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Exceeding Righteousness; Matt 5:20  
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Introduction – If you could sum up the Sermon on the Mount in one sentence it would be 5:20. This is the main point of the sermon. Remember we've said the purpose of the sermon is to distinguish between false faith and true faith, false believers and true believers.

With that in mind, Jesus opens His sermon by presenting a portrait of true faith in the Beatitudes 5:1-12 and then describing the purpose of true faith in the salt and light passage of 5:13-16. As you've heard stated many times, the best way to spot a counterfeit is by studying the real thing.

Verse 20 is found in the section of the sermon where Jesus is answering the question of how the Law of God applies to the faith. As we discovered last week, the ceremonial law and the civil law find their completion in Christ. The moral law, however, remains applicable today for it lays out for us how we live our lives to the glory of God, for our good, and as a witness to those who remain in the darkness of sin. The moral law is summarized in the Ten Commandments, and the simplest way to obey the Ten Commandments is by keeping the two greatest commandments, love God and love our neighbor. If we love God, we will only worship God, we will resist making idols, we will honor the name of God, and we will set aside a day for rest and corporate worship. If we love our neighbor, we will honor our parents, and we won't murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, or covet.

The reason why v20 then appears is because as soon as someone says the moral law of God still applies today there is a great danger in misunderstanding how the moral law applies. We are prone to think that we are saved by keeping the Ten Commandments. That is a horrible distortion of the gospel, which is salvation by grace. We don't keep the 10 Commandments in order to be saved; we keep the 10 Commandments because we have been saved. Because God has rescued us from our own sin by grace, through faith, in Christ, we then begin to truly love God and love others.

Having said all of that, the reason why 5:20 is so relevant for us today is that as sinners we all have a little legalist living in each and every one of our hearts. V20 does not only address the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day; it addresses every human being in every age. That's why every other religious system is essentially a system of works. Every other religion teaches that we must do better to gain whatever that religion promises. Even atheism and agnosticism and naturalism boil down to religions of works, for in denying the existence of God we become our own God with our own set of works to follow. 5:20 is relevant for us today because we are born with this idea that I can be good enough to be right with God.

But it's not only relevant, it's urgent. Jesus declares that a legalistic faith can never save. "You will never enter the kingdom of heaven." To believe that if I'm good enough, generous enough, philanthropic enough, nice enough, moral enough, then God will be pleased with me and welcome me into heaven is a lie! It's not the gospel. In fact, it's the opposite of the gospel. Legalism says we can save ourselves; the gospel says it's impossible for us to save ourselves. Legalism says our good can outweigh our bad; the gospel says our righteousness is like filthy rags because it's corrupted apart from faith. In legalism man gets the glory; in the gospel God gets the glory. Legalism makes the law the savior; the gospel makes Christ the Savior. The latter can actually save and does save; the former can never save.

- I. What is Pharisaical Righteousness?
  - a. Relatively speaking and by comparison to those around me, pharisaical righteousness says that I have done enough good things, I have done enough right things, that I am right with God.
    - i. God and me are ok because I believe there is a god, I pray to Him, and I haven't committed the really evil and bad things that others have committed.
    - ii. I've got a long list of good things and a very short list of not-so-good things.
    - iii. God is a loving and understanding God, and He knows I have tried my best, so I'm sure I will go to heaven.
  - b. Luke 18:10-12
    - i. V11 – He's praying, he believes in God, he's giving God thanks – surely he's right with God

- ii. “I am not like other men” comparison. I’m not bad like they are, or at least I’m not as bad as they are. I don’t do the wrong things. I don’t hang out with the wrong crowd.
  - iii. V12 – in fact, I do really good things! I fast and I give
  - iv. I don’t do bad things, and I do good things. Notice there are a lot of “I”s in this prayer.
- c. Luke 18:18-27
  - i. V21 – I’ve been really good. I’ve done the right things and I haven’t done the bad things. I’ve got a really good record.
  - ii. V22 – “When Jesus heard this” He heard Pharisaical righteousness. Really, you’ve kept all 10 Commandments?
  - iii. V23 – you see he failed in the very first commandment – he had another god.
  - iv. Those listening to this conversation were troubled. “If that guy is not getting in and he has such a good record and look at how God has blessed him, if he is not getting in, then who can be saved?!?!”
  - v. V27 – it is impossible with men – you can’t be saved by doing enough good and not doing too much wrong. You can only be saved by the grace and power and mercy of God
- d. Pharisaical righteousness is a check-the-box righteousness. If you have enough boxes checked in the good column and not so many in the sin column, you’re right with God.
- e. Now in our culture today, we would never agree to Pharisaical righteousness, however, what we’ve done is softened and candy-coated Pharisaical righteousness into Southern righteousness.
  - i. We believe we’re right with God because we’re nice to people until they’re not nice to us. We go to church on Sunday. We’ve said the sinner’s prayer. We’ve been baptized. We’ve joined the church. We put some money in the offering plate occasionally. We do things at church and serve here and there occasionally. We bring our kids to church. We believe in God. We believe in Jesus. We pray occasionally when we’re not mad at God.
  - ii. We do what we want to Monday-Saturday. We go where we want to go, say whatever we want to say, do whatever we

want to do, but usually on Sunday morning, we do get up, dress up, and come to church.

- iii. We don't commit the really bad sins, but when we do, we have a good reason why. When our sin comes to light, it's always someone else's fault. We don't worry too much about how much we indulge our sinful desires and go our own way because after all, God will forgive us if we ask Him.
- iv. We say Yes Ma'am and Yes Sir. We hold the door open for others. We're good. We're not that bad.
- f. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

## II. What Exceeding Righteousness is Not

- a. The little legalist in our hearts hears these words of Jesus and we then conclude, Oh, we must do better than the Pharisees, we must try harder than the scribes. That's what exceeding means.
- b. NO! That's not what exceeding means. That's just hyper-legalism. Do more and do it better is not exceeding righteousness.
- c. Exceeding righteousness does not mean out-perform the Pharisees in doing good and not doing evil. Exceeding righteousness is not a comparison; it is a contrast. It doesn't mean to do more or try harder; it means a righteousness that is completely, entirely different, and therefore excels above, is better than, actually saves!

## III. What Exceeding Righteousness Is

- a. Luke 18:13-14
  - i. V13 – he understands he doesn't deserve or hasn't earned God's grace – he understands the urgency of his situation before God – he prays too – he believes in God too – but he knows his only hope is the mercy of God because he is a sinner.
  - ii. V14 – The righteousness of the Pharisee did not make him right with God, but the tax collector was made right with God, he experienced exceeding righteousness.
- b. Philippians 3:4-9

Conclusion – Pharisaical righteousness can never save. Southern righteousness can never save. Being good and moral can never save. The only righteousness that saves is that which comes through faith in Christ by the grace of God. That is exceeding righteousness because that righteousness cleanses us from sin, makes us right with God, and gives us new hearts that love God and loves our neighbor.

III. Testimony – doesn't matter what others think of me but it does matter what God thinks.