**A Righteousness that Exceeds**

**You have heard it was said to those in ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord,’ but I say to you, ‘Do not swear at all… Let your word be Yes, Yes or No, No…’ Matt. 3:33,37a**

All eyes were on New Hampshire this week with both Democratic and Republican primaries being held there. Primaries give candidates an opportunity to present their case to the party – to proclaim their passions and list their priorities as political leaders. It’s a time to highlight the key issues in their platform with the hope of winning support within the party.

In a way, the sermon on the Mount is a primary for this new candidate, Jesus. Here he announces the platform for his ministry. He’s been baptized by John, tempted by the devil, and chosen some disciples. Now the time has come to set out on his mission to establish God’s kingdom in our midst. So, what will his mission look like? What will be his focus, and how will his mission differ from what the rabbis and priest are about? Well, the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapters 5-7 tells us all about that!

# After the beatitudes (which we dealt with 2 weeks ago) Jesus proclaims: “You are the light of the world.” The words are meant to be empowering… they tell us that we can make a difference in the world… that our faith can shine brightly in the world by the way we live each day. But those words are intimidating too, because they put the burden squarely upon our shoulders. You are the light of the world! You are a witness to the faith you espouse. When you get up and go out into the world, people are watching you… they are not only evaluating only you, but they are judging Christianity by your example. British author William J Toms once said it this way: “Be careful how you live. You may be the only Bible some person ever reads.” Do you feel the weight of that? What if I screw up? What if I do something unworthy of the gospel – people not only think less of me, they also think less of the faith I represent. My bad example could even damage someone else’s faith? This week all of the churches are praying for Gulf Breeze United Methodist church because the actions of their youth minister could do damage to them and their flock. So, we pray for them.

# You are the light of the world… it’s a big responsibility! I have a friend in London England that I’ve known since I was a teenager when we lived there. We were school chums back then but lost contact with each other when I moved back to Canada. We recently re-connected. His family originally came to London by way of north Africa, and while I don’t know their religious background, I’m pretty sure it isn’t Christian. But he knows I’m Christian, and now I’m his friend who happens to be a Presbyterian minister! So, he asks me questions about the church and the faith and I am aware that I represent the Christian faith for him in many ways. He doesn’t read the Bible but he reads me. I am his witness to the faith and that’s a bit daunting because I represent the gospel to him. He’s watching me! Who else is watching me and evaluating the Christian faith through my words and actions?

# When Jesus says: ‘You are the light of the world’ he not giving us a choice is he? These words are an appointment, a claim upon our lives. So, it’s important to live righteously… in fact Jesus claims today that we must go beyond the law with our righteousness. Simply following the letter of the law is not enough, our righteousness ought to exceed the law. He calls it a new righteous and it is one that goes beyond the letter of the law to embrace the spirit of the law also. It involves asking ‘why did God give us this particular law? What is its intent? And knowing that, we then live it out in such a way that satisfies the full intent of the law.

# Take for example one of the ten commandments: Moses wrote ‘You shall not murder’ but Jesus says ‘don’t even get angry with a brother or sister, don’t insult them and certainly don’t call them degrading names.’ Why? Because the law is claiming human life to be precious and anything that degrades it is wrong… not just the act of murder. So, Jesus commands us not show disrespect or distain to all our brothers and siters.

# “And if you are offering a gift at the altar and you remember a brother has something against you, go reconcile with him first and then come back to the altar.” Why? Because the brother or sister are more important than your sacrifice. And if your brother accuses you of something and lays charges against you, go reconcile with him before it goes to court. Why? Because court might settle the dispute but it won’t restore the relationship. That’s more valuable. So, people are more precious even than religious practice.

# And then Jesus gets into the messy topic of adultery. The law says ‘You shall not commit adultery, but I say to you don’t even look lustfully at a woman or you’ve already committed adultery.’ Now wait a minute, Jesus! You mean if I’m watching television and a Victoria Secret commercial comes on, and it catches my attention, have I really committed adultery? Isn’t it just a natural reaction? Didn’t God make us to be attracted to each other that way?

# Yes, but Jesus isn’t talking about mere attraction, he’s talking about being lustful and lust is a desire to covet or possess another person for our own purposes. But the law reminds us that people are not to be possessions. Lusting after someone is dehumanizing because it treats them like a sex object. If you find yourself doing that, get to know them as a human being… with thoughts, feelings, aspirations, faults and fears. When you can see them as persons you no longer are objectifying them.

# But Jesus goes on! “It has been said: ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery…’ According to Deuteronomy 24:1 any man can divorce his wife if something about her is displeasing. (and notice that there is no law allowing a wife to divorce her husband. The husband had all the power in a marriage in those days) So a man can divorce his wife is she is ‘displeasing’ – what does that mean? Well, this made for lively conversation among men! They made lists of what constituted ‘displeasing’ - argumentative, uncooperative, inattentive, unattractive. But Jesus comes down like a meat cleaver on the whole conversation! ‘Anyone who divorces his wife except on the ground of unchastity cause her to commit adultery.’ You see, the original intent of the law in Deuteronomy was to protect married women from inhumane treatment by men. So, Jesus assures the intent of that law is held by interpreting it as conservatively as possible. Unless your wife is unchaste you have no grounds for divorce.

# Finally, Jesus addresses the whole notion of swearing… not profanity, but the act of taking oaths. It’s a practice that still lingers in our courts today – when a witness places their hand on the bible and the clerk says ‘do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?’ And the witness says ‘I swear’. Back in those days it was common for a person do this all the time… ‘I swear on my mother’s grave’ or ‘I swear by God in heaven’ or ‘I swear upon the altar in the Temple’. Now the law encouraged swearing… it only forbid people from swearing falsely. But Jesus says ‘Don’t swear at all. Why? Because the whole notion of swearing is based on the belief that I am a liar. You can’t trust what comes out of my mouth… so unless I swear an oath don’t trust my words. Jesus says – ‘let your yes be yes and your no be no.’ In other words, as Christians we should just speak the truth all the time. It’s the ultimate lack of self-respect to accept that our own words are not to be trusted. The true intent of the law in the first place is that we speak the truth at all times, isn’t it?

# So, we are called to a higher righteousness by Jesus. He wants us to embrace a righteousness that exceeds the law…goes beyond the letter of the law to include the true intent of the law. And notice that all the examples Jesus uses have to do with relationship – our relationship with our brothers and sisters, our relationship with the opposite sex, our relationship with ourselves. Jesus is reminding us that being the light of the world mostly has to do with living in unity with one another… treating each other as precious children of God. That reflects the kingdom of God that Christ comes to usher in.

# Back in January Howard Kirby went to the Habitat for Humanity Restore in Owosso, Michigan (near Detroit) to buy a couch for his mancave. He found one for $35 and loaded it up and took it home. He sat on the couch but something was wrong - it just didn’t feel all that comfortable… too hard. His daughter-in-law opened up one of the cushions and discovered a pouch of money had been stored inside. They counted it up - $43,000 in cash was in there!

# Howard first planned to keep the cash. He needed the money and the lawyer he consulted said according to the law it belonged by rights to him because he’d paid for the couch. But a little voice inside Howard’s head said otherwise. It kept saying ‘It’s not your money,’ and being an upright Christian, he decided he had to give it back. So, Howard contacted the Restore in Owosso, found the contact information of the people who donated the couch and gave them a call. He said there’s something we found inside the couch that you’re going to want back. They didn’t know what he was talking about. The couch had belonged to their grandfather and when he passed away, they donated his couch to the Restore. They were very surprised and moved to find that their grandfather had left money inside the couch and were grateful to receive it back. They too looked like they needed it. When pushed to explain why he gave it back he said ‘“I have had so much peace, so much joy because I did do it, that $43,000 never could buy that much joy or peace or happiness."

# Howard Kirby is an example of someone living out this new righteousness. He’s not satisfied following the letter of the law… in fact it troubled his soul when he tried to keep it. But when he gave it back – when he considered the wellbeing of others over his own, it blessed his soul… and brought him more peace and joy than $43,000 ever could bring. So, he knows he did the right thing. And his story is blessing others too – restoring their faith in humanity and they are showing similar generosity… some of them even to Howard. A fellow set up a GoFundMe page for the guy and it’s doing alright!

# Back in the 60’s Hugh Thompson Jr. was a helicopter pilot in the 123rd Infantry Divison in Viet Nam. He was ordered to provide air support to the troops as they moved combed the village of Son My on March 16th, 1968. He passed over the village and saw a mass of men, women and children gathered in a ditch and U.S. troops were firing upon them. He couldn’t believe his eyes. He circled back to confirm the massacre that was unfolding. He then noticed another group of civilians huddled on the edge of the village with U.S. troops advancing on them. He lowered his helicopter between the civilians and the troops led by Lt. Willaim Calley Jr. and held off their advance. He radioed for additional air support and helicopters came and removed the civilians and took them to a safe refuge.

# Emory Seminary invited Hugh Thompson to address the graduating students about 35 years later after he was finally recognized for his bravery that day with the Soldier’s Medal. He said to the students: I am just a country boy from Stone Mountain GA. But my momma taught me right from wrong and I knew I had to do something when I saw what was happening. I only regret that I couldn’t save more of them that day.

# The kingdom of God comes through acts of righteousness like this… acts that reflect the light of Christ because they go beyond the letter of the law to embrace the true intent of it. The law establishes all human life to be precious and we are called to treat one another with the respect and dignity that God intend. When we do, eyes can see, hearts are opened and eventually every knee is bowed and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

# Amen

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