

A few years ago, Keren and I were thinking about buying a house. We walked through it with a realtor from this church. We liked it. We made an offer; it was accepted. The house had everything we were looking for—it was the right size, it had character in every room, it was on a perfect street. We were so excited. After our offer was accepted, we ordered a home inspection. An expert walked through the house and then gave us the report: he had a lot of concerns. There were problems with the electrical system, problems with the foundation, problems with the insulation and the roof. He said we might have to spend half of what we were paying for it to fix all these problems. It was an easy decision for us to walk away. The house appeared good on the outside and it had everything we were looking for, but upon closer inspection, when someone looked beneath the surface, things were not as good as they looked.

Do you know the same can be true for people, for me and you? Did you know that it's possible to appear good on the outside, to say the right words in public, to do the right things for others to see, to check all the religious boxes and follow all the rules, even the rules found in the Bible, to have a nearly perfect image, but still have a very imperfect heart? That's what Jesus addresses in the section of the Sermon on the Mount we are covering today. He's going to open the hood and do an inspection. He's not interested in the paint job; he's going to shine the light on the engine, showing us the condition of our hearts, and as he does, he's going to show us what life is supposed to look like in the kingdom of heaven—the life that he came to make possible.

Let's look at the way Jesus begins.

**“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 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)**

Jesus is telling us three important things in this passage that all tie together:

- **Jesus did not come to remove the Old Testament.** Some people say, “There was the God of the Old Testament, who I don't like, and then the God of the New Testament, who I really like. Not so into the old, really into the new.” Jesus would not agree with that way of thinking. Jesus would remind us God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He didn't come with an eraser to remove what was in the Old Testament; he came with a highlighter to show us what it means.
- **Jesus did come to fulfill the Old Testament.** Jesus not only affirmed the value and worth of the Law, but he also perfectly lived it throughout his entire life. He obeyed every command God ever gave and showed us how beautiful a life lived according to God's design can be.
- **Jesus required his followers to be more righteous than the religious leaders of his day.** He literally said, “Unless you are more righteous than the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you won't enter the kingdom of heaven.” The key problem with that statement is that no one knew how that would be possible. That would be like saying you can't play basketball unless you shoot a better three than Steph Curry, or you can't play football unless you are better than Peyton Manning in his prime. The Pharisees were their religious heroes, the gold standard of religious

devotion. They memorized the Old Testament and meticulously followed every part of it. So when Jesus said you have to be more righteous than them, no one could have imagined what that would have looked like. It's almost as though when Jesus says that's the new standard, someone from the crowd says, "That's so confusing; can you give us an example?" And then Jesus says, "I'm glad you asked; I'll give you six." The rest of the chapter contains six examples of what true righteousness—internal, heart-transformation-level righteousness—looks like.

Topic	Traditional righteousness	Kingdom righteousness
Anger	Seek containment	Seek reconciliation
Sexuality	Don't cheat on your spouse	Don't lust in your heart
Divorce	Use the court system	Be faithful to your spouse
Truth	Tell the truth when under oath	Tell the truth always
Injustice	Respond by getting even	Respond with grace
Enemies	Hate them, obviously!	Love them, like God has loved you

This is absolutely revolutionary. This is not simply another religion; this is deeper righteousness than anyone had ever thought possible. This is what life in the kingdom of heaven is supposed to look like. Let's dive in and look at each one.

### Anger

**“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment’” (Matthew 5:21).**

Wouldn't it be nice and easy if the only thing God expected us to do with the people we didn't like—the people who wronged us, cheated us, lied about us, gossiped about us, stole from us—was not murder them? I think most of us could do that without any problem. But Jesus wants more from us. “But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment” (Matthew 5:22). In the kingdom, Jesus expects more. The minimum standard isn't not murdering the person who wronged you; it's having no anger toward them in your heart. Jesus gives this example: “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24). This is a challenging command regardless of the context. You come to church, you realize as you are worshipping God that there is something between you and another believer, you press pause on your worship experience, you go and talk to someone in the church to reconcile the matter, or you make a phone call to talk things through with someone, or you even get in your car and drive home to make sure things are right with you and someone else before you come back to get right with God. That takes courage, humility, and faith. But now imagine their context. Jesus is speaking to people who lived in Galilee, and they are offering their gifts in the temple. Where's the temple? In Jerusalem, which means what? To follow Jesus' command, it wasn't a phone call. It wasn't a 15-minute trip in the car. It was a three-day, 90 mile walk back home to get things right, only to then return to get right with God after they settled matters with their brother or sister. What an extreme example! There's no way to miss it: Jesus says it's not enough to not murder the person, to not slander them, to not gossip about them, to not post mean things about them on social media. Of course you shouldn't do those things, but real righteousness means you are willing to go way out of your way and pay a very high price to maintain healthy relationships with everyone in your life. You can't determine how they respond, but you can make every effort! “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18).

## Sexuality

**“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’” (Matthew 5:27).**

Wouldn't it be easy and fairly reasonable to accomplish if sexual integrity was only measured by not committing adultery, by not cheating on your spouse? For most people, we could stay between those lines. But Jesus wants so much more. “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28). Kingdom righteousness is not simply avoiding the physical act. A person can, out of sheer willpower and a basic sense of integrity, avoid cheating on their spouse. Jesus wants his followers to avoid the visualizing of, the meditation or rumination on, anything explicit. He not only wants our hands to be pure, but our hearts and minds as well. That's a high standard, and only a transformation of our hearts can bring that about. To show us how serious he is about our commitment to purity, he says, “If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell” (Matthew 5:29-30). Many of you will remember the movie *127 Hours*. It tells the harrowing true story of Aron Ralston, who was hiking a remote canyon in Utah when he dislodged a large rock and got stuck. He pushed with all his might but couldn't get free. He yelled for help for days, but no one heard. Finally, he used a dull pocketknife to amputate his forearm so he wouldn't die. Better to lose one part of your body than to lose everything! Now, to be clear, Jesus is not literally speaking about mutilation or self-harm. He doesn't want anyone to hurt themselves, but he's giving us an incredibly powerful example of to what extreme we should take our commitment to purity. We should be more committed to sexual purity than we are to keeping our body intact. It's not about avoiding a “big sin”; it's about the desires of our heart.

## Divorce

**“It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce’” (Matthew 5:31).**

In other words, if you don't want to be married any more, it's no big deal. Do it the legal way: go to the court and make it official with the paperwork, so that your former spouse is legally allowed to remarry someone else. Again, most people could reasonably live up to that standard, but Jesus wants so much more. “But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (Matthew 5:32). I realize that this is a very personal and intimate subject. This is not a classroom discussion or a theoretical topic. Divorce has affected so many lives; it affected the home I grew up in. It requires so much nuance, wisdom, and care. We did an entire sermon on it in our 1 Corinthians study in 2023. You can go back and listen to it, but I'll summarize it: We know that God hates divorce. If you've walked through divorce with someone, or you've walked through divorce yourself, you know why God hates divorce. What divorce does to people and families is horrible. So except in the most extreme and irredeemable of scenarios, God wants his people to remain married.

## Truth

**“Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made’” (Matthew 5:33).**

In other words, when you say, “I swear to God,” it had better be true. Jesus raised the bar on that standard. He says: “But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your

head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. All you need to say is simply “Yes” or “No”; anything beyond this comes from the evil one” (Matthew 5:34-37). Jesus has high expectations for the integrity of our speech. It’s not about telling the truth when we are signing a contract. It’s not about telling the truth when we put our hand over a Bible and promise it’s the truth. It’s about all our words being truthful, everything we say being trustworthy, people being about to take whatever we say to the bank.

## **Injustice**

**“You have heard that it was said, “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth”” (Matthew 5:38).**

Jesus is quoting from the Old Testament book of Leviticus, from what is called the “law of retaliation.” If someone punches you and knocks out your eye, the law limits what you can do to get even. You can take out their eye, too, but you can’t take out both eyes and cut off both ears. If someone knocks out your tooth, you can knock their tooth out, too, to get even—that’s justice—but you can’t knock out all 32 teeth; that would be too much. Earlier this week Keren and I were in a disagreement. We talked for thirty minutes and couldn’t get on the same page. Then she said, “Do you know why we’re fighting? Because you lack humility.” I thought about it for a few seconds, and said, “No, we’re not fighting because I lack humility. We’re fighting because you lack humility.” Now I just want to put it on the record that even as I was saying it, I knew it was a dumb statement. But that’s the law of retaliation: you give people back what they gave you.

Jesus says that’s not how it’s supposed to work in the kingdom. Then he gives three examples.

- If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, what’s the game plan? Punch them back? No. Rather, turn to them the other cheek also. Instead of responding reactionarily, let them know that their violence doesn’t take away your humanity.
- If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, what’s the response? Countersue and take them for everything they’re worth? No. Rather, hand over your coat as well. Give them even more than they are asking for.
- If anyone forces you to go one mile, what do you do? This was about Roman soldiers not wanting to carry their heavy loads. The law said a Roman soldier could make any Jew carry their pack for up to one mile. The Jews hated it. Could you imagine if Hamas or the Taliban conquered our country and at any time they could force you to stop whatever you were doing and carry a fifty pound backpack and walk for a mile with it? That would be miserable. Jews would do anything to avoid it. But what does Jesus say? “Go with them two miles.” Forget the bare minimum; go above and beyond.

Do you see how radically different the way of Jesus is from the way of the world? It’s not about limiting our revenge as we strategize our counterattack. It’s simply grace. Tomorrow our nation will honor Dr. King. One of my favorite quotes from him is, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” That’s what Jesus is teaching us. This requires a transformation of the heart beyond that which anyone could accomplish on their own!

## **Enemies**

**“You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy”” (Matthew 5:43).**

This is the age-old story. There are good guys and there are bad guys. Everyone knows you are supposed to root for the good guys and root against the bad guys. But Jesus says that’s not how it works in the Kingdom. ““But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...”” (Matthew 5:44). Love my enemies? Pray for them? How is that possible? Who in the world would do that? ““...that you

may be children of your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:45a). How does God treat his enemies? ““He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45b). Jesus says everyone in the world is good to the people who are good to them, but God is good to everyone, even those who aren’t good to him, and if you want to be his children, you must treat your enemies that way as well. Of course, that is exactly how God treated us: “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). Because that is how God loved us when we were his enemies, if we really want to live in his kingdom, we must love others the same way.

Jesus is not teaching us how to be slightly better people and he’s not showing us how to become religious. He’s teaching an entirely new way to live. C.S. Lewis once said: “When I invited Jesus into my life, I thought he was going to put up some wallpaper and hang a few pictures. But he started knocking out walls and adding on rooms. I said, ‘I was expecting a nice cottage.’ But he said, ‘I am making a palace in which to live.’” That’s what Jesus wants to do in our lives, and it becomes possible because he changes us from the inside out. In Ezekiel 36:26-27, God said, speaking of the ministry of Jesus, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.” On our own, we will fall short every time. Every inspection report will turn up a thousand red flags. But with Jesus, renovation of the heart really is possible! His grace is great enough to forgive us where we fall short, and it’s powerful enough to transform us and call us to a revolutionary way of life.