



The King's Ransom

Matthew 20:28

Text

Matthew 5:17-48

Topic

Jesus describes the efforts of the scribes and the Pharisees to do right as being deadly to the spirit of God's Law

Title

"Deadly Do-Rights"

Introduction

It's called *vanity sizing*.

Also known as *size inflation*, it is the practice of clothing manufacturers using smaller numbered sizes on larger clothing.

Although size standards do exist, many companies don't use them anymore.

Why vanity sizing? It satisfies your desire to appear thin and feel better about yourself and thus be more inclined to buy.

Guys, you only think your pants are a 34. You've been a 36 or 38 for a while - despite what the tag reads on your *Wranglers*.

The first century Jewish scribes and Pharisees had a vanity sizing problem. It wasn't with their clothing; it was with their *righteousness*. They were inflating the size of their righteousness to appear more spiritual before men.

Jesus told His followers that the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees fell far short of the standard God requires - which He states in verse forty-eight as being "perfect.

The remarkable thing is that, although the scribes and the Pharisees fell short, **we can**, in fact, "be perfect, just as our Father in Heaven is perfect" (v48).

Because we are saved, and have the righteousness of Jesus Christ, we can keep the *spirit* of God's Law rather than trying, and failing, to keep it to the *letter*.

I'll organize my thoughts around the following two points: #1 You Shan't Be Perfect By Keeping The Letter Of The Law, but #2 You Shall Be Perfect By Keeping The Spirit Of The Law.

#1 You Shan't Be Perfect
By Keeping The Letter Of The Law
(v17-20)

Jesus took His closest followers on a mountain retreat to explain to them various aspects of the kingdom of Heaven.

A natural question for any Jew would be, "Will the Law of Moses remain in effect once Jesus establishes the kingdom?"

Mat 5:17 "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.

Mat 5:18 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.

Mat 5:19 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.

The "Law and the Prophets" is shorthand for the Jewish Scriptures - what we commonly call the Old Testament.

The Law, specifically, is the system of legislation given by God through Moses to the nation of Israel. Thus we call it interchangeably "God's Law" or "the Law of Moses."

The entire body of the Law is found in Exodus chapters 20-31, in Leviticus, and in Deuteronomy. Its essence is expressed by the Ten Commandments.

Jesus held the Law in the highest regard. The "jot" is the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet; the "tittle" is a small mark or projection that serves to distinguish one letter from another, much as the bottom stroke of a capital E distinguishes it from a capital F in English.

If Jesus held the Bible in such high regard - not just its ideas and ideals, but the very letters and words - so must we.

The Law must be "fulfilled" because it reflects the holiness of God and it reveals the heart of God for His creation.

Far from abolishing it, Jesus upheld it and warned of consequences to any who broke even the "least of [the] commandments."

OK, it sounds like we are to keep the Law. **Of course we are** - just not the way the scribes and the Pharisees did.

Mat 5:20 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.

The scribes and the Pharisees were seen as spiritual giants. Pharisees, for example, tithed from their herb gardens - counting out 10% of the leaves of oregano.

But Jesus' words indicate that their righteousness fell short.

In the verses that follow Jesus will explain what He meant. He's going to show how by misinterpreting God's Law the scribes and the Pharisees appeared to be keeping it to the letter but they were missing the spirit. In fact, some of their misinterpretations led to greater sin - not to righteousness.

Christians continue to be troubled about our relationship with the Law of God. William MacDonald wrote,

The Law was [never] given as a means of salvation; it was designed to show people their sinfulness and then drive them to God for His gracious salvation. **It was given to the nation of Israel, even though it contains moral principles which are valid for people in every age.**

Certain moral principles contained in the Law are permanent. It is always wrong to steal, to covet, or to murder. In fact, nine of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament, with an important distinction - they are *not* given as Law, but as training in righteousness for the Christian.

The one commandment not repeated in the New Testament is the Sabbath Law. Christians are under no obligation to keep the Sabbath.

Nor are we under obligation to keep the ceremonial or dietary parts of the Law. Those are for Israel, *not* the church. If you want a prooftext, read Acts chapter fifteen where the early church, guided by God the Holy Spirit, discerned that Gentiles need not keep the Law except for its permanent moral imperatives.

The ministry of the Law to unsaved people has not ended. Its use is still to produce the knowledge of sin and thus lead to repentance. But the Law is not for those who are already saved: "The law is not made for a righteous person" (1 Timothy 1:9).

Pastor David Guzik said, "The Law sends us to Jesus to be justified, because it shows us our inability to please God in ourselves. But after we come to Jesus, He sends us back to the Law to learn the heart of God for our conduct and sanctification."

God never intended us to try to 'keep' His Law as a means of righteousness. You *shan't* and you *can't* be perfected by keeping the letter of the Law. Jesus had to keep it for you. When you trust Him as your Savior, He takes upon Himself your sin and gives you His righteousness and, by the indwelling Holy Spirit, you are empowered to keep the spirit of the Law.

#2 You Shall Be Perfect By Keeping The Spirit Of The Law

(v21-48)

Jesus gave a series of examples to illustrate how the scribes and the Pharisees were misinterpreting the Law in order to appear to 'keep' it to the letter.

We should pay attention because it is our tendency as humans to think we are right with God by keeping the letter of the Law even when our hearts are far from Him. We should always be careful calling someone a Pharisee, but the truth is that there is a little Pharisee in all of us as sinners.

The first illustration Jesus gave was their misinterpretation of the command to do no murder.

Mat 5:21 "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.'

The phrase, "you have heard it was said to those of old," refers to the traditions that the Jews had added to God's Law as their own interpretation.

By the way: *Antiquity doesn't equal authority.* Just because something is old, it doesn't mean it is right.

In the case of "do no murder," they added, "whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment."

The addition redefined "murder" as actual murder that could be tried in a court of law. The addition weakened the spirit of the Law by ignoring the underlying heart-attitudes that give rise to actual murder.

Mat 5:22 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.

By reducing "murder" to actual murder, Jews could harbor terrible anger, and treat each other with disdain and contempt, but still think they were keeping the Law. Jesus said that those attitudes were serious enough to bring you into judgment before men and by God.

The specific words, "Raca" and "you fool," are not the issue. They were the common insults of the day. The issue is the attitude behind the words.

Jesus then illustrated the spirit of the Law.

Mat 5:23 Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you,
Mat 5:24 leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

The scribes and the Pharisees stressed the external aspects of the Law. Go ahead and "bring your gift to the altar," regardless the sin in your heart.

The spirit of the Law, proceeding from the heart of God, is that to obey is better than sacrifice.

Mat 5:25 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.
Mat 5:26 Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny.

In the previous example your brother had something against you. In this one, he still does. In other words, **you are the one in the wrong in these illustrations.**

Jesus was describing the person who thought they were righteous because they hadn't murdered anyone even though they wanted to. He wanted them to see that the heart-life is where righteousness must be cultivated. The spirit of the Law is to live at peace with others to the extent it depends upon you; it is to seek reconciliation when there is a problem. It may not always be possible - but that's a lot different than harboring hatred **and** thinking you are spiritual while doing so.

The next illustration Jesus used was their misinterpretation of the command to not commit adultery.

Mat 5:27 "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY.'

The commandment against murder had to do with the heart. So does the commandment against adultery. Adultery is more than the physical act.

Mat 5:28 But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Jesus never makes the sins of the heart equivalent to carrying them out. Anger is not as bad as murder; lusting is not as bad as physical adultery. But they *are* sin. And we could make the argument that if we kept the heart pure the physical sin would not be committed.

Charles Spurgeon said, "If sin were not allowed in the mind, it would never be made manifest in the body."

Do we ever think we are doing OK because there is no actionable sin? If so, we are Pharisees, keeping our personal misinterpretation of the letter of the Law while intentionally ignoring the spirit of the Law.

Mat 5:29 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.

Mat 5:30 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.

Don't try this at home! Don't try it anywhere.

If you consult a Jewish Encyclopedia regarding Pharisees you will encounter those that were labelled "bruised and bleeding Pharisees." They would not look upon a woman out in public but would close their eyes, keep walking, and run into posts and walls, leaving them "bruised and bleeding." Their cuts and bruises were to them a badge of righteousness.

Jesus takes this to a whole other level. He's obviously not suggesting that physical mutilation or amputation will resolve the problem of lust in the heart. But He is saying that we must prioritize the heart to the point that we would be willing to go through life maimed if it were necessary in order to avoid sin.

A real life application of this principal would be the young man Joseph who, when Potiphar's wife sought to seduce him, fled naked from the house - risking shame and earning imprisonment in order to keep himself spiritually pure.

So, you see, gouging out the eye or amputating your hand, as an illustration, serves to remind you that your heart is where God's Law must be kept. "Holiness is where the heart is."

The next illustration was their misinterpretation of marriage and divorce.

Mat 5:31 "Furthermore it has been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'

Mat 5:32 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.

The "certificate of divorce" was a legal document in which a husband relinquished his rights to the wife he was divorcing. This would allow the woman the possibility of remarriage. In a society in which women were totally dependent upon men for their living, remarriage was her only protection.

"Let him give her a certificate of divorce" was an addition to God's Law. Men were divorcing their wives for almost any reason, leaving them destitute.

In a future teaching Jesus will point out that Moses initiated the certificates to regulate this liberal attitude toward divorce.

The certificate of divorce, therefore, was a concession to regulate **divorces that were sin.**

Jesus recognized that "sexual immorality" was grounds for a biblical divorce that would free the offended spouse to remarry. Beyond that, God's Law taught the permanence of the marriage relationship.

Jesus describes remarriage after an unbiblical divorce in terms of adultery. By divorcing a woman without biblical grounds, it put her in a position in which only remarriage or illicit relationships were possible. Thus the husband had caused the woman to become an adulterous.

Jesus is going to give a more detailed teaching on divorce and remarriage in chapter nineteen. He brings it up here as another example of misinterpreting the Law to make yourself appear righteous when, in fact, you were causing even more sin. The very men who were bragging about their righteousness were sinning and leading others to sin.

The scribes and the Pharisees misinterpreted the practice of swearing oaths.

Mat 5:33 "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.'

The misinterpretation here was to say that *only* those oaths that were sworn "to The Lord," i.e., in His Name, were binding.

It gave rise to the practice of swearing oaths without invoking His Name that you never intended to keep. We would call that lying, but the scribes and Pharisees called it righteousness.

Mat 5:34 But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne;

Mat 5:35 nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.

Mat 5:36 Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black.

Mat 5:37 But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.

Jesus pointed out that *any* oath you swear invokes something in God's creation so you are always swearing by God.

Is it always wrong, then, to swear an oath? I think Jesus had in mind false oaths. Some oaths, e.g., marriage vows, are recommended, but we should limit the swearing of oaths and always be truthful.

His main point was to show how these guys could justify lying while simultaneously thinking they were the gold standard for righteousness.

Next was their misinterpretation of God's justice.

Mat 5:38 "You have heard that it was said, 'AN EYE FOR AN EYE AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.'

The Law did specify this but it did so to **limit** retaliation. The Jews misinterpreted it to teach that you *must* retaliate. They eliminated the possibility of showing mercy.

Allow me to illustrate. In the movie, *The Untouchables*, Sean Connery's character is explaining to Elliot Ness what it's going to take to fight Al Capone. He says, "they pull a knife, you pull a gun. He sends one of yours to the hospital, you send two of his to the morgue. That's the Chicago Way."

Mat 5:39 But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.

Mat 5:40 If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also.

Mat 5:41 And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two.

Mat 5:42 Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.

Keep in mind that Jesus was *not* replacing old laws with new laws. He was suggesting that we keep the spirit of the Law, which is to be merciful and generous even when wronged.

My first thought, when I am wronged, ought not to be about my rights. It ought to be about how I can bring God's mercy and generosity to bear upon the person or persons who have wronged me. It doesn't mean I can never exercise my rights - only that I seek something higher in each situation.

The last of the misinterpretations had to do with God's command to love your neighbor.

Mat 5:43 "You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.'

The Jews had misinterpreted "love your neighbor" to mean it was OK, even commanded, to "hate your enemy." *So I guess the more you hated your enemy the more righteous you'd be.*

Mat 5:44 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,

Mat 5:45 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.

God is compassionate. God is longsuffering. Even in the Old Testament, when God ordered His people to destroy their enemies, it was after hundreds of years of waiting for them to repent and He would still respond to their sincere cries for salvation and save them.

Mat 5:46 For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

Mat 5:47 And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so?

Matthew, a former tax collector, must have loved this section. Tax collectors were Jews employed by the Roman government to collect taxes from their fellow citizens. They collected far more than Rome required. They were legalized extortioners. They were hated by the Jews and considered traitors.

By their misinterpretation they claimed to be righteous, but a Jew who loved his neighbor while hating his enemy was exactly like a tax collector.

Throughout these illustrations Jesus had given some possible responses of a follower who understood the spirit of God's Law and was enabled to keep it by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

He now says that person - who is **you** - can be "perfect."

Mat 5:48 Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

If you are a Christian, you *are* perfect and *are being made* perfect:

- When a person trusts Jesus Christ as their Savior, He immediately gives them His perfect righteousness and God accepts them on account of His Son. You are not righteous in yourself; it's nothing you have done. You are declared righteous because of Jesus. This your **position** in Christ.
- This imputed righteousness leads to the **practice** of righteousness. Because you have a new nature, you desire to obey God and as you choose to obey you are being made perfect day-by-day.
- One day, when we are no longer in these bodies of flesh, our righteousness will be complete and we shall be altogether perfect and without sin.

Have you ever played the word association game where you are given a word and are asked to say the first thing that pops into your head?

As a Christian, going through life, God is perfecting you so that the first thing that pops into your **heart** is reconciliation, not murder; purity, not lust; truth, not falsehood; mercy, not justice; and love, not hatred.

We all have a long way to go, but He that has begun this good work has promised, and will be faithful, to complete it.

Let's cooperate with Him to our good and His glory.