

Following The Way Of The Kingdom: Studies in the Sermon on the Mount

First Methodist Church of Tulsa
Fall 2025 | Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson

Session 4: Righteousness (Matthew 5:17-48)
October 1, 2025

MATTHEW 5:20

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

1. What comes into your mind when you hear the word, “righteousness”? How well do you think you measure up to that standard that comes to your mind? What do you think about Jesus’ standard?

2. Are there any places in your own heart that need transformation? Write them down for yourself and ask God to transform it this week. Expect God to answer and be ready to share a testimony next week.

3. Which means of grace have you neglected the most and might be a practice God could use to transform you? There's a list below. You're invited to choose one for the upcoming week, to pray for God to transform, and to pay attention to what God is saying or doing.

The Means of Grace:

Prayer

Searching the Scriptures

Fasting

Holy Communion

Christian conference (fellowship with a purpose, sharing your heart, confessing sin, etc.)

Works of mercy (serving others)

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I. Willard question 3 – what is righteousness?

a. Matthew 5:17-20

Matt. 5:17 “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. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

b. Righteousness – δικαιοσύνη

i. N.T. Wright – faithfulness to covenant

ii. How does one express faithfulness to a covenant? By adhering to the stipulations.

iii. What are the stipulations of God’s covenant? Start with the ten commandments, but also what’s said in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

c. Law and the Prophets

i. Torah and Navi’i – The prophets are also the historical books. The historical record of Israel’s obedience and disobedience.

ii. Jesus didn’t come to abolish but to fulfill. What does this mean.

1Pet. 1:22 Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, ²³ since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; ²⁴ for

“All flesh is like grass
and all its glory like the flower of grass.

The grass withers,
and the flower falls,

²⁵ but the word of the Lord remains forever.”

Isa 40:8 The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever.

iii. Jesus as fulfillment – Jesus not only fulfills prophecy, he fulfills Israel’s role. Abrahamic promise. **Gen. 22:18** and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.” Why? Because you have obeyed. Jesus obeys the Father.

d. It’s not so much a faithfulness to the law, but to God. That’s where the people missed it. Faithfulness to God will end up meaning obeying the commandments. So righteousness becomes a matter of the heart and Jesus illustrates that over the next 27 verses.

II. The broadening of the law – look at the way Jesus interprets these commands. He chooses commandments that are expressly about relationship to other humans, not the first commandments which are about our fidelity to God.

a. Matthew 5:21-26 – Murder

i. You shall not murder

ii. But I say to you, if you are angry with your brother or sister, you’re liable to judgment.

iii. Why? Because the sin starts in the heart, not in the act. Look at Adam and Eve. Do you see we have a heart problem more than an action problem. You cannot legislate the heart!

b. Matthew 5:27-32 – Adultery

i. Again, adultery and divorce are heart issues. It begins with “an intent to lust,” which later can lead to the sinful act.

ii. The eye and hand passages have been interpreted a number of ways, sometimes painfully in the case of Origen.

iii. If you look at the previous block, it’s clear that the problem is the heart! Cut out your heart, or circumcise your heart as the Scriptures say. The heart is what causes us to stumble and needs transformation. We’ll come back to that.

- iv. **Matt. 19:7** They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?”⁸ He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.
- v.
- c. **Matthew 5:33-37 – False Witness**
 - i. Most false witness (lying) is preceded by “I swear on my mother’s grave.” Or something similar.
 - ii. Let your yes be yes and your no be no is a poetic way of saying, “Just tell the truth.”
 - iii. But why do we lie? 90% of the time it’s hiding shame. Just like in the garden.
- d. **Matthew 5:38-42 – Revenge**
 - i. We want justice, what’s owed to us. Jesus is going to really flip this upside down in the Lord’s prayer in chapter 6.
 - ii. Who is ultimately in charge of justice? God. Will we be repaid? One day, but not by those who harm us. It’s a matter of trust in our hearts to God, which, again, we’ll cover in chapter 6 about being anxious about food and clothing.
- e. **Matthew 5:43-48 – Hatred**
 - i. Finally, this section on righteousness, which began with Jesus telling us that ours must exceed that of the Pharisees, ends with the call to perfection.
 - ii. What does that mean and look like? Love. Love is the ultimate fulfillment of the law.
 - iii. Look what Jesus says in Matthew 22:34ff

Matt. 22:34 But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together.³⁵ And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.³⁶ “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”³⁷ And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.³⁸ This is the great and first commandment.³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

- iv. Look at that last part. Law and the Prophets, an echo of the beginning of this section.
- v. Love is a heart issue and if we’re not able to love, we need a new heart, a heart that only God can give us.

“True righteousness is not about external compliance with laws but about the transformation of the heart.” – Willard

Ultimately, and I want to repeat this from the first week, our righteousness comes not from our ability as sinners to do the requirements of the law, but to become the kind of people who can do what God says. It's about transformation.

How? Reiterate the means of grace and asking God which we're going to hone in on two weeks.