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SIX

Jesus' Greatest Salvation Sermon

About two thousand years ago, the Son of God, then living on earth in human form, spoke to a multitude of people who had gathered to hear Him on a mountainside along the Sea of Galilee. Today we refer to the words He spoke that day as the "Sermon on the Mount."

Jesus was the greatest communicator who ever existed, and He was teaching people whom we would consider to be uneducated. Thus, His teaching was simple and easy to understand. He used everyday objects to illustrate His points.

Today, however, many think that we need someone who has a Ph.D. to interpret what Jesus said. And unfortunately the basic premise of some of those interpreters is that Jesus *couldn't* have meant what He said. Thus they've concocted elaborate theories to explain what Jesus *really* meant, theories that the people whom He originally spoke to wouldn't have guessed at in a thousand years, nor would they have understood those theories if someone had explained them. For example, some modern "scholars" want us to believe that Jesus' words had no application to either His audience or to modern Christians. Rather, they say that His words will be applicable only during the time when we're living in His future kingdom. This is an astounding theory, in light of the fact that, as Jesus addressed His audience, He used the word *you* (not *them*) in this short sermon over one hundred times.

The purpose of this chapter and the next is to study Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. As we do, we will discover that it was a message about salvation,

holiness and the relationship between the two. It is a sermon that repeatedly warns against antinomianism. Caring dearly for the spiritually hungry people who had gathered to hear Him, Jesus wanted them to understand what was most important—how they could inherit the kingdom of heaven. It is imperative that we, too, pay attention to what He said. This was the one about whom Moses wrote: “The Lord God shall raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren; to Him you shall give heed in everything He says to you. And it shall be that every soul that does not heed that prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people” (Acts 3:22-23).

Let us begin at the beginning.

The Beatitudes

In the first section of Jesus’ sermon, what are called the Beatitudes, Jesus promised specific blessings to people who possess certain character traits. Many different traits are listed and many specific blessings are promised. Casual readers sometimes read the Beatitudes like people peruse their horoscopes, thinking that each person should find himself in one, and only one, Beatitude. As we read more closely, however, we soon realize that Jesus was not listing different kinds of people who will receive varied blessings. Rather, He was speaking of one kind of person who will receive one all-encompassing blessing: inheriting God’s kingdom. There is no other reasonable way to interpret His words.

Let’s read the first twelve verses of the Sermon on the Mount:

When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. He opened His mouth and began to teach them, saying,

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

“Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:1-12).

The Blessings and Character Traits

First, consider all the blessings promised. The blessed shall (1) inherit the kingdom of heaven, (2) receive comfort, (3) inherit the earth, (4) be satisfied, (5) receive mercy, (6) see God, (7) be called God’s sons, and (8) inherit the kingdom of heaven (a repeat of #1) where they shall be rewarded.

Does Jesus want us to think that *only* the poor in spirit and those who have been persecuted for righteousness (#1 and #8) will inherit God’s kingdom? Will *only* the pure in heart see God and *only* the peacemakers be called sons of God, but neither shall inherit God’s kingdom? Will the peacemakers *not* receive mercy and the merciful *not* be called sons of God? Obviously that is not what Jesus wants us to think.

Now consider the different traits Jesus describes: (1) poor in spirit, (2) mournful, (3) gentle, (4) hungering for righteousness, (5) merciful, (6) pure of heart, (7) peacemaking, and (8) persecuted.

Does Jesus want us to think that a person can be pure in heart yet unmerciful? Can one be persecuted for the sake of righteousness but not be one who hungers and thirsts after righteousness? Again, obviously not.

Therefore, it is only safe to conclude that the numerous blessings promised are the manifold blessings of one big blessing—inheriting God’s kingdom. Moreover, the many character traits of the blessed are the manifold traits shared by *all* the blessed.

Clearly, the Beatitudes describe the character traits of Jesus' true followers, in which, by enumerating those traits, He encouraged His followers with promises of the many blessings of salvation. The blessed are saved people, so Jesus was describing the traits of people who are going to heaven. *People who do not fit Jesus' description are not blessed and will not inherit the kingdom of heaven.* Thus it is fitting that we should ask ourselves if we fit Jesus' description. This is a sermon about salvation, holiness, and the relationship between the two.

The Character Traits of the Blessed

The eight characteristics Jesus listed of blessed people are not necessarily all easily understood, and they are thus variously interpreted. For example, what is virtuous about being "poor in spirit"?

Personally, I'm inclined to think that Jesus was describing the first essential trait a person must possess if he is going to be saved. That is, he realizes his own spiritual poverty. One must first see his need for a Savior before he can be saved.

This first trait eliminates all self-sufficiency and any thought of meriting salvation. The truly blessed person is one who realizes that he has nothing to offer God, and that his own righteousness is as "filthy rags" (Is. 64:6, KJV). He sees himself among the company of those who are "separate from Christ...having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12).

Jesus did not want anyone to think that by his own self-effort he might attain to the standards He was about to enumerate. No, people are *blessed*, that is, *blessed by God* if they possess the characteristics of the blessed. They have tasted of God's grace. They are blessed, not only because of what awaits them in heaven, but because of the work God has done in their lives on earth. If I see the traits of the blessed in my life, it should remind me not of what I've done, but of what God has done in me by His grace.

If the first characteristic is listed first because it is the first necessary trait of the heaven-bound, perhaps the second trait is also listed meaningfully: "Blessed are those who mourn" (Matt. 5:4).

Could Jesus have been describing heartfelt repentance and remorse? I think so, especially since Scripture is clear that godly sorrow results in a repentance that is

necessary for salvation (see 2 Cor. 7:10). The mournful tax collector who humbly bowed his head in the Temple, beating his breast and crying out for God's mercy, was indeed a blessed person. He, unlike the proud Pharisee who simultaneously prayed in the Temple, left that place justified, forgiven of his sins (see Luke 18:9-14).

If Jesus was not speaking of the initial mourning of the repentant person who is just coming to Christ, then perhaps He was describing the sorrow all true Christians sense as they continually face a world that is in rebellion against the God who loves them. Paul expressed it as “great sorrow and unceasing grief in [his] heart” (Rom. 9:2).

The third characteristic, gentleness, is listed in Scripture as one of the fruits of the Spirit (see Gal. 5:22-23). Gentleness is not a self-generated attribute. Those who have received the grace of God and the indwelling of the Spirit are also blessed to be made gentle. Harsh and violent “Christians” beware. You are not among those who will inherit the earth. You are not among the blessed ones.

Hungering for Righteousness

The fourth characteristic, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, describes the God-given inward longing that every true born-again person possesses. He is grieved by unrighteousness in the world and in himself. He hates sin (see Ps. 97:10; 119:128, 163) and loves righteousness.

Too often, when we read the word *righteousness* in Scripture, we immediately translate it, “the legal righteousness imputed to us by Christ,” but that is not always what the word means. Quite often it means, “the quality of living right by God’s standards.” That is obviously the meaning Jesus intended here, because there is no reason for a Christian to hunger for what he already possesses. He already has an imputed righteousness.

Those who have been born of the Spirit long to *live* righteously, and they have assurance that they will one day “be satisfied” (Matt. 5:6), certain that God, by His grace, will complete the work He’s begun in them (see Phil. 1:6).

Jesus’ words here also foresee the time of the new earth, “in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet. 3:13). Then there will be no sin. Everyone will love

God with all his heart and love his neighbor as himself. We who now hunger and thirst for righteousness will then be satisfied. Finally our prayer will be answered, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10).

Mercy and Purity

The fifth trait, mercifulness, is also one that every born-again person naturally possesses by virtue of his having the merciful God living within him. Those who possess no mercy are not blessed of God and reveal that they are not partakers of His grace. The apostle James concurs: "Judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy" (Jas. 2:13). If you stand before God and receive a merciless judgment, do you think you will go to heaven or hell?¹

Jesus once told a story of a servant who had received great mercy from his master, but who was then unwilling to extend some mercy to his fellow servant. When his master discovered what had happened, He "handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him" (Matt 18:34). All his formerly-forgiven debt was reinstated. Then Jesus warned His disciples, "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart" (Matt. 18:35). Again, non-merciful people will not receive mercy from God. They are not among the blessed.

The sixth trait of the heaven-bound is purity of heart. True followers of Christ are not just outwardly holy. By God's grace, their hearts have been made pure. They truly love God from their hearts, and it affects their meditations and motives. Jesus promised that they shall see God.

Again may I ask, are we to believe that there are true Christian believers who are *not* pure in heart and who therefore will *not* see God? Is God going to say to them, "You can come into heaven, but you can't ever see Me"? No, obviously every true heaven-bound person has a pure heart.

¹ Interestingly, the very next verse in the book of James is, "What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?" (Jas. 2:14).

Blessed to be Peacemakers

Peacemakers are listed next. They will be called sons of God. Again, Jesus must have been describing every true follower of Christ, because everyone who believes in Christ is a son of God (see Gal. 3:26).

Those who are born of the Spirit are peacemakers in at least three ways.

First, they've made peace with God, one who was formerly their enemy.

Second, they live in peace, as far as possible without disobeying God, with other people. They're not characterized by dissensions and strife. Paul wrote that those who make a practice of strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions and factions will not inherit God's kingdom (see Gal. 5:19-21). True believers will go the extra mile to avoid a fight and keep peace in their relationships. They do not claim to be at peace with God while at odds with a brother (see Matt. 5:23-24; 1 John 4:20).

Third, by sharing the gospel, true followers of Christ also help others make peace with God and their fellow man.

The Persecuted

Finally, Jesus called *blessed* those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness. Obviously, He was speaking of people who are *living* righteously, as they are the ones whom nonbelievers persecute. Those are the sort of people who will inherit God's kingdom.

What kind of persecution was Jesus talking about? Torture? Martyrdom? No, He specifically spoke of the persecution of being insulted and spoken against on His account. This means that when a person is a true Christian, it is obvious to nonbelievers, otherwise nonbelievers wouldn't say evil things against him. How many so-called Christians are so indistinguishable from nonbelievers that not a single unbeliever speaks against them? They are not really Christians at all. Jesus warned, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for in the same way their fathers used to treat the false prophets" (Luke 6:26). When all men speak well of you, that's a sign that you're a false believer. The world hates true Christians (see also John 15:18-21; Gal. 4:29; 2 Tim. 3:12; 1 John 3:13-14).

Does anyone hate you? This is a sermon about salvation, holiness, and the relationship between the two.

Salt and Light

In the next few verses, Jesus continued describing His true followers, the blessed ones, comparing them to salt and light. Both have certain obvious characteristics. Salt is salty and light shines. If it isn't salty, it isn't salt. If it doesn't shine, it's not light.

You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven (Matt. 5:13-16).

In Jesus' time, salt was used primarily as a preservative of meats. As obedient followers of Christ, we are what preserves this sinful world from becoming completely rotten and corrupt. But if we become like the world in our behavior, we are truly good for nothing. Jesus warned the blessed to remain salty, preserving their unique characteristics. They must remain distinct from the world around them, lest they become "unsalty," deserving to be "thrown out and trampled under foot." This is one of many clear warnings against backsliding directed at true believers that is found in the New Testament. If salt is truly salt, it is salty. Likewise, followers of Jesus act like followers of Jesus, otherwise they aren't followers of Jesus, even if they once were.

Christ's true followers are also the light of the world. Light *always* shines. If it isn't shining, it isn't light. In this analogy, light represents our good works (see Matt. 5:16). Christ admonished His followers to do their good works so that others would see them. That way they would glorify their heavenly Father because He is the source of their good works.

Notice Jesus didn't say we should *create* light, but to let the light we have shine before others so that they'll see our light. He wasn't exhorting those who have no works to drum some up, but exhorting those who have good works not to hide their goodness. Christ's followers *are* the light of the world. They are blessed, by God's grace, to be lights in darkness.

The Importance of Keeping God's Commandments

Now we begin a new paragraph (in the NASB). Here, Jesus began talking about the Law and its relationship to His followers.

Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:17-20).

If Jesus warned His audience against thinking that He was abolishing the Law or the Prophets, then we can safely conclude that at least some in His audience were making that assumption. Why they were making such an assumption we can only guess. Perhaps it was His stern rebukes of the scripture-twisting scribes and Pharisees that tempted some to think He was abolishing the Law and Prophets.

Regardless, Jesus clearly wanted everyone in His audience to realize the error of such an assumption. He was God, the divine inspirer of the entire Old Testament, so certainly He was not going to abolish everything He'd said through Moses and the Prophets. On the contrary, He would fulfill the Law and Prophets.

Exactly how would He fulfill the Law and Prophets? Some think that Jesus was talking only about fulfilling the messianic predictions. Although Jesus certainly did (or will yet) fulfill every messianic prediction, that is not entirely what He had in mind. Clearly, the context indicates He was also talking about *all* that was written in the Law and Prophets, down to “smallest letter or stroke” (v. 18) of the Law, and to the “least of” (v. 19) the commandments.

Others theorize Jesus meant that He would fulfill the Law by fulfilling its requirements on our behalf through His obedient life and sacrificial death. But this, as the context also reveals, is not what He had in mind. In the verses that follow, Jesus mentions nothing about His life or death as being a reference point for the fulfilling of the Law. Rather, in the very next sentence, He states that the Law will be valid at least until “heaven and earth pass away” and “all is accomplished.”

So what did Jesus mean when He declared that He would fulfill the Law? Jesus would fulfill the Law by revealing God’s true and original intent in it, filling back “to the full” what the scribes and Pharisees had effectively emptied from it. He would fully endorse and explain it, and completing what was lacking in peoples’ understanding of it.² The Greek word translated *fulfill* in verse 17 is also translated in the New Testament as *complete, finish, fill, and fully carry out*. That is exactly what Jesus was about to do, beginning just four sentences later.

No, Jesus did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it, that is, “fill it to the full.” Concerning the commandments found in the Law and Prophets, Jesus couldn’t have made His point more forcefully. He expected everyone to obey

² This would be true of what is often referred to as the “ceremonial law” as well as the “moral law,” although much of His fuller explanation concerning the ceremonial law would be given by His Holy Spirit to the apostles after His resurrection. We now understand why there is no need to sacrifice animals under the new covenant, because Jesus was the Lamb of God. Neither do we follow the old covenant dietary laws because Jesus declared all foods to be clean (see Mark 7:19). We don’t need the intercession of an earthly high priest because Jesus is now our High Priest, and so on. Unlike the ceremonial law, however, no part of the moral law was ever annulled or altered by anything Jesus did or said, before or after His death and resurrection. Rather, Jesus expounded upon and endorsed God’s moral law, as did the apostles by the inspiration of the Spirit after His resurrection.

them. They were as important as ever. In fact, how one esteems the commandments will determine how he is esteemed in heaven: “Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (5:19).³

Then we come to verse 20: “For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Notice that this is not a new thought, but a concluding statement that is connected with previous verses by the conjunction *for*. How important is keeping the commandments? *One must keep them better than the scribes and Pharisees in order to enter the kingdom of heaven.* Again we see that this is a sermon about salvation and holiness, and how they are related.

Of What Kind of Righteousness Was Jesus Speaking?

When Jesus stated that our righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees, was He not alluding to the legal righteousness that would be imputed to us as a free gift? No, He was not, for at least two good reasons. First, the context does not fit this interpretation. Before and after this statement (and throughout the entire Sermon on the Mount), Jesus was talking about keeping the commandments, that is, living righteously. The most natural interpretation of His words is that we must live more righteously than the scribes and Pharisees.

Second, if Jesus was talking about the imputed, legal righteousness that we receive as a gift for believing in Him, why didn't He at least hint at it? Why did He say something that would be so easily misunderstood by the uneducated people to whom He was speaking, who would have never guessed that He was talking about imputed righteousness?

³ Although Jesus' words here are a strong motivation not to annul or teach others to disregard any commandment, including lesser ones, His words also offer hope that heaven's population will include people who have been guilty of that very thing.

Our problem is that we don't want to accept the obvious meaning of the verse, because it sounds to us like legalism. But our real problem is that we don't understand the inseparable correlation between imputed righteousness and practical righteousness. The apostle John did, however. He wrote: "Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous" (1 John 3:7). Nor do we understand the correlation between the new birth and practical righteousness as John did: "Everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him" (1 John 2:29).

Jesus could have added to His statement of 5:20, "And if you repent, are truly born again, and receive through a living faith My free gift of righteousness, your practical righteousness will indeed exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees as you cooperate with the power of My indwelling Spirit."

The Righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees

The other important question that is naturally raised by Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:20 is this: How righteous (practically speaking) were the scribes and Pharisees?

At another time, Jesus referred to them as "whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness" (Matt. 23:27). That is, they appeared outwardly righteous but were inwardly evil. They did a great job at keeping the letter of the Law, but ignored the spirit of it, often justifying themselves by twisting or even altering God's commands.

This Jesus brought to light in the next portion of the Sermon on the Mount. He quoted several of God's commandments, and then showed the difference between keeping the letter and spirit of them. Jesus showed how the scribes and Pharisees interpreted and outwardly obeyed each law, and then revealed what was God's true intent in each case. He began each example with the words, "You have heard," and then told God's view of what they had heard. The sixth commandment is the subject of His first example:

You have heard that the ancients were told, “You shall not commit murder” and “Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.” But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever shall say to his brother, “Raca,” shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever shall say, “You fool,” shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, in order that your opponent may not deliver you to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Truly I say to you, you shall not come out of there, until you have paid up the last cent (Matt. 5:21-26).

The scribes and Pharisees prided themselves that they were not murderers. That is, they never actually killed anyone. In their minds, they were keeping the sixth commandment. They would have *loved* to kill, however, if it wasn't prohibited, as revealed by the fact that they did everything *but* murder those they hated. Jesus listed a few examples of their murderous behavior. From their mouths they spewed forth vicious words of contempt toward those with whom they were angry. They were inwardly bitter, unforgiving and irreconcilable, embroiled in lawsuits, either suing or being sued for their murderously selfish actions.⁴ The scribes and Pharisees were murderers at heart who had only restrained themselves from the physical act.

The truly righteous person, however, is much different. His standard is much higher. He knows God expects him to love his brother, and if his relationship with his brother isn't right, his relationship with God isn't right. He won't

⁴ It is possible that Jesus was intimating that the scribes and Pharisees, so at home in the courtroom, needed to realize that they were heading for God's courtroom, and that they were quite disadvantaged to have Him as their “opponent at law.” He thus warned them to settle out of court, lest they face the eternal consequences.

hypocritically go through the motions of his religion, pretending to love God while he hates a brother (see Matt. 5:23-24). As the apostle John would later write, “The one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20).

The scribes and Pharisees thought that only by the act of murder could they incur guilt. But Jesus warned that the *attitude* of a murderer makes one worthy of hell. True Christians are blessed of God to the degree that He puts His love in them, making them lovers (see Rom. 5:5), all by His grace.

God’s Definition of Adultery

The seventh commandment was the object of Jesus’ second example of how the scribes and Pharisees kept the letter while neglecting the spirit of the Law:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery”; but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart. And if your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to go into hell (Matt. 5:27-30).

First, note once again that this is a sermon about salvation and holiness, and the relationship between the two. Jesus warned about hell, and what one must *do* to stay out of it. That is crystal clear.

The scribes and Pharisees couldn’t ignore the seventh commandment, so they outwardly obeyed it, remaining faithful to their wives. Yet they fantasized about making love to other women. They would mentally undress women they watched in the marketplace. They were adulterers at heart, and thus were transgressing the spirit of the seventh commandment. (How many professing Christians are no different?)

God, of course, intended for His people to be completely sexually pure. Obviously, as I've stated earlier in this book, if it is wrong to have a sexual relationship with your neighbor's wife, it is also wrong to dream of yourself having a sexual relationship with her.

Were any among Jesus' audience convicted? Probably they were. What should they do? They should immediately repent as Jesus instructed. Whatever it took, no matter what the cost, those who were lustful should stop lusting, because those who are lustful go to hell.

Of course, no reasonable person thinks Jesus meant that lustful people should literally pluck out an eye or cut off a hand. A lustful person who cuts out his eye simply becomes a one-eyed luster. Jesus was dramatically and solemnly emphasizing the importance of obeying the spirit of the seventh commandment. Eternity depended on it.

Are you convicted? Then "cut off" whatever it is that is causing you to stumble. If it's cable TV, get the cable disconnected. If it's regular TV, then throw out your TV. If it's what you see when you go to a certain place, stop going there. If it's a magazine subscription, cancel it. If it's the Internet, get off line. None of those things are worth spending eternity in hell. No one in hell is going to say, "Yeah, I'm in hell, but I sure enjoyed a lot of sexually-explicit movies when I was on the earth. I've got no regrets, even though my sin will have eternal consequences.

God's View of Divorce

Jesus' next example is very much related to the one that we just considered, which is probably why it is mentioned next. It should be considered a further elaboration rather than a new subject. The subject is, "Another thing people do that is equivalent to adultery":

And it was said, "Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce"; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Matt. 5:31-32).

Here is another illustration of how the scribes and Pharisees kept the letter of the law while rejecting the spirit of it.

Let's create an imaginary Pharisee in Jesus' day. Across the street from him lives an attractive woman after whom he has been lusting. He flirts with her when he sees her each day. She seems attracted to him, and his desire for her grows. He would love to see her unclothed, and imagines her regularly in his sexual fantasies. Oh, if he could only have her!

But he has a problem. He is married and so is she, and his religion forbids adultery. He doesn't want to break the seventh commandment (even though he's already broken it every time he's lusted). What can he do?

There is a solution! If they both were divorced from their present spouses, he could marry the mistress of his mind! But is it lawful to get a divorce? Yes! There is a scripture for it! Deuteronomy 24:1 talks about giving your wife a divorce certificate when you divorce her. Divorce must be lawful under certain circumstances! But what are those circumstances? He reads closely what God said:

When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house... (Deut. 24:1).

Ahah! He can divorce his wife if he finds some indecency in her! And he has! She's not as attractive as the woman across the street!⁵

And so he lawfully divorces his wife by giving her the required certificate (you can pick one up in the lobby of the local office of the Pharisees' Club), and quickly marries the woman of his fantasies, herself just legally divorced. And all without incurring an ounce of guilt because God's Law has been obeyed.

⁵ This is not a far-fetched example. According to Rabbi Hillel, who had the most popular teaching regarding divorce in Jesus' day, a man could lawfully divorce his wife if he found someone prettier, because that made his current wife "indecent" in his eyes. Rabbi Hillel also taught a man could divorce his wife if she put too much salt on his food, or spoke to another man, or didn't produce a son for him.

But, of course, God sees things differently. The “indecent” of which He spoke in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 for lawful divorce was something very immoral, probably something just short of adultery.⁶ That is, a husband could lawfully divorce his wife if he discovered that she was promiscuous before or during their marriage.

In God’s mind, the imaginary man I’ve just described is no different than an adulterer. He has broken the seventh commandment. In fact, he’s even more guilty than the average adulterer. He is guilty of “double adultery.” How is that? First, he’s committed adultery himself. Jesus later said, “Whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery” (Matt. 19:9).

Second, because his now-divorced wife must seek another husband to survive, in God’s mind the Pharisee has done the equivalent of forcing his wife to have sex with another man. Thus, he incurs guilt for her “adultery.”⁷ Jesus said, “Everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, *makes* her commit adultery” (Matt. 5:32, emphasis added).

Jesus may even have been charging our lustful Pharisee with “triple adultery” if His statement, “and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (Matt. 5:32), means that God holds the Pharisee accountable for the “adultery” of his former wife’s new husband.⁸

This was a hot issue in Jesus’ day, as we read in another place where some Pharisees questioned Him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?” (Matt. 19:3). Their question reveals their hearts. Obviously, at least some of them wanted to believe any cause was a lawful cause for divorce.

⁶ Under the Old Covenant, those who committed adultery were to be stoned.

⁷ Of course, God doesn’t hold her accountable for adultery when she remarries; she was just the victim of her husband’s sin. Obviously, Jesus’ words make no sense unless she does remarry. Otherwise, there is no sense in which she could be considered to be an adulteress.

⁸ Again, God would not hold the new husband accountable for adultery. He’s doing a virtuous thing, marrying and providing for a divorced woman. However, if a man encouraged a woman to divorce her husband so he could marry her, then he would be guilty of adultery, and that is more likely the sin Jesus had in mind here.

I must also add what a shame it is when Christians take these same scriptures about divorce, misinterpret them, and place heavy shackles on God's children. Jesus was not talking about the Christian who was divorced when he or she was a sinner, and who, upon finding a wonderful potential mate who also loves Christ, marries that person. That is not anywhere close to being equivalent to adultery. And if that is what Jesus was talking about, we'll have to change the gospel, because no longer does it provide forgiveness for all the sins of sinners. From now on we'll have to preach, "Jesus died for you, and if you repent and believe in Him, you can have all your sins forgiven. *However*, if you've been divorced, make sure you never get remarried or else you'll be living in adultery, and the Bible says that adulterers will go to hell. Also, if you've been divorced *and* remarried, before you come to Christ you need to commit one more sin and divorce your present spouse. Otherwise you'll continue to live in adultery, and adulterers aren't saved."⁹ Is that the gospel?

On Being Truthful

Jesus' third example of the unrighteous conduct and scriptural misapplication of the scribes and Pharisees is related to God's commandment to tell the truth. The scribes and Pharisees had developed a very creative way to lie. We learn from Matthew 23:16-22 their belief that they were not obligated to keep their vows if they swore by the temple, the altar, or heaven. However, if they swore by the *gold* in the temple, the *offering* on the altar, or by *God* in heaven, they *were* obligated to keep their vow! It was an adult equivalent of a child's thinking he is exempt from having to tell the truth as long as his fingers are crossed behind his back.

This item of hypocrisy was next in Jesus' most famous sermon:

⁹ There are, of course, other situations that could be addressed. For example, the Christian woman whose unsaved husband divorces her is certainly not guilty of adultery if she remarries a Christian man.

Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, “You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.” But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, “Yes, yes” or “No, no”; and anything beyond these is of evil (Matt. 5:33-37).

Of course, there is nothing wrong with making a vow, which is simply a promise. Jesus was not contradicting the Old Testament Law that He inspired, saying that it is now wrong to make any vows. Rather, He was correcting the practice of the scribes and Pharisees of swearing with an oath. God’s original commandment concerning vows said nothing about making an oath by swearing. God simply intended for His people to keep their word. When people have to swear with an oath to convince others to believe them, it is an outright admission that they often lie. Our word should be good, needing no oath-swearing. Does your righteousness exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees in this area?

The Sin of Revenge

The next item on Jesus’ list of grievances was a Pharisaic perversion of a very well-known verse in the Old Testament.

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone wants to sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you (Matt. 5:38-42).

The Law of Moses declared that when a person was found guilty in court of injuring another person, his punishment should be equivalent to the harm he caused. If he knocked out someone's tooth, in fairness and justice, his tooth should be knocked out. This commandment was given to insure that justice would be served in court cases for major offenses. Once again, however, the scribes and Pharisees had twisted it, turning it into a commandment that made getting revenge a holy obligation. Apparently, they'd adopted a "zero tolerance" policy, seeking revenge for even the smallest offenses.

God, however, has always expected more from His people. Revenge is something He expressly forbids (see Deut. 32:35). The Old Testament taught that God's people should show kindness to their enemies (see Ex. 23:4-5; Prov. 25:21-22). Jesus endorsed this truth by telling us to turn the other cheek and go the extra mile when we are dealing with evil people. When we are wronged, God wants us to be merciful, returning good for evil.

But does Jesus expect us to allow people to take gross advantage of us, allowing them to ruin our lives if they desire? Is it wrong to take a nonbeliever to court, seeking justice for an illegal act committed against us? No. Jesus was not talking about obtaining due justice for major offenses in court (something endorsed by the Mosaic Law that He inspired), but about getting personal revenge for petty, ordinary infractions. Notice that Jesus did not say that we should offer our neck for strangling to someone who has just stabbed us in the back. He didn't say we should give someone our house when they demand our car. Jesus was simply telling us to show tolerance and mercy to a high degree when we daily encounter petty offenses and the normal challenges of dealing with selfish people. He doesn't expect us to "go the extra hundred miles," but "go the extra one mile." He wants us to be more kind than selfish people expect, and be unselfish with our money, generously giving and lending it. To this standard, the scribes and Pharisees didn't come close. Does your righteousness exceed theirs in this area?

Loving Our Neighbors

Finally, Jesus listed one more God-given commandment that the scribes and Pharisees had altered to accommodate their hateful hearts:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:43-48).

In the Old Testament, God had said, “Love your neighbor” (Lev. 19:18), but the scribes and Pharisees had conveniently assumed that if God wanted them to love their neighbors, He must have meant for them to hate their enemies. It was their holy obligation. According to Jesus, however, that is not at all what God meant, and that is not what He said.

Jesus would later teach in the story of the Good Samaritan that we should consider *every* person to be our neighbor. God wants us to love *everyone*, including our enemies. That is God’s standard for His children, a standard by which He Himself lives. He sends crop-growing sun and rain, not only on good people, but also on evil people. We should follow His example, showing kindness to undeserving people. When we do, it shows that we are “sons of [our] Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:45). Authentic born-again people act like their Father.

The love God expects us to show our enemies is not an emotion or an approval of wickedness. God is not requiring us to have warm fuzzy feelings about those who oppose us. He is not telling us to say what is untrue, that our enemies are really wonderful people. But He does expect that we will love them and take willful action to that end, at least by greeting them and praying for them.

What About You?

By now you realize that the scribes and Pharisees weren't very righteous at all. They had some degree of outward righteousness, but, like too many professing Christians, they were hateful, lustful, selfish, revengeful, unmerciful, greedy, Scripture-twisting liars. According to Jesus, however, true believers are characterized as gentle, hungering for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemaking, and persecuted. Thus, this part of the Sermon on the Mount should either fill you with assurance that you've been truly born again, or fill you with terror because you realize you are no different than those whom Jesus condemned. If you are in the former category, you, like everyone else in that category, know you still have room for improvement. But perfection is your goal because it is God's goal for you, as Jesus said (see Matt. 5:48; see also Phil. 3:12-14).

If you are in the latter category, you can repent and become a slave of Jesus' by believing in Him. You will instantly experience being moved by God into the former category by His grace!