

**The Life of Jesus**  
**Sermon 7: Teaching on the Mountain**  
*“How righteous are you?”*

Passages: Romans 8:1-4  
 Matthew 5:17-20

***How righteous are you?*** To accentuate the force of that question, let me read the very last verse of today’s passage to you again:

***<sup>20</sup> For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.***

Now, quietly reflect on this simple question: *How righteous are you?*

**Let’s pray.**

The whole of today’s passage from Matthew 5 hinges on this Biblical concept of **righteousness**. But before we try to answer the question about our own righteousness (or lack of it), let me ask you three clarifying questions:

1. What is righteousness?
2. Is it possible to be righteous?
3. What is the connection between the Law and righteousness?

First question: **What is righteousness?**

Take a good look at this verse from Genesis 6: ***“Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God.”*** (Gen 6:9) According to this verse, Noah’s righteousness was based in two things: (1) He was *blameless* among the people and (2) He *walked* with God.

In other words, ***righteousness is primarily about relationships;*** with God and with others!

**Second question: Is it possible to be righteous?**

This is clear! What did we just read about Noah? ***“Noah was a righteous man...!”***

Here are some more verses from the Old Testament:

- The LORD said, *“If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.”* (Gen 18:26)

- Moses said, *“And if we are careful to obey all this law before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness.”* (Deut 6:25)
- David said, *“The LORD has dealt with me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he has rewarded me.”* (2 Samuel 22:21)
- The Psalmist says, *“The Lord will bless the righteous.”* (Psalm 5:12) and, *“The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous.”* Psalm 34:15, 17.
- Proverbs says, *“Blessings crown the head of the righteous...”* (Prov 10:6); it adds that, *“When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice: [Prov. 29:2](#)”*
- Ezekiel made it clear: *“If a righteous person turns from their righteousness and does evil, they will die for it.”* ([Ezekiel 33:18](#))

Let's come back to the New Testament again.

- Jesus said, *“Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness.”* Matt. 5:6, and, *“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.”* Matt. 6:33;
- James says, *“The fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”* James 5:16

So, to answer our **second question** (*Is it possible to be righteous?*) the obvious answer is **‘Yes!’** Noah, Moses, David, Elijah; all of these men were considered “righteous”. Moreover, according to the Psalms, there were many righteous people in Israel; people who worshipped God with clean hands and a pure heart; people whom God blessed. And (unless God was playing a game with Abraham), there were even a few righteous people living in Sodom!

Here's our **third question**: *“What is the connection between the Law and righteousness?”*

In the Law, God told His people how to have these right relationships... with Him and with others. (This is what the Ten Commandments were about: *Have no other gods; honour the Sabbath Day; Do not steal; Do not commit adultery...*) The law gave clear instructions on the art of living in relationship with God and others! Or, to put it another way, **the Law was principally an instruction manual on how to love, and loving others was essentially the highest form of righteousness!**

**Jesus knew this!** Later in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus will be asked “What is the greatest commandment?”, and He will answer, ***“Love the Lord with all your heart....and love your neighbour as yourself! On these two commandments hang all the Law and the prophets!”***

In another passage (Matthew 7), Jesus will summarise *the entire Law and the Prophets* in one simple sentence: **“Do unto others as you would have them to do unto you for this sums up the Law and the Prophets”**. (Matthew 7:12)

In a nutshell, the connection between Law and righteousness is clear:

**Righteousness requires that you love others, and the Law shows you how!**

“But hold on!”, you may be thinking. “If that’s true, then why does Paul, in Romans 3, say **“There is no one righteous, no not one”**?” And why does Isaiah tell us (in Isaiah 64:6) that all our *“righteous deeds have become like filthy rags”* to God?

Both of these statements were made in light of the reality of sin; how sin has affected our ability to love. Once sin takes hold of us, even the good Law of God becomes twisted, and the righteous deeds encouraged by the Law end up becoming polluted and corrupted by selfishness and pride. No matter how hard we try, sin ends up ruining all relationships...with God and with others! In other words, Paul and Isaiah are not saying anything bad about the Law. They’re simply stating the fact that *the Law is powerless to keep us in right relationships!* **We need something stronger than the Law to make us righteous!**

And, of course, this truth was already widely known in the Old Testament. That’s why the prophets talked about a new day...a day when God would make a new covenant with Israel and, instead of writing the Laws on tablets of stone, they would be written on the human heart, by the Holy Spirit. In Jeremiah 31, we read,

<sup>31</sup> **“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah...**

<sup>33</sup> **“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. <sup>34</sup> No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”**

This is the context in which we must read Jesus’ words in Matthew 5!

As I was saying a few weeks ago, **Jesus came to start a revolution**—but it was a different sort of revolution from all the other ones that were bubbling up in His day:

- In light of the difficulties the Jews were facing, some of the revolutionaries encouraged the *abandonment* of the Law. *“Give up the Law since God has obviously given up on us! He has forsaken us! Let us immerse ourselves in more modern ways.”* (This is still the mentality of many secular Jews today.)
- Some of the revolutions advocated for a hardening up of the Laws. This was the approach of the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law who said to the people, *“The only reason why God has abandoned us is because we’ve disobeyed His laws. We need to show him we mean business! If we get back to the Laws and are really strict in their observance, God will restore our nation!”* (It’s still the approach of many orthodox Jews today.)

**But Jesus wasn’t going to follow either of these revolutions.** He would neither abandon the Law nor toughen it up! Rather, He came to fulfil it! That is, He would take the whole story of Israel (from the promises made to Abraham to the Laws given to Moses) and make it all come true! His perfect life and perfect death would display **perfect righteousness** because they would be done for others; the perfect act of love!

And that’s why Jesus says to the crowd sitting at his feet on the mountain-side:

***<sup>17</sup> ‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. <sup>18</sup> For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. <sup>19</sup> Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.***

Jesus, *the salt of the earth*, would make God’s people salty again! Jesus, *the light of the world*, would make God’s people shine again! Jesus, *the truly righteous Israelite* (more righteous than Noah, David or Elijah; more righteous than the Pharisees and Teachers of the law!)...would make God’s people **righteous** once again! And not just in name only! By His death on the cross, he

would break sin's hold on us and wash us clean. By His resurrection and ascension to heaven, He would pour out His Holy Spirit *in order that the Holy and Righteous Lord Jesus might live inside all of us, living out the righteous requirements of the Law* (ie. perfect relationships) *through us!*

Indeed, **this is the real revolution** that Jesus was bringing to Israel! In Jesus, the deepest, relational truths of the Law would finally be fulfilled and **true righteousness** would again be seen in God's people!

Isn't this what exactly Paul says in Romans 8?

***<sup>3</sup> For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh,<sup>[b]</sup> God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering.<sup>[c]</sup> And so he condemned sin in the flesh,<sup>4</sup> in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit...<sup>10</sup> But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness.<sup>11</sup> And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.***

How righteous are you? It all depends on whether you've asked Jesus to live in you; whether you are truly allowing His Spirit to lead you in the living ways of His righteousness.

For, in the end, that's the revolution Jesus calls us into—a **revolution of righteousness, made possible through the Righteous Lord, Jesus Christ!**

Let's pray.