

The Wisdom of Jesus

Be Perfect

Matthew 5:17-48

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We continue with our series on the Sermon on the Mount with an extended passage today. The context demands that we consider this lengthy passage. Remember, we are looking for the wisdom of Jesus.

Text: ¹⁷ “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. ¹⁹ Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds *the righteousness* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.

(Note: I probably will summarize this section for the sake of time! Slides for screens can pick back up at verse 48!)

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘*You shall not murder*, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ ²² But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire. ²³ Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny.

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘*You shall not commit adultery*.’ ²⁸ But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast *it* from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast *it* from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.

³¹ “Furthermore it has been said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.

³³ “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘*You shall not swear falsely*, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.’ ³⁴ But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God’s throne; ³⁵ nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.

³⁸ “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹ But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. ⁴⁰ If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have *your* cloak also. ⁴¹ And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. ⁴² Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘*You shall love your neighbor* and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you ⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more *than others*? Do not even the tax collectors do so?

⁴⁸ Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

Introduction: I think the place to start in this passage is in verse 48. Can you believe Jesus would give such a command? What does He mean? Be perfect? How can we be perfect? Jesus’ command sounds like an impossible task.

I did a little bit of extremely informal research this week. I posed the question to a group of people: “Name an impossible task?” I got some interesting answers. A few staff members thought of impossible tasks involving body parts: lick your elbow, sneeze with your eyes open, wiggle your ears, scratch the itch in the middle of your back, and see your eyebrow without the aid of a mirror. A few others thought about more frustrating matters. One said, “Call customer service and actually get customer service.” Another said, “Get my youngest daughter to answer her phone! She only communicates through text messaging.” Spoken like a true church staff member, one rightly summed up the common experience, “Make everyone happy.” The most bizarre response was “Unflush the commode!” True, I suppose, but why would you want to unflush the commode? My guess is that he was speaking from the experience of accidentally flushing something that needed retrieving.

Indeed some things are impossible. One said, “Sing in a choir by yourself.” Some of our more seasoned staff members were thinking on a more spiritual level when answering back, “It is impossible to out give God, live without sinning, save yourself, love like God loves and forgive like God forgives.” Another said, “Serve two masters.”

Equally impossible is the saying in our text today, “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.” You might want to give up on this passage before we get started because of such an impossible command. You might say, “What’s the use?” Let me show you how important this passage is to our understanding of wisdom and our relationship with Jesus as His disciples.

Understanding the Passage

Before we look at the practical implications of this text, consider with me three important textual features of this passage.

- Jesus anticipated a great question. The question being anticipated is “What about the law?” Remember that when Jesus spoke this Sermon on the Mount, the religious people of His day believed that their relationship with God was tied to following the Old Testament law. Now, Jesus seems to be contradicting that notion so they want to know, “What about the law?”
- Jesus answered the question with 6 examples. We don’t have the time to go through each of these examples, but notice that Jesus did not nullify the law, but His call was to go beyond the law.
- Jesus concludes with a very **hard saying**. That brings us back to the difficult command. We have been conditioned to look for the word, “Therefore.” Here, the word, “therefore,” probably strikes us with great fear, because it is as though Jesus is saying, “See, you can be perfect.” Can we? What if we cannot be perfect? What does that mean for us in our relationship to Him? What does that mean in terms of our eternal life? What is the meaning of this passage?

Identifying the Principles of this Passage:

Indeed this is a complicated passage, so let me give you four principles that I have identified in this passage.

- Jesus’ command calls us to an Advanced Standard.

Jesus has not called us to religion or law, but something deeper than that. Grace always calls us to a higher standard. In fact our attitude about rules shows us the greatest differences between works and grace. A salvation of works is always seeking what is the least I can do and still be o.k. with God; a salvation of grace is always seeking what is the most I can do in thanksgiving to God.

- Jesus’ command compares us to a Unique Standard-Bearer.

We are used to not only measuring ourselves up to keeping the rules, we are also pretty used to comparing ourselves to other people. “I’m not as bad as that guy” we say. As long as we can find at least one other person that we are better than, we think we are o.k. Three things are wrong with this. First, it makes us real judgmental. Second, it keeps the focus off of ourselves. Third, it causes us to rationalize our sin.

- Jesus’ command creates in us the need for an Atoning Savior.

This passage screams out at me, “We have a problem.” Indeed, we cannot save ourselves. But, the good news is that God, in Jesus, has taken care of that for us. The Bible says, “For He (meaning God) made Him (meaning Jesus) who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Corinthians 5:21) So, Jesus said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness. (2 Corinthians 12:9)

- Jesus’ command confirms an Anticipated Solution.

Let me point to you the most important aspect of verse 48. It is the word translated “shall.” It is a command, but it has future implications. We will one day be perfect. We ought to be moving closer

and closer to that. This is what theologians call sanctification. But, we will only be made perfect in Heaven. However, because this is our calling, we ought to have what some have called a restful dissatisfaction. (NIV Application Commentary on Matthew) We are at rest in our salvation knowing that it comes from Jesus alone and not our ability to live a perfect life. We are dissatisfied with our walk because we are not there yet.

Applying the Principles of this Passage:

Let's wrap this up with a couple of points of application. This passage calls all of us to...

- Repent (4:17) There is a whole lot I don't understand about this passage, but three things I do understand about this passage. #1 God is serious about sin. #2 We better be just as serious about sin. #3 I am in great need of forgiveness.
- Follow Jesus (4:19)

Impossible things? Indeed some things are impossible. We have identified several of those things today. But, then again, a lot of things once thought to be impossible, sometimes are determined to be possible. I think we have identified one of those things today. The Apostle Paul said, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13)