

## Follow Jesus – Authentic Righteousness

2/11/18 - Pastor Randy

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Last Sunday we began what will be an 8-week journey through the teaching of Jesus recorded in Matthew 5-7 which we refer to as the Sermon on the Mount. This teaching of Jesus was directed at His disciples and intended to impart to them wisdom to be applied so that they would live lives that fulfilled God's moral vision for His people. The sermon on the mount is set within the context of Jesus announcement that the Kingdom of God has arrived through Him. The theme of the sermon on the mount is how Jesus followers are to live in light of the fact that they are members of God's Kingdom. The key word in the sermon on the mount is "righteousness".

So our series title is "Follow Jesus" and my title for today's message is "Authentic Righteousness".

Last week we looked at the beatitudes, the list of blessings that Jesus pronounced upon His followers. Jesus concluded his list of blessings by reminding His followers that they are blessed when they experience persecution for doing what is right; for following Jesus. These words remind us of the fact that doing what is "right" will not always be rewarded with praise from everyone. Sometimes when you do the right thing you gain enemies, not friends. This has always been the case. In the prophet Isaiah's day, he decried those who called evil good and good evil. The point I want to draw your attention to is the fact that those who follow Jesus are not simply persecuted, but persecuted for doing what is right; persecuted expressly because they have chosen to align themselves with Jesus and His teachings, pursuing a life of authentic righteousness.

*Matt. 5:13-16*

*"You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless.*

*<sup>14</sup> "You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden."<sup>15</sup> No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.*

After telling his disciples that they should expect some persecution for

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2/11/18 - Pastor Randy

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following Him, He went on to encourage them and let them know that as they do the good works God has called them to, many people will praise God as a result. Yes, some will persecute you, but others will be drawn to God because of you.

Jesus employed two metaphors to describe His disciples and conveying the impact they ought to have on the world around them. He said they were the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Both of these images convey something positive and good about their impact on the world.

Salt had a number of beneficial properties to it that would have come to the minds of Jesus disciples and the others who were part of His audience. In Judaism salt was often used as a metaphor for wisdom. In Colossians 4:6 Paul wrote, *“Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”* Paul was probably expressing the need for the Christian to speak wisely when facing opposition. Salt was also used as a preservative against corruption, and to flavor to food. Jesus point is rather simple: Salt is good, but if it stops being good what good is it? Jesus' followers are called to follow the righteous teaching and example of Jesus and do good! Salt that loses its flavor is not salt. The moment we stop doing good we stop being followers of Jesus!

In early Judaism “light” was used as a frequent metaphor for Israel, the law, the temple, and God Himself. The disciples would have most certainly understood Jesus words as commissioning them to act as God's representatives to the world. We don't have to figure out the meaning of “light”. Jesus said that they should brighten their world with their good works. But as with salt, Jesus addresses the problem of followers who don't follow. No one hides a light. Since shining their light refers to doing good works, to hide your light is to not do good works. It is a denial of who you are supposed to be.

Jesus words in this passage are a call to mission. Jesus followers have a mission to both *speak* a message about Jesus and to *be* a message about Jesus. We need proclamation and demonstration. Jesus has introduced their mission: to live lives that reflect the righteousness of their Savior-King.

Jesus is going to move on in the rest of His sermon to describe and delineate

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2/11/18 - Pastor Randy

---

true, authentic righteousness, from mere strict, rigid adherence to moral and religious codes and laws. He will mostly contrast the pseudo-righteousness of the religious leaders with the authentic righteousness that will be exhibited by His followers. Righteous character and conduct absolutely need to be concerns of Jesus followers, those who live under the authority and provision of the King now and who will inherit all the future blessings and benefits of the kingdom which is yet to come.

But before Jesus gets there he needs to prepare his listeners for what he is going to say. Look at verses 17-20:

*Don't misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose.<sup>18</sup> I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not even the smallest detail of God's law will disappear until its purpose is achieved.<sup>19</sup> So if you ignore the least commandment and teach others to do the same, you will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But anyone who obeys God's laws and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.*

<sup>20</sup> *"But I warn you—unless your righteousness is better than the righteousness of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven!*

Jesus is about to teach His disciples what it means to live righteously as members of God's Kingdom and in order to do this He will use the Mosaic Law as his basis. But observance of the Mosaic Law does not necessarily equate to a life of righteousness. Jesus is about to say some things that appear to supersede, contradict or nullify the Mosaic Law. Jesus was preparing them for what they were going to hear and telling them that they should not mistake what he is saying as to demean or abolish the law of Moses. The "law and the prophets" was an expression that referred to the whole of the Jewish scriptures, what Christians call the Old Testament. Jesus was saying that he had come to fulfill those scriptures. They pointed to Him and while their value was not being diminished their purpose was. Going forward they would no longer serve the same purpose that they had previously. God was about to establish a new covenant, forming a new

## Follow Jesus – Authentic Righteousness

2/11/18 - Pastor Randy

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people comprised of both Jews and Gentiles. The identity of God's newly formed covenant people would no longer be founded upon any physical or national markers. The identifying marker would be faith in Jesus Christ as the King of this new kingdom.

The members of this new covenant and new kingdom were no longer depend upon the law to lead them and motivate them to live righteously. God's promise through the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel were about to be fulfilled. God promised,

*"And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." – Ezekiel 36:27*

*"For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts."  
- Jeremiah 31:33*

Living as a "salt and light" follower of Jesus is only possible for those who are "in Christ", indwelt by the person of the Holy Spirit Who empowers them, enabling them to actually fulfill the will of God, reflecting the righteous character of and conduct of Christ.

*"By the Spirit, Christ...effects the new creation by restoring humanity back into the divine image. And this is precisely why the law is out and "walking by/in the Spirit" is in (Gal. 5:16)...As Gal. 5 and Romans 12-14 make abundantly clear, "salvation in Christ" includes behavior that reflects God's own character; other wise there has been no salvation at all. – Gordon Fee in Pauline Christology pg.487*

When Jesus said, *'...unless your righteousness is better than the righteousness of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven!'*, He wasn't saying that you had to attain to some great level of moral and ethical purity and performance in order to be qualified for the Kingdom. He was simply contrasting authentic righteousness -the kind that was produced in the heart of a person by the Spirit – from superficial self-righteousness that manifested itself in external behavior only.

From here Jesus proceeded to introduce a series of subjects with the phrase, "You have heard...but I say". Six times Jesus introduces a subject with these

## Follow Jesus – Authentic Righteousness

2/11/18 - Pastor Randy

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words. We will look at the first one today and the others next Sunday.

*“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.*

Murder is a problem in a country and especially in our cities. A total of 17,250 people were reported killed in the US in 2016. In just the past few years I have had to perform three funerals for young men who were murdered. They have not been easy funerals to conduct. Despite the fact that our murder rate is way too high – and just one murder is one too many – the reality is that the vast majority of people have never violated this commandment. But does that make us righteous in regard to heart of this commandment? Jesus answer would be, “no”.

The sixth commandment prohibited murder, but Jesus taught that hatred or contempt towards another person leaves you guilty before God as well. Jesus employs a lot of hyperbole in His teaching in order to stress the serious of what he is saying. Jesus was not saying that cursing at someone is just as bad as killing them. What he was saying is that if you hate someone enough to wish they were dead, you are a murderer at heart. Righteousness is not only defined by the conduct of our hands but also by the condition of our heart.

If the only thing that has kept us from actually committing murder is that we were afraid of the consequences or afraid of the act itself, then the difference between us and the murderer is negligible. I have often used this illustration to help people come to grips with the murder in their heart. If you had a secret device in your home with a red button on it that you could push anytime you wanted and have a given person wiped off the face of the earth, how many times in your life would you have pushed that button? You have a guarantee that no one would ever find out. How many times?

Authentic righteousness goes beyond how we treat others to how we view others. Pre-meditated murder and violence perpetrated against people

## **Follow Jesus – Authentic Righteousness**

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The Holocaust, and other incidents of genocide, abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia are examples of sanctioning the killing of people by communities made possible by a denial that human life is sacred. Once we have denied that a human life or group of humans are created in the image of God, they become stripped of their dignity and dehumanized. One group denies the humanity of another group, providing justification for eliminating them. Those who dehumanize others become desensitized to the normal human inhibitions to murder.

Authentic righteousness does not consist in merely restraining ourselves from the act of murder, it consists in treating people with the love and dignity they deserve as human beings created in the image of God.

We will cover verses 23 & 24 in a couple of weeks when we talk about authentic worship.

Our Takeaways:

We can't be dismissive of an attitude of hatred and contempt for other people. Neither can we be dismissive of words or actions that demean and degrade others. If the Holy Spirit is revealing to you that you have hatred and contempt in your heart for another person. If you wish they were dead, so to speak. You need to call out to God and ask the Holy Spirit to change your heart towards that person.

If we are going to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world as Jesus said his followers would be, we need to first view people through the eyes of Jesus. We can only do the good works Jesus has prepared us to do if our hearts are full of His love and truth.

Finally, being salt and light requires us to "do something". Ask God to speak to you this week about your agenda and show you if it needs some reworking so that people can see your good works and glorify our Father.

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