

TREAT PEOPLE AS MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE (Part 1)**MATTHEW 5:17-37**

Today, we pick up the pace of our study of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount by covering 20 verses in Matthew 5. The key verse in this whole section of Jesus' sermon is v. 20, "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!" (NLT) Who were the teachers of the religious law and the Pharisees? The teachers of the law were trained theologians who knew the Old Testament inside and out. They would be similar to seminary trained pastors or Bible college and seminary professors today. The Pharisees were a group of very zealous Jewish laymen who were fanatically concerned about keeping all the Old Testament laws and the additional guidelines that the teachers of the law developed. The end result was a religion of do's and don'ts – of trying to relate to God by keeping endless rules and regulations based on the ever changing interpretations of human beings.

Jesus had major problems with that kind of religion. It's as if Jesus says, "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees are dead wrong about so much! They've added rules that My Father never intended. This, instead, is what God meant when He said to do this or not to do that." Jesus wanted to recover the essential meaning of what it means to be righteous – what it means to be a truly good person. Jesus describes here in this part of His sermon what it means to be a good person. What really pleases God? What does authentic goodness or righteousness look like? Who truly is the good person?

That word "righteousness" in v. 20 means your personal goodness. It's whatever God finds pleasing about how you go about living out your life. What often tells the real story is how we treat other people. Do we treat people as made in God's image? Or do we treat them as something far less? Jesus gives several examples or illustrations as to how God's idea of personal goodness is very different than the usual definitions of personal goodness. The examples we'll consider today are murder, hatred and anger in v. 21-26, adultery and lust in v. 27-30, divorce and remarriage in v. 31-32, and oaths and telling the truth in v. 33-37. Each of those illustrations involve how we treat other people. Human relationships. Jesus wants His followers to treat people as creatures made in God's image thus deserving of the highest respect and value. And each of these examples also reveal a completely new and different take on what it means to be a good person, to be moral, and to live a life that's pleasing to God. Here's four big, overarching principles that tie these verses together. First of all...

REAL GOODNESS BEGINS WITH A TRANSFORMED HEART.

Here's another way to put it. Real goodness is more about the transformation of my inner desires than controlling my outward behavior. Jesus was an astute spiritual doctor. If you get really sick, you go to see a doctor. A bad doctor is content simply to treat your symptoms or relieve your pain. A good doctor always wants to get down to the real issue that's causing the symptoms. He wants to solve the problem and help you get and stay healthy. Jesus knew that you can't become really good just by controlling your outward behavior. Every outward, sinful act points to an underlying

heart issue. The Bible talks a great deal about your heart. It doesn't mean the physical organ that pumps your blood. Instead, your heart is where your desires, your dreams, your wants, your drives, and your ambitions take shape and live. The Bible says your heart is hopelessly corrupt. God says, "The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is? But I, the LORD, search all hearts and examine secret motives...." (Jer 17:9-10 NLT)

That helps us understand what Jesus means in v. 29-30 about taking out your eye or cutting off your hand if either causes you to sin. I like the suggestion that it's probably a kind of sarcastic, tongue-in-cheek observation by Jesus, actually. Jesus knew full well that no body part causes you to sin. It's your heart! But, if you're really convinced that your eye or hand causes you to sin, the only logical response is to get rid of that body part. But, no, the spiritual condition of your heart is the issue! Your heart and mine is in desperate need of a kind of total transformation that only God can carry out.

Now, notice how Jesus applies this principle in His sermon. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees implied that if you can just control yourself and not murder someone you hate, that's all God expects. Jesus disagreed. He taught that the root cause of any and all murder is hatred and self-centered anger. One of the greatest insults for a Jew was for someone to spit in your face. It was a sign of utter contempt. The word for "fool" among the Jewish people was "raca" which mimics the sounds of someone clearing his throat and getting ready to spit. Jesus teaches that when you're at the place where you're calling someone "raca", your personal goodness just disappeared. Of course, murder is wrong, but it's hatred, self-centered anger, and treating other human beings with contempt that leads to murder. God wants to transform your heart so that you never hate anyone and never treat anyone with self-centered anger or contempt. If that happens, you'll certainly never murder anyone either!

We see the same application when it comes to adultery. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees taught that it was sinful and wrong to commit the actual act of adultery, but they were apparently silent when it came to the whole interior, heart issue of lust and sexual fantasies with human beings other than your spouse. Jesus teaches here that physical adultery would never happen if people hadn't already lost the battle in their hearts to lust. When you use pornography or even if you allow yourself to indulge in an inappropriate sexual fantasy about a person made in God's image, don't start congratulating yourself, "Well, I didn't commit adultery." That kind of "personal goodness" doesn't impress a holy God, because you're relating to another person as an object to satisfy your selfish desires. That degrades him or her and, therefore, dishonors God. It's a corrupted heart desperately needing transformation that results in adultery. But if God is truly allowed to transform your heart, you'll never get close to adultery.

Jesus brings up divorce in these verses. What's His point? Back in Jesus' day, everyone – including the very religious people like the teachers of the law and the Pharisees – were rather matter of fact about divorce. What really mattered, to their way of thinking, was not what caused the divorce, but whether you did it the right way. If you had the proper certificate and two witnesses, a husband could divorce his wife on the

spot for the silliest reasons. Maybe you didn't like what she fixed for dinner last night. Maybe she didn't get around to cleaning the house last week. In Jesus' day, there was no equality between men and women. Women were absolutely financially dependent on the men in their families. If a husband divorced his wife, she just couldn't run out and get a job the next day. It usually resulted in a life of hopeless poverty for the woman. She might be forced into prostitution just to survive. She might get picked up by another man as a wife, but she would always be considered damaged, second-rate goods. She was far more likely to suffer physical, sexual, and emotional abuse.

Jesus challenges this whole way of thinking. It's as if He says, "Do you really think your personal goodness is left intact just because you went through the right procedure? You get just the right certificate and two witnesses, so now it's perfectly OK to consign this woman made in God's image to a life of poverty and degradation? Divorce was never my Father's intent for a marriage relationship. God wants to fix the heart issues that led to the divorce in the first place. If people would get rid of heart issues like hatred, self-centered anger, contempt, and lust, divorce would never happen!"

The whole matter of oaths and swearing is yet another example. This isn't about using obscene language in this context. Instead, it's the kind of swearing you might do in a court of law. Just like today, people in Jesus' day wanted to be able to lie and get away with it. So, a kind of ridiculous solution was offered up to legitimize lying. It all depended on what you swore by. If you said, "I swear by God's Name, that I will do this" or "I swear by the temple in Jerusalem, I will do that," it was considered legally binding. You could get into big trouble for not keeping your word. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees were teaching, however, that if you swore by something less than God, the temple, or some other sacred object, it was OK to break your promise. If you said, "I swear by my dog, I will do this" or "I swear on my newspaper, I will do that", then it was OK to change your mind and not keep your promise.

You can imagine what Jesus thought about that! "Do you really think you can hold on to any sense of personal goodness while you deliberately renege on your promises to people made in God's image, lie to them, and treat them with disrespect? Is that being righteous? Why do you even need to attach some silly oath to your promises? Doesn't My Father want you to be truthful at all times – oath or no oath? If you mean yes, then just say yes. If you mean no, then just say no. The problem is your heart. You want to tell lies and get away with them. If your heart is transformed then you will not want to tell lies and take advantage of people made in My Father's image."

When it comes to personal goodness, the real issue is the condition of your heart and mine. Frankly, all of us resemble little Johnny who asked his mother one day, "Can I have some cookies, Mom?" Looking at the clock, she replied, "Not now. It's too close to dinner." About ten minutes later, Mom walked into the kitchen. There was Johnny up on the counter with his arm in the cookie jar clear up to his elbow. Mom's mood darkened. "I thought I just told you that you couldn't have any cookies until after dinner." Give Johnny some credit for a quick comeback. He said, "Well, Mom, I'm not eatin' no cookies. No way! I'm just holding some!" That's you and me, isn't it? You

can't really change the behavior until you change the heart and only God can transform your heart. Real goodness begins with a transformed heart. Second principle:

REAL GOODNESS IS POSITIVELY DEFINED.

Here's another way to put it. Real goodness is more about the good that I do than the evil I resist. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees defined goodness negatively. It was all about what you did not do. They said, "If you don't commit murder, you're a good person. If you don't commit adultery, you're righteous. If you don't divorce your wife in an inappropriate way, you're doing great in God's sight. If you don't commit perjury, well done!" When you think about it, is that any different than the way most people think today about what it means to be good? We often define goodness negatively. "I don't steal. I don't do drugs. I haven't cheated on my taxes. I haven't had an affair. Therefore, I must be a really good person. I must be pleasing God."

Jesus might say in response, "There's a whole lot more to being a good person than just avoiding sinful, wrong behavior. That's how these teachers of the law and the Pharisees define goodness, but my followers must do better. Yes, you might have avoided the actual sin of murder, but do you still hate people and treat them with contempt which is the ultimate source of murder? Yes, you might have avoided the actual act of adultery, but is your mind obsessed with lustful images and fantasies? You've avoided actual divorce. Good for you! But do you treat your spouse in a way that honors the Lord? No, you didn't technically perjure yourself, but did you really tell the truth?" A good person, from God's perspective, is not a just a person who avoids doing bad stuff, but who is doing the good, positive things that please God.

The first Queen Mary ocean liner was the largest ship to cross the ocean when it was launched back in 1936. I got to be on that boat as a six year old traveling from England to New York City when my family returned from missionary service in India. Through four decades and one world war, the Queen Mary sailed until it was retired and anchored as a floating hotel and museum in Long Beach, California. During its remodeling, those three massive smokestacks were taken off to be scraped down and repainted. But on the dock they crumbled to pieces. Nothing was left of the $\frac{3}{4}$ inch steel plate from which the stacks had been formed. All that remained was more than thirty coats of paint that had been applied over the years. The actual steel had rusted away. The personal goodness or righteousness of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees was just like that. There was no real substance to it, only appearance. Real goodness begins with a transformed heart. Real goodness is positively defined. Third:

REAL GOODNESS CONSIDERS EVERY SIN AS UNACCEPTABLE TO GOD.

Like the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, we like to differentiate between big, terrible sins and little, irrelevant sins. Of course, murder is a sin. But Jesus says hatred, self-centered anger, and contempt is just as unacceptable to God. By the way, don't twist Jesus' words here into some kind of new law. Jesus didn't rule out every expression of anger. After all, He Himself got angry enough to throw out the merchants

in the temple. There's a place for righteous indignation. But 99% of your anger and mine is self-centered anger which is the result of not getting our own way. And it, along with hatred and contempt, causes us to treat people made in God's image in unworthy ways. Of course, adultery is a sin. But being dominate and controlled by lust is just as unacceptable to God. Again, don't twist Jesus' words here into some kind of new law. Jesus is not condemning all sexual desire. After all, God created sex for our pleasure as well as providing the method for children to come into the world. But when sexual desire is focused on any person other than your spouse, it degrades him or her - a person made in God's image - and dishonors God.

Of course, divorcing someone for an insufficient reason is a sin. But don't twist Jesus' words into some kind of new law. Notice please that Jesus doesn't forbid any and all divorce here. But recognize that Jesus is even more concerned about the heart attitudes that precede a decision to divorce and how people made in God's image are treated before and after. If that's His ultimate concern, then it's just as unacceptable to God to stay legally married but treat your spouse in an abusive way. It's possible for a husband and a wife never to get a divorce but to inflict untold misery on each other – disrespect, physical abuse, emotional abuse, verbal abuse, or just being content to live separate, self-centered lives that ignore each other. A bad marriage is just as unacceptable to God as a divorce for insufficient cause. Of course, perjury itself is a sin. But any time you make telling the truth optional – whether or not you have your hand on a Bible – it's just as unacceptable to God. We lie in order to take advantage of people made in God's image and it dishonors God. Now, it's true that some sins have a far greater and more devastating impact on people than other sins. Who can deny that? But real goodness recognizes that every sin is unacceptable to God. A fourth principle:

REAL GOODNESS IS A GOD-GIVEN GIFT NOT A PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENT.

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sincerely believed they could make themselves right before God through their own efforts. They created this elaborate, legalistic approach to personal goodness. Ironically, all they accomplished was to "dumb down" what it means to be really good before and pleasing to God. They focused on controlling certain outward behaviors and ignored the whole area of the heart where the battle is really fought and won. Most people today still think of personal goodness in much the same way. We, too, "dumb down" what it means to be good. As long as my outward behavior is not overtly sinful, I must be good and pleasing to God. You can be hateful, controlled and ruled by anger, hold other people in contempt, be dominated by lust, treat your spouse thoughtlessly, lack integrity in your personal dealings with others, but as long as you haven't been guilty of the "big ones" – however they may be defined today – most people will think of you as a good person.

Two women spent the better part of an afternoon trying to impress each other with how spiritual and close to God each one happened to be. Finally, one woman left and the other woman turned to her husband and said, "You know, she's a good Christian, but I just believe I live closer to the Lord than she does." Her husband thought for a moment and then said, "Ain't either one of you crowding Him any."

Isn't that the truth? The fact is that none of us are crowding God any – including your beloved pastor – when it comes to personal goodness or righteousness because God runs His universe by a completely different set of standards. Again, don't make the mistake of turning Jesus' examples and illustrations into some kind of new law – trying to figure out how they apply or don't apply to your life today. When you truly "get" Jesus' sermon or it "gets" you, you realize no one can live like this in his or her own strength. That can be very discouraging until you realize God doesn't expect you to keep His standards by personal effort alone. You and I need outside help desperately. That help is a Person – the Holy Spirit – who comes alongside you and empowers you to become like Jesus a bit more every day. Now, I don't want to tear down the need for personal effort when it comes to living our lives like Jesus describes in His sermon. It's not that the Holy Spirit just does it all for us. No, you have to learn how to co-operate with Him. He's faithful to point out specific attitudes and behaviors you and I need to change. A lot of that change and transformation will not be easy or enjoyable. But as you and I learn how to surrender and submit to the Holy Spirit's instruction and then to access His power, we will change. We will experience transformation. The Holy Spirit will enable you and me to become truly good and pleasing to God. Real goodness is a God-given gift not a personal achievement.

There's a baseball card out there called "Future Stars" and it's valued at \$100. There are three players on that card. The first is Jeff Schneider. He played one year of major league baseball, pitched in 11 games, and gave up 13 earned runs in 11 games. The second player is Bobby Bonner, who played 4 years of baseball, appeared in 61 games, batted in 8 runs, and finished his career with zero home runs. The third "Future Star" played 21 years for the Baltimore Orioles and appeared in 3,001 games. He batted in 1,695 runs while collecting 3,194 hits and 431 home runs. His name is Cal Ripken, Jr. Now imagine if you met Bobby Bonner, he shook your hand, and then said, "Did you know my baseball card is worth \$100?" You'd laugh because you know the card's worth has absolutely nothing to do with him and his very mediocre career.

What happens when you start pointing to your good works – your statistics, so to speak – and ask God, "Is this good enough? Will this get me into Heaven?" If you think your stats will ever impress God, you are sadly mistaken. But when you put your faith in Jesus, His statistics – His righteousness, His goodness – become yours. On that basis alone - Jesus' personal goodness and righteousness - God accepts you into His forever family. True, He also gives you His Holy Spirit to enable you to move toward real personal goodness yourself, but when the issue is acceptance before God, the bottom line is Jesus not you. Bobby Bonner and Jeff Schneider's baseball card is worth at least \$100 not because of their stats, but because of what someone else did. You and I are made right before God - and we're kept right before God - only because of Jesus' perfect goodness. And then the Holy Spirit enables you to experience real heart transformation this day and every day so that, yes, you start to resemble the picture of a disciple that Jesus paints in His Sermon on the Mount. They are, indeed, gracious demands, not optional suggestions.