

Say What?

Hard Sayings of Christ:
Be Perfect - Matt. 5:48

Background on the Sermon on the Mount

The first chapter of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5) points us to two important themes in Jesus' teaching. First, Jesus' authority is one of the most dominant features in this chapter. The Law and the Prophets point toward him, but he himself determines their meaning, fulfillment, and continuity, with an authority nothing less than divine. It is important to remember that the Old Testament Scriptures have no intrinsic status apart from God- what ever authority they possess is from God. But because the derivation is *from God*, it takes nothing less than divine authority to interpret it and define it in this way; implicitly, therefore, Jesus is claiming such authority for himself.

Second, that toward which the Law and the Prophets have pointed has come in the person of Jesus and in the kingdom which he introduces. Jesus authoritatively makes plain the demands of the kingdom and how they stand in relation to the Old Testament Scriptures. The common demand is holiness, perfection; all the Old Testament laws are rightly understood only when interpreted in the light of this overwhelming concern. The emphasis on transparent purity and unaffected holiness, on imitating the Father's perfection, utterly precludes all religious hypocrisy, all spiritual sham, all paraded righteousness, all showy performed religious duties (D.A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 54).

The theme of the Sermon on the Mount is the kingdom of heaven. Jesus' entire mission revolved around the kingdom of heaven (4:17; 23). It was the central focus of his preaching and teaching. To understand the sermon we need to understand the kingdom of heaven. In this passage, the kingdom of heaven refers to the work of salvation that God is doing in the world through Jesus. This kingdom has begun through the work of Jesus and will be finally fulfilled in the future. Taken together, the books of the New Testament insist that the kingdom of God has already arrived; a person may enter the kingdom and receive life now, life "to the full" (John 10:10). Jesus himself argues that if he drives out



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Matthew 5:48*

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demons by the Spirit of God- and he does- then the kingdom of God *has come* (Matt. 12:28). Nevertheless, the books of the New Testament insist that the kingdom will be inherited only in the future, when Christ comes again. Eternal life, though experienced now, is consummated then, in conjunction with such a renovation of the universe that the only adequate description is “a new heaven and a new earth” (Isa. 65:17; 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13; Rev. 21:1) (Carson, 13-14).

Perfection Through Jesus

Earlier in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus has told us that to love one's enemies is characteristic of God (Matt. 5:45). But love is not the only characteristic of God which Jesus expects his followers to emulate. As the sermon continues, it becomes painfully obvious that Jesus is setting out a breathtaking description of morality which makes God himself the standard of all of it. “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). We are to be holy, for the Lord our God is holy (Lev. 19:2); loving because God is love (1 John 4:7ff); perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:48) (Carson, 54).

Jesus does not scorn the law of God. He does not say that keeping the commandments is unimportant. He says, “If you depend on keeping the commandments alone, you will not inherit eternal life. There will always be something lacking.” The standards of the law are perfection. “You therefore must be perfect,” Jesus said, “as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). He does not lower that standard. Instead, he demands it from the whole world. And then he offers it through attachment with himself. “If you would be perfect . . . come, follow me.” Jesus is the only path to perfect obedience. And perfect obedience is required for eternal life.

The crucial question is: *How* is Jesus the path to perfection? One historic answer is that Jesus himself is our perfection. That is, when we are connected with him by faith, God counts us to be perfect because of Jesus, even though in ourselves we are not. Jesus said that he came “to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45) and that his blood would be “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28) and that believing in him as he was lifted up on the cross would give eternal life to undeserving sinners (John 3:14-15). All of this implies that Jesus’ life and death are our only hope of escaping wrath (John 3:36) and obtaining heaven. Jesus said concerning the most intentional law-keepers in Israel, “None of you keeps the law” (John 7:19). And he very bluntly called even his disciples “evil.” “If you then, *who are evil*, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Matt. 7:11). In other words, all humans are sinners under God’s holy wrath with no hope of eternal life based on their own obedience. Jesus came to solve that problem.

Jesus solves it by removing the wrath of God. He removes it by enduring the punishment we deserved and paying the debt we could never pay. Therefore, because of Jesus’ shed blood, all our sins are canceled and God does not see us as sinful or imperfect anymore. This is owing to our attachment to Jesus by faith (John Piper, *What Jesus Demands From the World*, Crossway, 155-156).

More Righteous Than Scribes and Pharisees

Jesus' statement that our righteousness must exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:20) must have astonished his first hearers as it astonishes us today. What Jesus is saying is that Christian righteousness must far surpass pharisaic righteousness in kind rather than degree. It is not so much, shall we say, that Christians succeed in keeping some 240 commandments when the best Pharisees may only have scored 230. No. Christian righteousness is greater than pharisaic righteousness because it is deeper, being a righteousness of the heart.

Pharisees were content with an external and formal obedience, a rigid conformity to the letter of the law; Jesus teaches us that God's demands are far more radical than this. The righteousness which is pleasing to him is an inward righteousness of mind and motive. For "The Lord looks on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7) (John Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, IVP, 75).

We must remember that the scribes and Pharisees were in many senses the most outstanding people of the nation. The scribes were men who spent their time in teaching and expounding the law; they were the great authorities on the law of God. They gave their whole life to the study and illustration of it. They, more than anyone else, therefore, could claim to be concerned about it. They were the men who made copies of it, exercising great care as they did so. Their whole life was lived with the law, and everyone looked up to them for that reason.

The Pharisees were the men who were quite outstanding and famous for their so-called holiness. The very word "Pharisee" means "separatist." They were people who set themselves apart, and they did so because they had formed a code of the ceremonial acts connected with the law which was more rigid than the law of Moses itself. They had drawn up rules and regulations for life and conduct which in their stringency went far beyond anything we find demanded in the Old Testament Scriptures.

For example, in our Lord's picture of the Pharisee and the publican who went up to the temple to pray, the Pharisee said that he fasted twice in the week. Now there is no demand in the Old Testament that men should fast twice in the week. Indeed the Old Testament asked for only one fast in the year. But gradually these men had elaborated the system and had actually brought it to the point at which they exhorted and commanded the people to fast twice in the week, instead of only once in the year. It was in such ways that they formed their excessively stringent code of morals and behavior and, as a result of that, everybody thought of the scribes and Pharisees as paragons of virtue. The average man said to himself, "Ah, there is very little hope of my ever being as good as the scribes or the Pharisees. They are outstanding men; they just live to be sanctified and holy. That is their profession; that is their whole aim and object in a religious, moral, and spiritual sense." But here comes our Lord; and He announces to these people that unless their righteousness shall exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees they shall in no way enter into the kingdom of heaven (D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, Eerdmans, 176).

What the scribes and the Pharisees were doing, in order to make obedience more readily attainable, was to restrict the commandments and extend the permissions of the law. They made the law's demands less demanding and the law's permissions more permissive. What Jesus did was to reverse both tendencies. He insisted instead that the full implications of God's commandments must be accepted without imposing any artificial limits, whereas the limits which God had set to his permissions must also be accepted and not arbitrarily increased.

The scribes and Pharisees were evidently restricting the biblical prohibitions of murder and adultery to the act alone; Jesus extended them to include angry thoughts, insulting words and lustful looks. They restricted the command about swearing to certain oaths only (those involving the divine name) and the command about loving your neighbor to certain people only (those of the same race and religion); Jesus said all promises must be kept and all people must be loved, without limitations

They also attempted to widen the permission of divorce beyond the single ground of "some

indecent" to include a husband's every whim, and to widen the permission of retribution beyond the law courts to include personal revenge. Jesus, however, reaffirmed the original restrictions. He called divorce on other grounds "adultery" and insisted in personal relationships on the renunciation of all revenge (Stott, 80).

Home Group Questions

1. Is it fair that God demands perfection from us? Why or why not?
2. If perfection is God's standard, how can we achieve it?
3. Why was Jesus so upset by the way the scribes and Pharisees tried to keep the law?
4. What does religious hypocrisy look like today?
5. How does Jesus change the way we are to think about following God's commands (Matt. 5:21-48)?
6. How can we make sure that we pursue holiness in a way that is pleasing to God?

Questions for Personal Application

7. Are you trying to please God on your own terms like the Pharisees? Are you more concerned with outwardly following God or being inwardly transformed by God's Spirit?