

Living A Life Better Than Squeaky Clean

Series on Sermon On The Mount

There are many people who try and live a good life. Millions of people in this country and many others who wouldn't describe themselves as religious, wouldn't go to church, probably wouldn't even think of themselves as Christians, would try and live by the golden rule – 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you'. If you really pushed them they would say that we should probably live by the ten commandments – or at least some of them - honour your father and mother, don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't tell lies. Perhaps they wouldn't express it like this, but most of these people have a view of God which believes that if they live a good enough life, and do enough good things, God will give them a 50% pass mark when they die. They live by the belief that that the balance of their good deeds bank account will be in credit by the time they die, and that God will let them in to his heaven. Unfortunately, Jesus blows that whole way of thinking apart. This is what he said. **"For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."** (Matthew 5:20 NIV)

When the people listening to Jesus heard that, they would have been shocked. For in their society the Pharisees and teachers of the law were looked up to as the most righteous people around. If anyone ever tried hard to do good, it was them. And Jesus is emphatic that their goodness wasn't good enough.

The Problem Of The Old Testament.

This whole issue revolved around what these people had been taught since they were babies. They were taught that the Law and the Prophets, which encompassed all of what we call the Old Testament, had to be obeyed. It was the law of God. It was the word of God. And the way to please God was to keep his commands. But keeping the commands of God was so difficult. The people who were doing it the best were the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, and Jesus says that it wasn't good enough.

Those listening to Jesus were hoping that he would show them a way to get out from under this terrible burden of trying to live by Gods law. But he didn't. This is what Jesus said. **"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."** (Matthew 5: 17- 20 NIV)

The Problem For Us.

Every person who follows Jesus has a problem with the Old Testament. What are we supposed to do with the Old Testament? Does this law and instruction for living that was given to the nation of Israel by the same God that we worship, apply to us? Are we to honour our father and mother? Most of us would say yes. Don't steal. Don't murder. Don't commit adultery. Don't give false testimony against your neighbour. Do these apply to us? Yes. Don't have any other God other than the Lord God of Israel. Don't make any idols. Do these apply? Yes. How about remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy? The Sabbath isn't Sunday, it's Friday sunset to Saturday sunset. Does that apply to us? Just on from the ten commandments in Exodus 20 there are some more commandments about making altars and sacrificing sheep and cattle and goats to the Lord. Are we to obey these commandments too? How about this instruction from God? **"If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury,**

you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.” (Exodus 21: 22 – 25)

This same Old Testament has specific instructions about not planting two kinds of seed in the same field, or wearing any clothing woven of two kinds of material. How many of us here today are wearing clothing made of wool and polyester, or some other mixture of fibres? It's fine to take one part of the Old Testament law and say it applies, but what about all the rest? It's fine to say we live by the 10 commandments, but what about the 248 commandments and 365 other prohibitions that there are in the Old Testament? Are we supposed to keep them all? What happens when we try?

The Pharisee Solution

The Pharisees were a group of very religious Jewish leaders who tried – really tried to keep the law of God. They took their scriptures – what we call the Old Testament – very seriously. They studied the law – really studied it. These people studied the law till they knew it backwards. Many of them could recite by heart whole books of the Old Testament. They were the greatest examples of righteousness imaginable in Judaism. They were super careful to make sure their lives were absolutely squeaky clean. They made up all sorts of rules and regulations to add to the Old Testament law to make sure they didn't break it. How far you could walk on the Sabbath. What constituted work on the Sabbath. What if your neighbour's donkey fell in a ditch on the Sabbath? Was it breaking the law to pull it out? They made the law more attainable by restricting the commandments and extending the permissions. These men were so squeaky clean they would close their eyes when they saw a woman on the street so that they wouldn't have impure thoughts about her. Guess what? They would bang into buildings and stone pillars and walk into things with their eyes shut so many times that the people used to nickname them 'the bruised and bleeding Pharisees'. They not only gave a tenth of their money to the poor, but tithed the herbs from their gardens as well. The Pharisees would make all of us look like the most undisciplined sinful people on the face of the earth. If anyone ever tried to do the Old Testament right, it was them. So you can imagine the shock when Jesus said ***"For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."*** (Matthew 5:20 NIV)

Being A Pharisee Isn't Good Enough

The problem with the Pharisee attitude is that it gets all tied up with the externals of religion and at the same time gets very proud on the inside. Here's how a Pharisee attitude might work for a Christian. "I read my bible four times this week so I must be OK with God. I gave 20% of my gross income to the poor this week, and attended church twice on Sunday. I'm respected as a good honest citizen by all the people in my office because I'm such a clean living person. On the inside I'm proud of my righteousness. I would never tell anyone of course, but compared with all the rest, I'm doing quite well in the righteousness stakes thank you very much". That sort of attitude leads us to concentrate on what we look like on the outside to other people. No wonder Jesus called the Pharisees whitewashed tombs. They looked great on the outside but on the inside they were as spiritually dry as old bones.

Jesus didn't make it easier to obey the law, he made it harder. He took everything the Pharisees were trying to make easier and made it harder. Everyone's heart must have sunk when they heard that. If the Pharisees weren't good enough, then who could be? This statement of Jesus is as impossible as his comment that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter his Kingdom. Who is good enough for the Kingdom of Heaven then? How can we possibly be righteous enough for the Kingdom of God? They were professional holy men. If there was no hope for the Pharisees, what hope is there for us?

Tolstoy was a great novelist in 19th Century Russia. The ethical ideals in Jesus' teaching attracted him like a moth to a flame, but his failure to live up to them utterly consumed him. He tried with all his strength to live by the teaching of the sermon on the mount. When he read Jesus word to the rich man to give away all that he had, Tolstoy set his serfs free, gave away his copyrights, gave away his vast estates. He wore peasant clothes, made his own

shoes, and worked as a labourer in the fields. He gave up hunting, smoking, drinking and eating meat. He took a public vow of chastity and wouldn't sleep with his wife. He found that vow difficult to keep as he had 16 children! He practiced non violence. He tried as hard as he could to exceed the Pharisees in his righteousness. All the while he lived with this terrible nagging emptiness inside him that there was this huge gap between what he knew was truth, and what he actually lived. He lived life a terribly unhappy man, and died as a vagrant in a country railway station. Like a spawning salmon, he fought all his life upstream and collapsed in exhaustion. His was a life of supreme effort and utter failure.

Jesus – The Fulfilment Of The Law

If the nation of Israel couldn't keep the law of God, and the Pharisees couldn't do it, and idealists like Tolstoy couldn't, what hope is there for us? Whoever can enter the Kingdom of Heaven? Not me. Not by keeping the law of God. Jesus said he was the fulfilment of the law. What does that mean? It means that he alone has satisfied Gods demand for righteousness. All the law and the prophets point to him. In Christ all the requirements of the law are fulfilled. Jesus has satisfied all the requirements of God. He has done what the nation of Israel could never do. He has done what the Pharisees couldn't do. He has done what you and I can never do. He alone is the fulfilment of all the righteousness that the law requires. The entry point into the Kingdom of Heaven is not a self satisfied, Pharisaical righteousness, that says "what a good person I am. Isn't God lucky to have me on his team". The entry point is despair and brokenness that says God be merciful to me a sinner" The starting point in the Kingdom of Heaven is acknowledging that we can never reach Gods standard of righteousness, but instead, embracing the righteousness of Jesus.

The Law – The Policeman

The law of God acts as a policeman. If we had a policeman with us wherever we went, 24 hours a day, we would obey every law. If the policeman's sole job was to remind us about every law, and make sure we always obeyed, we might just come close to fulfilling the law. But the motivation to obey the law would always be based on fear. A fear of being caught. We would always be feeling like the policeman was waiting to catch us out. That's what the law of God felt like for the Jews. People felt they were always failing and the Scribes and the Pharisees were the policemen who kept reminding them of how bad they were.

The Holy Spirit writes the law of God on our hearts

But what Jesus has done has changed all that. Our entrance into the Kingdom of God is not through our efforts to keep Gods laws, but because we put our trust in Jesus and his fulfilment of the law. Our continued living in the Kingdom of God is grounded in our continued trust in Jesus and his righteousness. When we acknowledge our sinfulness and embrace the righteousness of Jesus, we are given the Holy Spirit who lives in us. The policeman is no longer outside us, watching our every move, but the policeman is now in our hearts. The policeman is no longer our accuser, but our friend who wants the very best for us. God's law still stands. It hasn't been abolished. But the desire to obey God's law comes from a power within. We want to obey Gods commands because we love him and don't want to disappoint him. The Holy Spirit within us writes the law of God on our hearts, because he wants us to be like Jesus. There is a new law that is operating within us. It's the law of love that want to please God and become more like Jesus. The law has served its purpose to bring us to Christ, and now that we have Jesus, who is the fulfilment of the law, we have everything we need to please a holy God.

People, we really need to get this truth, and live it out. In the next part of the teaching of the sermon on the mount, Jesus illustrates how this works in everyday living. Over the coming weeks we are going to discover what it means to live out this sort of life in the freedom that Jesus brings. Welcome to life in the Kingdom of God!

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