If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. <sup>30</sup> And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

Clarifying "Righteousness" - Matthew 5:(1-16), 17-20, (21-30)

This morning we are continuing on with part three of our series on the Sermon on the Mount. And, once again, I'll be drawing heavily from Dallas Willard's book *The Divine Conspiracy* as in weeks past.

Now the focus of this morning's sermon will be on clarifying just one paragraph from the Sermon on the Mount, only the four verses that I've put a box around in your bulletin (verses 17-20), where Jesus says,

17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. 18 For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. 19 Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Now, the biggest problem with a paragraph like this is that it is *really easy* to misunderstand what Jesus is up to, and to hear what he is saying as *bad news*. In fact, some read verse 20 where Jesus says, "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" and they wonder how this could *possibly be* good news! First of all, if they've read much of their Bible, they *know* that these scribes and Pharisees were *obsessed* with observing God's law. It was almost *the only thing* these guys talked about! But also, since most people wrongly assume the term "kingdom of heaven" refers the afterlife – an assumption we corrected two weeks ago. But for anyone with that wrong assumption, it *sounds* like Jesus is proclaiming that anyone who doesn't follow God's law better than "the scribes and Pharisees" will miss out on heaven!!

So, none of this sounds like good news at all. But we need to remember: if we ever read a passage of God's word and hear it as bad news, that's a great indication we aren't understanding its full meaning. And the *first* question we should *always* ask ourselves when that happens is: "Am I understanding this passage in its context?"

You know, one thing that makes many Anglicans proud of our tradition is the amount of scripture we read every Sunday – an Old Testament reading, a psalm, a reading from the epistles, and a Gospel. However (at the risk of saying something negative about Anglicanism), this approach does have at least one weakness, and that weakness is that the passages we read almost *always* tend to be in these bite-sized chunks of one or two paragraphs, which frankly *assumes* we know enough of the Bible to understand the context. You have to understand that when this approach was popularized in the 17<sup>th</sup> century England, people *did* know their bibles a lot better, pretty much front-to-back, because the King James Bible was the *only* book in most households and there wasn't much else for people to do with their free time (there were not TVs, etc.).

Well, with something like the Sermon on the Mount – this weakness of this approach is particularly glaring. And we saw this last week with the Beatitudes “blessed are the poor in spirit...blessed are those who mourn... the meek, and so on”. I know from Life Groups that a few of you understood them correctly, but most, have heard these beatitudes over the years as a list of virtues that Jesus is saying we must work hard to attain if we want *any hope* of receiving God’s blessing. But what we saw last week was that the context shows the Beatitudes are actually a message that the true blessing is offered to all who are tired, weary, hurting, lonely, merciful, pure, and persecuted if only they are willing to live in reliance upon Him. So, what I’m finding to be true about the Sermon on the Mount *in particular* is that if we ever read just one or two paragraphs from it they will almost always sound like bad news, like a message of death, rather than life.

This reminds me of something the comedian Brian Regan says. I’ve mentioned him before: he’s by far my favorite comedian; you should totally check him out on youtube. But Regan has this joke where he talks about the iPod. And he talks about this phenomenon he’s observed that using an iPod to listen to music can make us *not* want to listen to songs we previously loved to listen to. So, here is this invention that allows us to listen to any single song whenever we want to, and there’s a setting called “shuffle” that causes it to randomly shuffle through all of the songs we’ve loaded on there, all of the songs we love most – but Regan says whenever he turns on his iPod he finds himself going from song to song saying: “I don’t wanna hear that, I don’t wanna hear that, don’t wanna hear that, don’t wanna hear that, don’t wanna hear that...” Have any of you ever experienced this? If a few of you are wondering, “What’s an iPod?” just hang in there; I’ll be back to the sermon in a minute. But I’ve found this to be true for myself. Somehow the shuffle feature on the iPod can cause me to have an aversion to listening to a song that I previously **loved to listen to** as part of an album. There is something about hearing that song in the context of the whole album that provided a different – and often more quality – listening experience than I get from just listening to a shuffle of individual songs from disparate genres. My latest solution for this is I’m trying to start intentionally listening to whole albums on my iPod instead of individual tracks. I’ll let you know how it works out.

Well, this reminded me of how individual *parts* of Sermon on the Mount can *sound* like bad news to us if we haven’t considered the context of the sermon as a whole. So today I’ve chosen to value helping us understand what Jesus is actually saying *over* maintaining Anglican tradition. This is why I cut our scripture down to two readings today in order to have a longer gospel passage that will allow us to consider more of the context (around our 4 verses)... because I want us to understand the *good news* Jesus intends us to hear. ## ##

So to try to get at this good news, let’s consider briefly the context *before* our passage and what we learned from that over the past two weeks.

First, two weeks ago we learned that “the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand” means that God’s rule is available to us right now, that he is waiting to walk with us and help us through each and every day of life. Then last week, Jesus gave his beatitudes after just healing people who many thought God would *never* bless, and he said “blessed are the ‘spiritual zeroes’”. And we learned that Jesus can bring blessing to *all people* if they will seek to live in this kingdom of heaven, which can be entered by simply turning to rely upon Him.

So how does that inform what Jesus *up to now* in our squared-off passage today? Well, although Jesus has made living in his kingdom *available* to “spiritual zeroes” – people who would surely caught up in all sorts of sin Jesus *didn’t* want them to mistakenly believe that God’s law no longer mattered. This is why, as our passage opens, he says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.”

Now, God’s “law” was traditionally understood as the Ten Commandments, which we also read today (from Deuteronomy). So Jesus is making clear that God’s law *hasn’t* passed away; that it still matters. But this isn’t bad news, because all of us should want to live in accordance with God’s law as much as possible. The reason is because God’s Law is inherently good: the more our lives conform to God’s law the better and more harmonious our lives will be! So, in this paragraph, Jesus actually has very good news to share – *remarkable news* – because he’s proclaiming that in him *all people will have the opportunity for God’s law to be fulfilled in their lives even more than the Pharisees!* {repeat} #

Did any of y’all notice the verses that *follow* our squared-off passage today? In verse 21, Jesus says “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder...But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.” Then, in verse 27: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

Now, here it seems like Jesus is just taking the Ten Commandments and amping them up! And it continues even beyond verse 30, with Jesus saying things like... you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all” (Matthew 5:33-34) ...and so on.

But Willard suggests interpreting Jesus’ words here as laws is the biggest mistake one can make. But, believe it or not, with all of these words Jesus’ aim is to give people hope about the kingdom. We’re going to talk more about this in the coming weeks, but Jesus is saying, “These are really serious problems; I know each of

them are a struggle for many of you... but if you'll surrender to living under my kingdom – my rule - **I'm will help you with them!**" Jesus is offering us the opportunity for God's law to be fulfilled in our lives more than the Pharisees, if only we will submit to living under his rule! ##

You see, back to that trick verse 20, it's easy to misread it as Jesus raising the bar on us, when what he's *actually* doing is criticizing the way the Pharisees approached God's law. The way the Pharisees approached God's law was problematic for two reasons. First, the reason **they** were so preoccupied with keeping God's law was because they believed perfect adherence would make them acceptable to God, and certainly more acceptable than others were. Well, Jesus has already debunked this idea by just healing all of these spiritual zeroes. So, the purpose of seeking to keep God's law should never be to earn God's acceptance and love – that is a free gift that comes through faith in Christ. No, Jesus simply wants us to keep his law because it is good for us, good for the world, and because it glorifies God! # #

But the second problem of the Pharisees is that even though they tried *really hard* and *talked a lot* about keeping it, they actually weren't very successful at keeping God's law. And Jesus explains why *later* in Matthew 23 (verses 25-26). There he analogizes the Pharisees' approach to God's law as being like a dishwasher who cleans the *outside* of the cup 'ever-so-carefully', but leaves the *inside* dirty. Now, think for a moment about doing the dishes, if you only focus on washing the outside of a cup and pay no mind to the inside of the cup, you're still gonna be left with a dirty cup you can't drink out of, especially since the inside is usually the dirtiest part. Now, we're thinking, "Why would a dishwasher ever do this? It's pointless to clean just the outside of a cup and leave the inside dirty." But Jesus said this is precisely what the Pharisees did: they worked hard at keeping God's law or at least appearing like they were keeping God's law, but much of this was just spinning their wheels, because the evil inside of them – in their hearts – remained untouched. And the reality is that "actions do not emerge from nothing". Over time, any evil in our hearts will manifest in our actions. As Jesus says in Luke 6 "No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit... A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of" (Luke 6:43, 45 NIV; see also James 3:12).

When our focus is on trying to keep God's laws *without* addressing the dirtiness in our hearts it's like only washing the outside of a cup. But, in contrast, thinking again about washing the dishes, what would happen if didn't focus on the outside at all, but only focused on cleaning the inside? As Willard points out, "it is *hard* to wash the inside thoroughly and leave the outside dirty." If you only focus on cleaning the inside, inevitably most of the outside will get clean as well, won't it? "Only a spot here or there may be left." You washing the inside naturally leads to the outside being cleaned as well. (If we focus instead on the need for the inside of the cup to be cleaned, we'll be

left with a cup that is clean all over.) And this teaches us that when if our goal is having our lives be more consistent with God's law, our focus needs to be on letting Jesus clean up our inside rather than just trying harder to on the outside.

You see, the great paradox here is that when it comes to keeping God's law we're not going to find a lot success when our focus is trying to keep the law! That's like only cleaning the outside of the cup. The path to succeeding in keeping God's law more and more is by living in the kingdom - coming to Jesus and letting **him** clean us up on the inside, letting him transform our hearts to value what he values.

Just a short example of this is the other day I found myself saying some things that later on I thought, "Those weren't very godly things to say." But instead of alerting me that I need to just try harder, what it did was alert me that there was something ungodly in my heart that I needed to take before the Lord and ask *him* to cleanse from you." ## ## ##

Well, a final key point that Willard makes about verse 20, where Jesus says, "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven," is that in Ancient Greek there were two words that could mean 'righteousness'. The word most often used in ancient texts is *arête*, but in our passage Jesus instead chooses the other word for righteousness, which is *dikaiosune*. Now you might say, "Okay John, we're getting a little too technical here." But Jesus' word choice here really unlocks the true meaning of verse 20. You see, *arête*, which Jesus didn't use, can also be translated as 'virtue'. But what this word (*arête*) **stresses** is human ability. In other words, *arete* refers to a righteousness someone accomplishes *on their own*, which would have most accurately described the Pharisees' approach. But the word Jesus chooses for righteousness – *dikaiosune* – wasn't used nearly as frequently in ancient texts, but it refers to a true inner goodness, which is elsewhere in the Bible associated with coming from God.

And so finally, with this distinction, we can see the true meaning of verse 20 begin to emerge: That so long as we operate like the Pharisees, intent on making *ourselves* 'righteous' (*arête*) by cleaning the outside of the cup, we will be operating outside of the kingdom of Heaven. But if *instead* we seek to rely upon Jesus to make us righteous (*dikaiosune*) from the inside-out, then our righteousness will exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees because it will be a righteousness from God and it will bear fruit *far beyond* what was ever possible for them! # # # #

So, I'll close with this encouragement: as we allow God to cleanse our hearts and enable us to live more in accordance with His law, **we** will be blessed because our lives will become more harmonious and **God** will be glorified because we will become more like him. Amen.