

MESSAGES FROM THE MOUNT – *Pursuing Perfection*

For the next few weeks we'll be contemplating some truths from what is commonly called "The Sermon on the Mount" found in **Matthew 5-7**. At present I'm planning on just 4 messages, but we'll see where the Lord leads me in that. In today's lesson, I call attention to **5:20-48**. I will not be reading the entire text, but I suggest you do – and I will be specifically addressing a few verses. After asserting that He had **"not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it"** Jesus says: ²⁰ **"I tell you unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."** That statement alone would seem like Jesus was setting the bar pretty high. These were the religious elite. It might be similar to me saying unless you live a better life than the preachers and pastors in this town, you haven't a prayer of being blessed by God.

Then Jesus systematically gives examples of what He means. ²¹ **"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'** ²² **But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell."** So, though I may think I'm doing pretty good that I haven't killed anyone yet - I can't even get angry with people or call them names? I'm in trouble...

Picking up in **verse 27**: ²⁷ **"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.'** ²⁸ **But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.** ²⁹ **If your right eye causes you to sin, 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.** ³⁰ **And if your right hand causes you to sin, 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."** If I followed this to the letter, I'd look more like a pirate than a pastor.

Jesus goes on: ³¹ **It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces (*breaks covenant with*) his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.'** ³² **But I tell you that anyone who divorces (*deserts*) her for any reason other than marital unfaithfulness (*having an affair*), causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries her commits adultery."** And keeping with that theme Jesus says, ³³ **"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.'** ³⁴ **But I tell you, do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷ Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No' be 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."** Well, I have never "cheated" on my wife...so I'm "good" there. But have I always kept my word with her and others? Have I kept all my vows?

Has my integrity been such that when I make a promise, my word is my bond? If I'm honest, the answer is "no." I've fallen short here, too.

Jesus isn't done. ³⁸ **"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'** ³⁹ **But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.** ⁴⁰ **And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.** ⁴¹ **If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.** ⁴² **Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."** Now, I'm not allowed "pay backs?" Nope. In fact, Jesus continues: ⁴³ **You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'** ⁴⁴ **But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,** ⁴⁵ **that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.** ⁴⁶ **If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?** ⁴⁷ **And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?"** Not only am I prohibited from "getting even," I also have to be good to those who wrong me.

C'mon, nobody lives this way. I mean we may try, but we'd have to be perfect and nobody is perfect! Surely, Jesus doesn't really expect us to be perfect, does He? Look at the next verse. ⁴⁸ **"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."** How is this possible?

In **Romans 3:23** the apostle Paul declares that, **"There are none righteous. Not even one. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."** This is one of the most universally accepted tenants of Christian theology. So, what chance do any of us have? No one could live up to "the letter of the law," let alone the spirit of it. My guess is that is exactly the point Jesus wants to make. And though God certainly ordained them, sacrifices of bulls and goats couldn't make up for the shortcomings of the very best of people. If you doubt that, pay close attention to **Hebrews 10:1-14**.

¹ **The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming--not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship.** ² **If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins.** ³ **But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins,** ⁴ **because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.** ⁵ **Therefore, when Christ came into the world, He said: 'Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me;** ⁶ **with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased.'** ⁷ **Then I said, 'Here I am--it is written about me in the scroll-- I have come to do your will, O God.'** ⁸ **First He said, 'Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire...nor were you pleased with them.'** (although the law required them to be made).

⁹ Then He said, "Here I am, I have come to do your will." He sets aside the first to establish the second. ¹⁰ And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. ¹¹ Day after day every (other) priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when this priest (Jesus) had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God. ¹³ Since that time He waits for His enemies to be made His footstool, ¹⁴ because by one sacrifice He has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

The Hebrew writer also tells us though Jesus was tempted in every way just as we are, He was without sin. (Hebrews 4:14-16; 7:26; 9:14)

No wonder Jesus said this in John 14:6: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except by Me." The obvious conclusion is that only Jesus can make us perfect. So rather than "pursuing perfection" through our efforts, we should pursue Jesus. For He is Perfection.