

*Sermon on Matthew 5:31-48 prepared by Jonathan Shradar*

**Jesus takes the law deeper and brings our lives higher.**

We are on a ride, hearing directly from Jesus the way the Kingdom works. Our ethic for life. Nothing here is new but we are consistently in need of reminder in the same way we are consistently in need of the reminder of our justification in Christ. That his sacrifice on the cross dealt with our sin and gifted us his righteousness. That we really are forgiven and invited into a new life with him.

We are distracted people, many voices and lures pull us in all kinds of directions that occasionally shift us off the course of maturity in the faith, a resiliency rooted in the good news of Jesus. So we endeavor to gather and re-center. But the Sermon on the Mount is a crazy ride.

Imagine: Like an X-games downhill biking challenge. You have the choice of trails but the one most appealing is arguably terrifying! You crest the top of the ramp and look down, you tip your bike because you feel beckoned onward. It feels like you are going straight down, outrageous downhill acceleration. Just as you are going as fast as you can, and the dip is as low as it can be, you shoot up. Ramped up and sent flying!

We have reached the upward slope of the ramp!

Jesus, having brought the law deep, into our hearts, now sends us flying, to remarkable lives that stand out as salt and light.

**Matthew 5:31-48**

**Jesus takes the law deep and brings our lives higher.**

C.S. Lewis occasionally faced accusations that he wasn't the good kind of Christian. Maybe his works were too broadly appealing or stogie old preachers figured if people were flocking to his lectures he must be a false teacher. One such accusation against Lewis suggested he couldn't be trusted because he didn't like, or "care for" the Sermon on the Mount.

"In Lewis's "Rejoinder to Dr. Pittenger," he responded: As to "caring for" the Sermon on the Mount, if "caring for" here means "liking" or enjoying, I suppose no one "cares for" it. Who can like being knocked flat on his face by a sledgehammer? I can hardly imagine a more deadly spiritual condition than that of a man who can read that passage with tranquil pleasure."

It isn't easy - not meant to be. Kingdom ethic implies that we have a King we submit to as ultimate and that we live in service to him. So there is a setting aside of self that can make us squirm.

Jesus has expressed kingdom citizens' character, how his law written on our hearts shapes how we live, and here comes the living. In four categories Jesus ramps up the way for those that follow him. It is his way of life as the counter-cultural proof in the pudding that we are his.

Kingdom citizens surprise those around us (as salt and light) by confounding with the way we respond to what we face - how we live sacrificially - and how we build bridges where they are least expected.

For our purposes this morning we want to review these categories of elevation and then settle on the motivation Jesus gives us for lives like this.

## **1) Elevation**

He has just previously described that it was not merely behavior that accounted for sin and that our hearts, if harboring anger and lust, could toxify our lives. Calling us to aggressive measures to avoid it. Taking the law deeper.

Now he turns to living a "salty" life, where worldly reasonableness is too low for followers of the King.

Closely relating to the warning against lust Jesus tackles the first category.

**a) Divorce** - it was said that if you divorce you have to give your wife a certificate of divorce, but I say, anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground sexual immorality makes her commit adultery and it spreads.

If you thought Jesus was meddling when he was calling out anger and lust, here he comes for the contemporary nonchalance toward divorce.

Here marriage, the institution rooted in the story of the garden long ago, established by God for the mutual good of a couple, for the exclusive partnership in all things of life, was manipulated to the point of patriarchal abuse.

Moses had required a certificate for divorce to prevent the appearance of immorality among women that had been abandoned by their husbands. As time progressed different houses of rabbinical teaching gave commentary about the reasons for divorce that had essentially become law to the people.

The covenant could certainly be broken for unfaithfulness but some teachers went so ridiculously far that they said you could divorce your wife if she burned dinner. Everything was fine as long as you did the paperwork.

The easy way out was normal in the culture - sound familiar? But to that mentality, Jesus says you have become adulterers. Persisting in covenant is the Kingdom way.

Now he doesn't rule out divorce, clear there are times and reasons it would be necessary, but the Kingdom Ethic is taking our commitments seriously.

In the midst of a "do what you want" culture, this is different. Kingdom citizens stay committed.

Seems a low rung, but he keeps going higher.

**b) Integrity** - You have heard it said, don't swear falsely, but I say, don't promise what you can't deliver and say simply yes or no.

Those approved of God live with integrity, a truthfulness that stands out. We become people of our word.

In the world that hears Jesus' sermon the first time around, swearing by God, the mountains, or momma was a way to get out of responsibility.

"The swearing of oaths had degenerated into a system of rules as to when you could lie and when you could not. The results were incredible. There was an ongoing epidemic of frivolous swearing, and oaths were continually mingled with everyday speech: "By your life," "by my beard," "may I never see the comfort of Israel if. .." There was an inevitable trivialization of everyday language and integrity. It became common practice to convince another that you were telling the truth (while lying) by bringing some person or eminent object into reference. The deception was very subtle." Hughes

Jesus says don't promise what you don't control and calls us to a life of profound truthfulness. We are keenly aware that we live in a radically deceptive world, a world that is deceitful at its very roots. From fake news to those shilling for your vote (all sides). It has trickled down to each of us and we are constantly faced with the choice of truthfulness or little "white-lies."

Nowadays we just don't give an answer... we ghost people instead of swearing by the moon! But Jesus says our ethic is one of integrity and a simple answer.

"The commandment of complete truthfulness is really only another name for the totality of discipleship. Only those who follow Jesus and cleave to him are living in complete truthfulness. Such men have nothing to hide from their Lord."  
-Bonhoeffer

So believers - keep your word. And man will it surprise people. Sure the world cultivates deception, but deep down people crave honesty, authenticity. So our integrity as followers of Jesus can make all the difference to a world dying in deception.

Committed people that keep their word. We feel like we can be on board for this. But Jesus goes on.

**c) Retaliation** - You have heard it said, get even with those that slight you, but I say respond with generosity.

We know this one well, turning the other cheek, but we are not really that familiar with living it. Instead, we can be dangerously obsessed with getting even and Jesus completely throws a wrench into that posture of life.

Now Jesus is not talking about allowing all forms of violence against you. If someone tries to fight you have freedom to defend yourself... but what he has in mind flows from the beatitudes, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake... We recognize it by how Jesus describes the affronts you face.

A slap to the face, a punitive judgment in court, and being forced to carry someone's burden. To the disciples sitting with Jesus, it would have been clear that these were insults.

Rabbinic law said to hit someone with the back of your hand was twice as insulting as hitting with an open hand. It was calculated contempt - you were scorned and inconsequential, the slapper was saying you were a nothing.

It was illegal to take a tunic (shirt), so Jesus is presenting a hypothetical to say if you find yourself in a place of absurd disadvantage take it further. Romans were permitted by law to force anyone on the street to carry their gear, but they could only make you go a mile. So the occupying force making your sweat in humility was insulting. And Jesus says walk on.

Rather than "fighting" the persecution, the Kingdom Ethic calls us to render it harmless because we dish out more, we become strangely generous.

Makes me think of the scene from the musical Hamilton when General Lee had suffered a humiliating defeat in being fired by George Washington. Lee starts to talk trash about the commander in chief, and Hamilton and his boys want to get even. Washington doesn't see the need, history will bear it out.

"We are to set aside our petty ways of getting even — the kind of living that punishes others by returning their own sins to them. If your spouse is messy, you leave things messy in return. If your friend is late, you will be late next time yourself. In effect Jesus asks us, in turning the other cheek, to make the other person and his or her well-being the center of our focus. We think of them and adjust our actions according to what we think will point them to Christ. And when we really do this, we begin to affect them."

"The only way to overcome evil is to let it run itself to a standstill because it does not find the resistance it is looking for. Resistance merely creates further evil and

adds fuel to the flames. But when evil meets no opposition and encounters no obstacle but only patient endurance, its sting is drawn, and at last it meets an opponent which is more than its match.” - Bonhoeffer

**Romans 12:17–21** “Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. [18] If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. [19] Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” [20] To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” [21] Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (ESV)

This is us in Christ. Responding to opposition, to an offense with generosity, take my cloak!

This is a different light to the world, this is noticeable. This is the steep part of the ramp, can we do it? But the launch is even more amazing...

**d) Love** - You have heard it 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.

Here is a place that the religious elite had added to the commands of God. Spoken to a crowd that lived in a culture that defined neighbor as those just like you - not the Roman, not the Samaritan, but only other Jews, and likely only those from your sect.

Jesus is saying that in the Kingdom the human inclination towards tribalism is spoiled - love not just those like you, that share your opinions, your experience, but even your enemies.

And what a moment in our lives to hear this. In the church and outside of it we need to be reoriented toward this exhortation.

“Believe as I believe, no more, no less;  
That I am right, and no one else, confess;  
Feel as I feel, think only as I think;  
Eat what I eat, and drink but what I drink;

Look as I look, do always as I do;  
Then, and only then, will I fellowship with you.” — SOURCE UNKNOWN

It is not natural but it is intentional love. When the rest of the world lives for transactional love (scratch my back I scratch yours, vote the way I do and you will be loved), Jesus calls us to sacrificial love. An embrace of those opposed to us to desire their good, to give them grace and mercy.

Jesus goes far beyond the explicit teaching of the OT law and offers an ethic in sharp contrast to natural human values. This is a life higher than we have expected. But it is good.

To most people, the mere idea of loving his enemies is absurd and offensive and beyond their capability. It offends his natural sense of right and wrong. To those under the Old Testament Law, the idea of loving one's enemies was completely contrary to their perception of God's Law, which they thought required rejection and hatred of enemies — a limited love.

But we live differently. With an unlimited love. And it is crazy good. A reflection of Christ's love for us and exactly the seasoning the world needs at the moment.

“The worldly man treats certain people kindly because he "likes" them; the Christian, trying to treat everyone kindly, finds himself liking more and more people as he goes on — including people he could not even have imagined himself liking at the beginning.” C.S. Lewis

This is special. This keeps people guessing. Kingdom citizens don't respond to anything the way we expect them to. This stands out. This is light showing the way. And like everything in the Sermon on the Mount to this point, it is not a way of life to earn salvation but because we already, in Christ, own the approval of God as citizens of his Kingdom.

And that is the motivation we need to live this.

## **2) Motivation**

Do these things “so that you may be sons and daughters of your Father who is in heaven.” So you look like part of the family as children of God.

Jesus describes the common grace of God as a model for our love of others, the sun rises on good and evil, rain falls on the just and unjust. So as Kingdom citizens we extend love, love we have received in Jesus, to everybody, even our enemies. This is just how our family lives, it is what we do.

When we lived in Washington a young couple moved in with us and we warned them before they made the move that our way of living was a musical - we were a singing family. They didn't quite understand what that meant but a few weeks in announced that they finally had a sense of the warning.

Walking with Jesus is the same, we hear the call upward and then we get to live it and we understand it.

So we live this because we are made children.

We also take it on because it distinguishes us from the world. This is how the Kingdom is recognized as holy, set apart. We don't live for reward or payback as the taxman, loving only those we like. This is where we blow the expectations out of the water.

And lastly, We take Jesus at his word and live his way, because it is maturity, it is how we are perfect as the Father is perfect.

"In scripture, perfection doesn't necessarily mean sinlessness. Instead, it often means maturity. Love for enemies is mature righteousness. Praying for and doing good for those who persecute us is mature obedience and discipleship. It is the sort of righteousness that surpasses the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, and the sort of righteousness that undoes the knots of evil that tie up the human race so that God's will is done on Earth as it is in heaven." Leithart

Since this perfection is the goal, then this is what all disciples of Jesus pursue.

Like Jesus completes the law, we complete obedience by following his ethic. Made righteous in him to live righteous with him.

We can be faithful because Jesus is faithful to us, granting forgiveness, keeping us secure with him.



We can be people of integrity because Jesus roots us in his truth, our justification in him, and that frees us to be honest about everything else.

We can trust that vengeance is the Lord's because the Father is making all opposition a footstool under our King's feet.

We can bear the insults for following Jesus because Jesus bore our insults against him.

We can love because he first loved us when we were still enemies and now love is what he fills us with.

In light of the outrageous love of Christ shown in his suffering and death on our behalf, we are free to bank all our hopes on this Savior and live as salt and light for his glory.

This is the lifting, this is the jump. We can reject it and get off the ramp and miss out on the glory of it or we can rejoice with the rest of the kingdom citizens and shout "WEE!" as we launch into real life. Rejoice and be glad for yours is the Kingdom of Heaven!

**Jesus takes the law deeper and brings our lives higher.**

**Let Jesus take you higher** - Surrender yourself, your perceived "rights" to offense, retribution and love. Be a conduit of his love. Grow in maturity together spurring each other on in this way of life. Take everything captive and keep it under the kingship of Christ.

**Find your perfection in Him** - He is your righteousness, security, he gives mercy to go again when we crash on the ramp! Because Jesus cried out "It is finished," you will hear "well done my good and faithful servant." Now you can live in him for others to see and experience the salt and light.

This is the ride - this is all of life, and it is good. This is how we know we are his. Let's live it together.

**Hebrews 10:32–34** “But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, [33] sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. [34] For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.” (ESV)