

Sermon Title: Surpassing Righteousness

Speaker: Jim Harris

Scripture Text: Matt. 5:17-20 (Sermon on the Mount #12)

Date: 9-27-20

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I invite you back with me to the Sermon on the Mount, which is recorded for us in the inspired written summary-version in Matthew Chapters 5, 6, and 7 (cf. Lk. 6:20-49). We have been marinating ourselves in this now, one verse at a time through the Beatitudes; and now, we're taking the other paragraphs as they come to us. When Jesus delivered this sermon, it was on a *huge* day; He had already gotten up first thing in the morning, after spending all night in prayer (Lk. 6:12), and announced who the Twelve Apostles were to be. Now He is delivering this sermon, and I think it was meant to be sort of a keynote address for His whole Galilean Ministry.

I mentioned this to you when we were introducing the Sermon: If you asked any of the people there that day: "Hey, who is the most righteous person here?" they would have looked for the nearest member of the Pharisee party. The Pharisees were the group that controlled the teaching in the synagogues. They trained the "scribes." They had their professional—or, clergy—arm known as the scribes, so you'll often see the phrase "the scribes of the Pharisees" (Mk. 2:16), "Pharisees and *their* scribes" (Lk. 5:30), or "scribes and Pharisees" (Matt. 5:20); and they rather openly proclaimed themselves to be *the* greatest examples of righteousness (Lk. 18:9; Rom. 2:17-20). They loved to make and keep rules and regulations (Col. 2:21-22; cf. Mk. 7:3-4), and they loved to make a great show of their religious fervor by *how* they kept their rules and regulations (Matt. 23:5).

But all through His ministry, *these* were the people who opposed Jesus at *every* turn. There's not one nice conversation between Pharisees and Jesus. There's the *pretense* of some civility, but it was always to trick Jesus; it was to test Him, it was to try to trip Him up, it was to get Him to do something that they could throw their spiritual flag on and call a foul on Him (Matt. 12:10). Their hypocrisy reached its zenith with their plot to murder Jesus, and they even teamed up with their other theological arch-enemies, the Sadducees (Acts 23:8), to put Jesus to death.

It was what they did to the Word of God that put them at odds with Jesus. Now, it wasn't that they ignored God's laws—not by any means. It was that they took God's laws, and they modified the entire system. God gave His Law to regulate worship within Israel. His Law always required *inward*, as well as *outward*, obedience (see Ex. 20:6; cf. 1 Jn. 5:3). You had to *believe* God, and then *from faith* obey those laws (Rom. 1:5; 16:26; Heb. 11:6-8)—you couldn't just obey the laws and check off the boxes, and expect that you were going to get to Heaven (Matt. 19:18-22).

In tacit recognition that they knew that their hearts would never be good enough, they kept adding on to the rules. And you'd say, "Well, if they couldn't keep the rules, why would they keep *adding* to them?" Well, they *buried* the Law of God underneath *their* laws; they had all of these thousands of detailed requirements that Jesus called "the tradition of men" (Mk. 7:8; Col. 2:8; cf. Matt. 15:3-9). Now, on the surface, it would seem that if you add more rules and regulations, you're making it harder; but the *real* effect was that it made it much *easier*, because it *obscured* the true meaning of the Law. The traditions focused on *external* actions, rather than getting to the issue of the heart (Matt. 23:23-28; cf. Ps. 51:6)—your fallenness. Their rules demanded no heart-obedience to God, as long as you kept the rules. Faith in God was a lost concept.

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The traditions masked the real issue: The *real* issue is that you can't *earn* your way to Heaven, because *you can't be good enough* (Ecc. 7:20), because you have to have *perfect* holiness (Gal. 3:10), you have to have *perfect* righteousness in order to be in the presence of a perfectly holy and righteous God (Hab. 1:13a), who is your Creator and who is your Judge (Ecc. 12:14; Nahum 1:3b). The New Testament tells us that the reason for the Law of God was to show man his "sin" (Rom. 3:20), so that we would be driven to embrace the Savior (Gal. 3:24). Keeping a list of laws was *never* the way of salvation (Gal. 3:21; cf. Jb. 25:4; Ps. 49:7-9; Prov. 20:9; Jer. 2:22; Mic. 6:6-7).

Now today, we come to a pivotal passage. It was almost breakneck speed last week when we took on three verses. Today, hold on—it's *four*! Matthew Chapter 5, Verses 17, 18, 19, *and* 20—all on one day!

I really think Jesus had probably announced that this was going to be a big day. That's why, as I've said, the crowd was unprecedented; He had just named the Apostles; He had spent the night before in prayer. I think He had also said: "You all come and listen tomorrow; I'm going to say something significant."

And this is a pivotal passage within this great sermon. It's a turning point in the sermon, because it's the end of the introduction, and it's the introduction to the next major section of the sermon.

It's also pivotal because it tells us Jesus's view of the Scriptures. Jesus did not come to bring some course corrections to the ship of Judaism (see Lk. 5:36-39). He did not come to reform the religion of His day. Instead, He came to bring complete transformation to the *hearts* of the individuals who would embrace the grace of God. He offered the Kingdom to Israel, but it was to be a spiritual Kingdom (Lk. 17:20-21; Jn. 18:36), and they had to come to the King "in spirit and truth" (Jn. 4:23-24).

Our passage today is where Jesus talks about "Surpassing Righteousness"—the kind of righteousness that is necessary for salvation; it *surpasses* anything that *any* religious system of man has ever produced, and it is rooted squarely in the Scriptures.

In Matthew Chapter 5, Verses 17 through 20, we're going to see Jesus And The Law, and we're going to see Jesus And Teachers Of The Law.

Join me at Matthew 5, Verse 17, where we put in today. He says: "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill." (NASB, and throughout, unless otherwise noted) Now, there's something that is pretty obviously implied there: Jesus says: "Don't think that!" Well, why would anybody think that? It's because *that's what they were saying* about Him (cf. Jn. 9:28-29; Acts 6:11). "He's breaking our traditions!" How many times, when we went through the Book of Mark, do you remember Jesus going out of His way to intentionally, publicly do things on the Sabbath that the Pharisees hated—because He was trying to expose that they had twisted the whole purpose of everything? (see Mk. 7:1-13; Lk. 6:7; 13:10-17) So, *they* were saying: "He is *abolishing* the Law! He doesn't care about the Prophets!"

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The word "abolish" is usually translated "destroy" or "overthrow." The opponents of Jesus considered Him dangerous because He kept breaking *their traditions*. So He exposed them. He opposed all the minutia that they used to cover up the real purpose of God's laws. So instead of listening to Him as "the Son of God" (Jn. 1:34)—God the Son (Jn. 5:18)—and then reexamining their system, they just got madder and madder at Him.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus sets forth the kind of righteousness that is associated with "the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 4:17). From the beginning of it, He deals with the outrageous charge of His enemies, that He was bringing novel new teachings, that He was rebelling against the ways of the Fathers. But rather than being contrary to the Old Testament, Jesus is going to show you that His ministry—His teaching—was in complete harmony with it (see Lk. 24:25-27; Jn. 1:45; 5:39, 46; Acts 24:14; 26:22; 28:23).

He says: "Do not think that I came to abolish *the Law or the Prophets*." That phrase: "the Law or the Prophets" was an idiom—one of several idioms—for the entire collection of the Hebrew Scriptures; that's what we call the "Old Testament," the first 77 percent of your Bible (Matt. 11:13; Heb. 1:1; 2 Pet. 3:2a).

In the New Testament writings, there are several different ways of referring to the Hebrew Scriptures, and interestingly—"Old Testament" is not one of them! We just call it that. It fits; it's okay—don't slap yourself for referring to the "Old Testament" (cf. 2 Cor. 3:14, NKJV). They referred to it in several different ways, and Jesus did in several different ways (e.g., Acts 7:38; Rom. 3:2; 2 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 5:12; 2 Pet. 1:19). Here in Matthew 5:17, He calls it "the Law or the Prophets." Over in Luke 24:44, He calls it "Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms." If you look at how the Hebrew Bible is put together most of the time, you'll see the reason for those three categories.

Often, it is just called "Moses and the Prophets" (Lk. 16:29; cf. Lk. 24:27)—there, the perspective is: Moses was the human author of the first five books of the Bible—the "Torah," the "Law"—and then, the rest of it is lumped together under the general heading: "The Prophets," referring to those whom God sent along to expound upon the meaning of the Law. Sometimes, it's just called "your law" (Jn. 8:17; 10:34), and we'll see that as we work through the Sermon on the Mount—even today.

But, by saying "the Law or the Prophets," Jesus means: "I am in *complete* agreement with what Moses wrote, *and* all of the later additions and comments that God inspired to be written to go along with the Law of Moses." In reality, Jesus gave honor to the Law and the Prophets *far beyond* that of the Pharisees (Matt. 3:15, 17; Jn. 8:29, 46; Gal. 4:4; Heb. 1:9; 7:26). They buried the Word of God under this mountain of their man-made traditions (Mk. 7:8-9), and instead of recognizing that God's Law is the thing that demonstrated their sinfulness and their spiritual neediness, they just buried it—literally.

They regarded keeping their traditions as the only way to obtain salvation (Rom. 10:3). They had God's favor on them—they thought—and everybody who didn't live the way that they told them to live *couldn't possibly* be from God (Matt. 23:2). The truth of the matter is: *they* were the ones annulling—setting aside—the Law and the Prophets.

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So here's one thing that Jesus said about them. Remember this? It's from Matthew Chapter 15, Verses 6 through 9. He has just used an example of one of their traditions, that basically gave them a way to not have to obey the Fifth Commandment and take care of their parents, when the time came. He says this: "By this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you"—and then, He quotes Isaiah 29:13—"This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men." They were equating *their* traditions with the Word of God—not just a helpful way to remember to *apply* the Word of God; they were burying the Word of God under their traditions (Col. 2:23).

There is *all the difference in the world* between doing good works out of gratitude for what God has done for you (Ps. 116:12)—that's what we *should* do: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Eph. 2:8-10)—we're *supposed* to do good works; we're supposed to *work hard* at doing good works (Ps. 119:4; Titus 2:14; 3:8); we're supposed to be devoted to serving everyone that we can, "and especially to those who are of the household of the faith" (Gal. 6:10). That's part of why God has left us here—to give Him glory in that way, to "let" our "light shine" so that people will "see" our "good works" and "glorify" our "Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16; cf. 1 Pet. 2:12). Remember, that's the verse we just studied; that's what God wants us to do!

But, it's *totally different* if you have the attitude of doing all the good things that you do *in order to gain favor with God* (Lk. 18:11-12; cf. Rom. 11:35), because they're never good enough—and we'll show you that more this morning.

Verse 17 of Matthew Chapter 5—Jesus says: "Do not think that I came to *abolish* the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill." Notice the contrast: "abolish" or "fulfill." "Fulfill" is the key word. Jesus says: "I'm not setting it aside; I'm showing you where it leads—it's supposed to bring you to Me."

He is the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Messiah. "Messiah"—*māsiāh*—is the Hebrew word for "the Anointed One." The Greek version of that is *Christos*—"Christ"—the "Anointed One," the One who will bring the Kingdom of Heaven to Earth. He is the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Savior, first hinted at all the way back in Genesis Chapter 3 (cf. Lk. 24:27; Acts 10:43; 26:22; Gal. 3:8).

Jesus is also the fulfillment of the whole system of all the laws of sacrifice (1 Cor. 5:7). All of those sacrifices were designed to reinforce the understanding of our sinfulness by requiring that those sacrifices had to be repeated over and over again (Heb. 10:3). Study the Book of Hebrews, and you'll come to understand how the great contrast is that Jesus is not like the priests who stood in the temple, offering the "same sacrifices" day after day (Heb. 10:1, 11); He offered one sacrifice "once for all" (Heb. 10:10), and He "sat down" (vs. 12). All of those sacrifices pointed to the perfect sacrifice (Heb. 10:4, 14). All of those priests pointed to the perfect priest (Heb. 10:11-12).

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Galatians Chapter 3, Verses 24 and 25, explains how all of that comes together. I'll let you read Galatians 1:1 through 3:23 to figure out why the word "therefore" starts this verse. "Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor." That's why we don't have a place for you to bring your animals to sacrifice! The sacrifice has been done, "once for all."

Jesus did not come to lift the demands of the Law from off our shoulders (Rom. 6:15; 7:12; 1 Cor. 9:21). He did not come to invalidate the words of the Law—including all of the specific predictions of the Prophets. He came to *fulfill* it.

So, look at Verse 18—"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."

"Truly I say to you" is an interesting little phrase; it's actually a translation of the Greek word—and you *know* this Greek word; you just don't *know* that you know this Greek word: it's the word "Amen." It's used sparingly in the New Testament, in a few cases like this, to introduce an important statement that is contrary to popular opinion or regular expectations—something that would cause a surprise. Jesus is saying: "Contrary to what you've heard—not what you expect Me to say; not what you've been told to believe about Me—Not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished."

He says: "until heaven and earth pass away"—well, that means just what it says. It refers to it in Second Peter Chapter 3, Verse 7. You can also read about it in Revelation 21, where we're introduced to the "new heaven" and "new earth" (vs. 1). Jesus says: "All of this takes us up to that point" (cf. Matt. 24:35).

And He says, until then, "not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away..." That's an interesting word picture. "Letter" is literally the Greek letter *iōta*—as in: "not one iota"—because it's the smallest letter of the Greek alphabet; it's like a little lower-case "i" without even a dot on it. "Stroke" is *keraiā*; a *keriah* is a Hebrew term, but it's not even a letter. Literally, it's "little horn"—a very small projection, a little tiny hook; think "comma" or "apostrophe." It was used to distinguish one letter from another in Hebrew. So Jesus is using another idiom here. An English idiom that would be something like it would be: "Not a single 't' will remain uncrossed; not a single 'i' will remain undotted from the Law."

Now, as Jesus spoke, and He said: "I'm the fulfillment of this," *some of it* He had already fulfilled—prophecy of where He would be born (Mic. 5:2), when He would be born (Dan. 9:25), to whom He would be born (Is. 7:14). Other parts were in the process of being fulfilled, as Jesus went about doing His ministry; remember how often He would quote the Old Testament—"This is what you're going to see the Messiah doing" (see Lk. 7:20-23). Other parts were soon to be fulfilled, when He would go to the Cross (Ps. 22:16; Dan. 9:26; Zech. 12:10), and then He would rise from the dead (Ps. 16:10; cf. Is. 53:11-12)—all of that was predicted in the Old Testament. Then He would be ascending to Heaven, as predicted (Ps. 110:1). Other things were *going to be* fulfilled that had not yet started; some of those are in the Book of Acts.

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And then, of course, we ultimately get all the way to the Book of Revelation—we even know the *end* of the story, and He is the fulfillment of it all (Eph. 1:10). In the New Heaven and the New Earth, I don't think you're going to have to carry a Bible around. *You won't need it*—because all of this is to get you to that point at which you are with God for eternity (Jn. 20:31; 1 Thess. 4:17).

The written Bible will become superfluous, but until then: *everything* that God has said *will* come to pass. *Everything* that the Law teaches you about the holiness of God is *fully* in force. It's just that now, we have the once-for-all sacrifice so we don't still lurk in the shadows—which is what the sacrifices were all about: the shadows that pointed to the reality (Heb. 10:1; cf. Col. 2:17). So, "until all is accomplished"—until that time-relationship word; all things in God's Word will be fulfilled in the course of time.

Those who accused Jesus of deemphasizing or abolishing or destroying the Word of God—well, they were dead wrong. So, that's Jesus And The Law.

Now, I want you to see what Jesus says about Teachers Of The Law. He's going to turn to a specific application. If a person claims to teach God's Word, but disregards any part of it, or teaches contrary to what he says he believes—that's a very serious matter. Look at Verse 19 of Matthew Chapter 5—"Whoever then annuls"—same word—"one of the least of these commandments"—referring to all of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures—"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."

Remember: He has already talked about the Kingdom of Heaven. He has said: "*Only* those who come spiritually recognizing that they are beggars and that they have nothing to offer—they *and they alone* will be in "the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3; cf. Lk. 18:13). Only those who "mourn" over their sin—they *and they alone* will be in "the kingdom of heaven" (vs. 4) Only those who are hungering and thirsting for "righteousness" will be in "the kingdom of heaven" (vs. 6).

He's already been talking about that, so when He says "greatest" and "least," He's using a euphemism; He's talking about those who will *be there*, and those who *won't*, in this context.

"Annul" tells you what the Pharisees and the Scribes did to the Word of God. *They did* what they accused Jesus of doing. That tells you what Jesus thinks of *anyone* who teaches in the manner that the Pharisees taught. To cover up the true meaning of Scripture by reducing it to a moralistic system of works-righteousness (Rom. 10:3)—"Do this, and do this, and do this; and eventually, you'll accumulate enough credit to be admitted into Heaven!" (cf. Col. 2:21)—that's what they were doing.

If you teach that way, you drag others down the drain into that theological cesspool (Matt. 23:13, 15)—and Jesus considers you an abomination. We must *never* "teach...as doctrines the precepts of men" (Matt. 15:9; cf. Jer. 8:9).

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That word "annuls" is a cognate of the word "abolish," back in Verse 17. And remember the contrast: Jesus says, "I'm not annulling anything. I came to fulfill it." All that we have from Christ—forgiveness, salvation, redemption, adoption, the indwelling Holy Spirit; all that we have, summarized in Ephesians 1:3 as "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places"—it's all given to us *by grace*. Not *one bit of it* can be earned! (Lk. 17:10)

But there *is* a lot at stake for what a person who has received the grace of God does with the Word of God—with "the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). On the one hand, there's the matter of eternal rewards for faithfulness. Once you stand in His grace, you let your light shine, so that "people...see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). You do that on Earth, He rewards you "in heaven" (Matt. 5:12). But on the other hand, there's the issue of *professing* to proclaim the truth, but not living up to what you claim; and God says great punishment is reserved for people like that (1 Cor. 9:27).

So He says "great" or "least in the kingdom of heaven"—that's determined after salvation, by your faithfulness to what God says. *Entrance* into the Kingdom of Heaven is on the basis of Christ's righteousness received by faith (Phil. 3:9). Reward and standing, once you *get into* the Kingdom—that's on the basis of fidelity to Scripture after you are an adopted child of God (see 1 Cor. 3:8-15; 2 Jn. 8).

There's another idea hinted at in this verse: Not every commandment of God's Law is of equal significance. Notice, He says: "the *least* of these commandments." Well, that implies that some may be weightier, some may be heavier. That concept is the trailhead to a rabbit trail the rabbis *loved* to spend time hiking. They divided the Law into 613 commandments; they regarded 248 of them as positive, 365 of them negative. And then, they added *thousands* of things on top of what God actually wrote.

The rabbis loved to debate—they did it endlessly—which ones of those commandments were heavier, and which were lighter. In some quarters of the rabbinical teachings of the Pharisees and the scribes, there was the belief that if you could pick out the most important one, or the most important few, and keep that one or those few rigorously, then you could be excused from having to worry about all the others.

That thinking is another symptom of the attitude that *totally* misses the point of the Law! All those details, all those sacrifices, showed you all those ways *that you sin*, and all those things that had to be dealt with! When you think in terms of trying to perform so that you gain God's favor, you miss the point that you have a sin problem that you can't solve! Your only hope is for, Number 1—complete forgiveness, which is available only through the death of Jesus Christ (Col. 1:22); and Number 2—complete transformation, which comes from allowing Him to work in your heart, through His Holy Spirit, to change you from the inside out (Ezek. 36:27; Gal. 5:16; Phil. 2:13; Heb. 13:20-21).

Now, when you think about greatest commandments and least commandments, that just might stir in your mind a memory: Wasn't there a time that somebody asked Jesus about that? There was! Look over at Matthew 22, Verses 35 through 40. This is one of the records of this encounter. It says: "One of them"—and if you look up the antecedent of

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"them," it was one among the Pharisees and the scribes—"a lawyer"—now, that doesn't mean a person who goes to court and litigates; it means one who was regarded as an expert in the Law of Moses, so this would have been one of the scribes. "One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question"—notice this—"testing Him..." Their questions were *never* to seek information; their questions were *always* to put Jesus to the test—*always* in the hope of getting Him to contradict Himself, or getting Him to say something that would inflame people, so that they could say, "See! We told you—this guy has to be killed!" This was *not* an honest question, but it was derived from that view I told you before, about figuring out what is the most important commandment, or the most important few.

So he says to Him: "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" Now, when you see Jesus start to answer this question, you might at first think, "Uh-oh! He took the bait! The guy is asking Him a *dishonest* question, and Jesus is going to answer it!" But His answer is absolutely brilliant: "And He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment' "—and then, He didn't even take a breath—" 'The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.' "

Notice how *brilliantly* Jesus answered that! Yes, He said: "Here's the most important one, and here's the second most important one." And He did not quote from the Ten Commandments in either of those things. But He said, "Love God with all you have (Deut. 6:5), and love your neighbor as much as you love yourself (Lev. 19:18). On *that* depends the whole Law and the Prophets." So, He's saying: "My friend, you can argue about which is the greatest. I'll tell you: Every single one of them is *absolutely essential*, and you're not excused from even Sub-point G of Paragraph 9 of the third footnote about the 150th commandment! It's *all* on you!" (see Jer. 26:2; Acts 20:27)

Do you want to remember them? Well, I'll tell you what: They all fall into two categories: Love God—"Love the Lord your God"; and, love man—"Love your neighbor as yourself." And by the way: That's how you divide up the Ten Commandments. Anybody who teaches the Ten Commandments, and spends any time actually paying attention to what the Scripture says, will tell you: The first four commandments are about loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. The last six commandments are about loving your neighbor as yourself.

So Jesus insisted that *every* aspect of what God said was important (cf. Mat. 4:4). Those who opposed Him were *totally committed* to the details that *they* had made up, but they missed the real issue of the heart.

Now, the next verse before us this morning—I said this is pivotal. It would be pretty hard to argue against this, but I would say that it is the theme-verse of the Sermon on the Mount. And this is a *blockbuster*!

Before I read it to you, think about what it was like: Jesus had been going from synagogue to synagogue to synagogue, week after week after week for over a year in



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Galilee, before He preached this sermon. He had been going into the turf of the Pharisees and the scribes, and they *absolutely* hated Him; and they were there when He preached the Sermon on the Mount, listening carefully to everything He said, because they wanted to find a reason to discredit Him.

So, what Jesus is about to say in Matthew 5:20 would be kind of like—picture yourself if you went to Salt Lake City during the annual worldwide conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and you stood in Temple Square and you said: "I have a message from God. The President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and all of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, are totally unworthy! You must *infinitely* surpass them, if you're going to get into the Kingdom of God!"

Or, suppose you had a little bigger travel budget, and you went to St. Peter's Basilica in Rome on a Holy Day; and you had a chance to speak with a loudspeaker, and a couple hundred thousand people around, and your message was: "Pope Francis and *all* of his predecessors fall *infinitely* short! You have *no hope* of eternal life unless you completely surpass them, as well as Mary and everyone you've ever considered to be a 'saint'." How popular would you be? (cf. Jn. 7:7)

Suppose you went to any of the seven holiest cities of Hinduism, and you had a chance to preach: "Mahatma Gandhi, and everyone that you regard as a holy man, are totally inadequate examples!"

Or, you stand in Mecca by the *Kaaba*; that's the "cube"—it's considered the holiest place on Earth in Islam—and your message to all of the people there, who have come from all over the world, is: "All of your pilgrimages leave you *infinitely* short of the goal. Mohammed cannot enter God's kingdom; you can't get there on his coattails; and all of the teachings of all of your Imams, and everything you've heard your entire life, is *completely* inadequate! You need something that *infinitely* surpasses it!"

Do you get the point? Jesus was saying something *astounding*. What was it? Matthew Chapter 5, Verse 20—"For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses"—*surpasses*—"that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." Remember, the perspective of those people was: "*The most righteous people on the planet* are the scribes and the Pharisees!" And Jesus says: "You'd better lap them! You have to be *way beyond* anything they could do!"

Right after He says that astounding thing, Jesus is going to be specific. In the rest of this chapter, we're going to see a series of examples of how the religious system of the scribes and the Pharisees was on the wrong track.

Now, what does He mean by "righteousness" that "surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees"? Well, that surpassing righteousness that Jesus requires is the righteousness that *you can't accomplish*! It has to be "imputed"—"credited" to your account by "God" (Rom. 4:3), to the heart of the one who accepts His provision for salvation. And by the way: that has *always* been the case (see Heb. 11:4).

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The scribes and Pharisees had taken the Law of God, and they had added all of these things; read the "Mishnah"—all of their commentaries on the Law—it's *thousands* of pages, adding on and adding on and adding on and adding on...They missed the whole point! Go back to before Moses, before the Law. Go back to before there were Jewish people. Genesis Chapter 15, Verse 6—"Then he"—and the antecedent of "he" is Abraham—"he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." Look—if you have to keep all of those laws, how did Abraham get declared totally righteous, before those laws were even given? *By faith* he received the "free gift" (Rom. 6:23). And by the way: The way of salvation has *never changed!*

Let's go up to *after* Christ. Let's now go to the time when the Gospel has gone to Jews and Gentiles alike: Romans Chapter 4, Verse 3—"For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.' " Salvation comes *exactly* the same way that Abraham believed, it's just that his Bible was a lot thinner...oh, wait—it hadn't been written yet! It is coming to God by faith, as one who recognizes his or her spiritual poverty, and receiving His free gift. A lot of people today have fallen into the very same trap that ensnared the Pharisees (see Rom. 10:3; cf. Gal. 3:21).

Now, I look around here, and I know most of you—almost all of you—by name. I *like* you! Based on what *I* know, you have my vote! I want you in Heaven! That's all wonderful. But *you're not going to be there*, unless you're receiving a free gift by grace through faith!

And if you have the feeling of being on a spiritual treadmill, working harder and harder and harder; and you're working up a sweat, spending a lot of energy, but you don't feel like you're getting anywhere—maybe you haven't understood the *essence* of the whole thing. You might pat yourself on the back for any number of good things that you do. And you're not in jail, so you probably don't regularly break any of the really big commandments. Maybe you've been faithful to your spouse all year long. You don't swear. You don't cheat people. Generally speaking, most of the time, you tell the truth—pretty much, in general, when it's convenient. But you just can't find this *joy*, this *peace*, this *resting* that the Bible talks about (Heb. 4:1).

If that describes you, maybe the problem is that your idea of the Christian life is behavior modification rather than faith. It's not a matter of reforming your behavior without first letting God deal with your heart. It doesn't work to start from the *outside*; you can't do it by doing stuff "outside" of you (Matt. 23:25). Now, in a sense, it *does* come from the outside, because it starts with God, *from the outside in*, giving you His gift of grace and faith and salvation—all of that package deal that includes all of those wonderful things (Eph. 2:8-9; cf. Deut. 30:6; Jer. 24:7; Ezek. 36:25-26; Jn. 3:3, 5). But then, the "outside" changes because of what happens on the "inside" (Matt. 23:26; Ezek. 36:27).

You need to understand how God works in your heart when you stand in Christ. Famous verse; you know this one: Romans Chapter 12, Verse 2. After laying out all of the details of the Gospel, Paul says, in Romans 12:1—"Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship"—or, "spiritual way to worship Him." Then, in

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Verse 2, he continues. Now, here is your instruction: what it means to be a Christian—not getting a bigger binder to put all of your rules and regulations in; it says this: "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."

Do you see the two words there in contrast?—"Conformed" and "*transformed*." The word "conformed" means "squeezed into a mold." Don't let somebody tell you how you need to be (Gal. 4:9; Col. 2:8, 20-22), but "be transformed"—from the inside out—"by the renewing of your mind." (see Jn. 5:39 with 2 Cor. 3:18; cf. Ps. 119:38; Jn. 17:17)

Here's another case where you know a Greek word, and you don't know that you know a Greek word. The Greek form of the word that is translated "transformed" is *metamorphoō*. Guess what English word comes from it: "Metamorphosis"—that *total change* from the inside out (see 2 Cor. 5:17). That ugly, disgusting-looking little caterpillar-thing crawls off one day and disappears for a while, and then *pops out as a butterfly!* Metamorphosis—total transformation. *That comes after* you come as "a living sacrifice" to receive the "free gift" of "eternal life in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:23).

I told you Jesus is going to use several examples in the rest of this chapter, and we'll see them, one at a time. But listen to the summary statement that Jesus makes about that part of the Sermon; He says: "Therefore"—and I'll let you read ahead, all the way up through Verse 47, to figure out what the word "therefore" is all about. By this time, He has gone through some contrasts, telling them, "Well, you hear it said this way, but I say to you..."—and then He explains what the Law really means. And then, He says: "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (vs. 48).

Now, *that's true*—but there's a problem: You can't achieve perfection. That ship sailed shortly after you were born! As a matter of fact, that ship sailed with Adam (Rom. 5:12). You were *born* a sinner (Ps. 51:5; 58:3). You didn't become a sinner because you sinned, you sinned because that's what comes naturally to you. You *can't get there* (Jer. 13:23).

*You need grace!* You can't be perfectly righteous (Ecc. 7:20; Jas. 3:2), so you need "surpassing righteousness"—that which surpasses anything that a person can humanly do (see Phil. 3:9). So, knock off the foolish insistence that you can get to Heaven by having your good points outweigh your bad ones!

If you go start witnessing to people, one of the best ways to open a conversation is to ask somebody: "Do you regard yourself as a good person?" Do you know what the default answer always is? "Well, yeah, I do." "How do you know that?" "Well, I know somebody worse than me! So, by comparison, I'm good." (cf. 2 Cor. 10:12) And then you can take them to elements of the Law, elements of the moral standard of God, and show them that they really *aren't* good. Do you understand perfection? *Perfection?* Have you ever read James Chapter 2, Verse 10? If you keep "*the whole law*"—all 613 negative and positive commandments—if you keep "the whole law," and you stumble "in one point"—*one point: one sin, one time, on one occasion*—then you are a lawbreaker, you are "guilty of all," and you deserve all the punishment described in the Scriptures (Ezek. 18:4; Rev. 20:10-14).

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You have been alienated from God because of your failure to obey Him perfectly (Gal. 3:10; cf. Is. 59:2). The standard is not a secret. It's right there: "You are to be perfect"—*and you can't be!* So the only way you're ever going to get there is if it is *handed* to you as a free gift, and surpassing righteousness is credited to your account!

And by the way: There has been exactly *one human being* who ever kept the standard of perfection—it's Jesus Christ (Matt. 3:17; Jn. 8:29; Heb. 7:26). He is the One who, by His grace, will give you His righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21). Remember: He is "the God of all grace" (1 Pet. 5:10; cf. 1 Jn. 5:20).

Remember the picture in the description of God that Jesus gave in one of His parables?—and this, by the way, was another assault on the Pharisees. He is pictured by the "landowner" who graciously gave a full day's pay to the workers who worked only one hour in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16).

He is the God who remained faithful to Peter through all of his failures and all of his sins, and then turned him into the mighty mouthpiece Apostle that he was (Lk. 22:32; Jn. 21:15-17). He is the God who promises to never leave us, nor forsake us (Heb. 13:5). Why? Because in Christ, He can look on you and see "surpassing righteousness"—the righteousness of Jesus Himself.

We'll close with this: Second Corinthians Chapter 5, Verses 20 and 21—"Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ..." Who is an ambassador? An ambassador is the one who represents the foreign entity on your soil. Paul says we're like ambassadors from the Kingdom of God (cf. Phil. 3:20).

"We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." You can stop there and say, "Well, I'd like to, but I have this problem: I'm not quite perfect. No, I'm *not even close* to perfect."

But listen to this final sentence: "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." *That's* surpassing righteousness—to have His righteousness credited to you.

There are two exchanges in that passage, two things transferred: Your sins transferred to Jesus—so He "died" on the Cross (1 Cor. 15:3; 1 Pet. 3:18) and endured "the wrath of God" (Rom. 5:9) for your sin (Is. 53:5-6)—so that now, His righteousness can be transferred to you (Is. 53:11), "credited" to your account (Rom. 4:3), imputed to you.

My friend: Do you have "surpassing righteousness"? Are you standing in His grace?

We have the *best message anywhere!* This is what people need to hear! This is what we need. And by the way: I need the grace of God just as badly today as I did the day that I first gave my life to Christ (see Phil. 1:6; cf. Ps. 37:24; Jer. 32:40; Jn. 10:28-29; Rom. 8:32-34; 2 Tim. 4:18; Heb. 7:25; Jude 24)—but I "stand" in His "grace" (Rom. 5:2)!

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Let's pray:

*Father, how we thank You again for Your incredible grace to us in Christ. Thank You for making it known to us. Thank You for the riches of it all. Thank You that it includes "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" in our wonderful Savior. Thank You for providing it to us, that we could have what we were never capable of having ourselves: eternal life. Thank You for the surpassing righteousness of the Savior. And, Lord, I pray You will not let a person leave here today without that righteousness, or anyone who is watching us online, or anyone who may one day listen to this by way of recording, or read it by way of a transcript. It's not because I say it, Lord, it's because of what You have said to us: You "made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." Thank You for that! Send us with that message on our lips, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.*