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The Revolutionary Disciple: Authentic Righteousness Matthew 5:17-26

How should we live? It's a question we all have to answer. In 2005, Steve Jobs gave the commencement speech at Stanford University and he had this to say:

Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma - which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of other's opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.

"Follow your heart and intuition." "Don't be trapped by dogma." "Don't let the noise of other's opinions drown out your own inner voice." I have to say, there is something really authentic about living your life that way. It says that I must be true to myself; that I don't want to live a divided life where my actions are out of line with my desires. It's very holistic. But there's a problem... What if your intuition is leading you astray? What if your heart is crooked, or broken? What then? Should you still follow your impulses? If not, how then should you live? Because the reality is that our hearts are crooked, they do lead us astray. My heart tells me to eat too much and exercise too little, it tells me to be angry at someone who wrongs me, it tells me to lust after women who aren't my wife. My heart and all of our hearts are broken, and we cannot trust them to tell us the right thing to do.

In the past weeks, we have been journeying through the greatest sermon Jesus ever preached. We call it the Sermon on the Mount. In it, Jesus is speaking to his followers, with a whole crowd of people listening in, and he is laying out an agenda for what life is like in his kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven. And he's just told his followers (we heard about this from Pastor Mark last week) that they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. They have been given the task of making this world a better place, so that people might give glory to God. Now, the question comes: If that's the job of his followers, and this applies to those in this room who are following Jesus too, how should we do it? How should we live? For the Jews, which was most everyone listening 2000 years ago, their method for living was the Law. (That's law with a capital L)

Around 2000 years before Jesus, God began his rescue mission for this broken, messed up world, by choosing a family who he was going to use to rescue the world. And God gave this family, who became known as the people of Israel, a set of laws to show them how they would live in a way that would make them a light to the nations. The Law (capital L) told the people of Israel what righteousness looked like, that is, what right living looked like. But now, Jesus steps onto the scene, and he makes some bold claims about the Law as he lays out his agenda for life in His kingdom. So let's turn to our next section in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:17. Now this is Jesus speaking to his followers with a whole big crowd of people listening in...

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, 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. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 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." (v. 17-20)

When I was at high school, there would be times when a teacher couldn't make a class because of some crisis they were dealing with or because they were sick, and often there would be no substitute available. So the teacher would get another teacher to come in and write on the whiteboard a set of instructions about what we were to do with our time. Now, these instructions came from the teacher, and without the teacher and our knowledge of the teacher, we might end up ignoring the instructions. "Are they really for us?" "I'm not sure." "Who wrote them?" "I don't know." The instructions pointed us to the teacher.

And they also pointed us to the authority of the teacher. If we knew the teacher lacked authority in their teaching, we would ignore the instructions, because we knew there would be no consequences. But if we knew the teacher taught with authority, we would do what was written, because otherwise, there would be problems when the teacher got back. And when the teacher did come back, it wasn't like the teacher abolished the instructions that were left behind, but they often explained what they really meant, or pointed out where we had understood them wrong. The instructions pointed us to the teacher, and therefore it was the teacher who was really the one we needed to pay attention to, not the instructions.

This is the claim Jesus is making in this passage. He is claiming that he is the teacher who left the Jews the instructions of the Law, and now he is back to explain it in full. He's not come to say the Law was wrong, but he has come to

correct their understanding of it. Look again at verse 17: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." Jesus hasn't come to abolish the Law (or the Prophets, which together made up the whole Jewish Bible). He makes the point even clearer in the next two verses. He says the Law will not pass away until heaven and earth pass away and that its commandments still stand.

But Jesus claims he has come to fulfill them. There is a variety of opinions over what Jesus means here, but it is interesting to note a couple of things about that word fulfill. First, it is not the same word as the word Matthew uses to talk about obeying or keeping the Law. So therefore, Jesus cannot mean only that. Second, Matthew uses the word "fulfill" regularly when he quotes from the Law and the Prophets. Go back and read the first 4 chapters of Matthew and see how many times he says something like: "This was to fulfill what was written..." and then there is quote from the Law or the Prophets. As you read those statements, you see that Matthew understands this word to mean something like complete or consummate. It's more like the fulfillment of prophecy, like in the Lego movie I watched last week—anyone else seen that? "Everything is awesome..." Where Emmet the ordinary Lego man is the one who is supposed to fulfill the prophecy. Well, Jesus came to complete or consummate or fulfill what the Law and the Prophets said. They pointed to Jesus. They were all about Jesus. Jesus was the Lawgiver. He was that teacher who wrote the instructions on the whiteboard.

And if this is so, Jesus then has the authority, like the teachers in my high school, to tell us what the Law really means, to tell us what right living really looks like. To tell us what authentic righteousness is. But he starts by telling us what it isn't. Take a look at verse 20: "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." Jesus says, right living doesn't look like what you think it looks like. You think it looks like the religious people—the teachers of the law and the Pharisees—but I say, you need to be even more right than them to enter my kingdom. And do you know how Jesus describes their righteousness later in Matthew's gospel? He calls them hypocrites. Like whitewashed tombs; appearing righteous on the outside, but inside full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

It's easy to point the finger, but in all honestly most of us live just like that. I wonder if you're like I am? Sometimes I wear workout clothes just to try and convince people I've been working out, so that when they see me picking out that delicious triple chocolate muffin to go with my mocha frappuccino with extra whip and extra chocolate, they think something like: oh, he must deserve that! Sometimes, when I'm out for dinner with friends, I order a salad, just to convince people that I'm healthy, when I know full well that when I get home later I'm going to be starving and chow down on half a tub of ice cream. Sometimes, in fact, most of the time, we can get the house cleaner in the 10 minutes before guests arrive than it's been all week!

You see we all do it. We all like to appear righteous when inside we are full of hypocrisy. We are all like those Pharisees. And Jesus says our righteousness needs to go beyond that. It needs to go deeper than that. Jesus says our righteousness must be authentic. Jesus says our righteousness must come from our hearts, our desires, and our wills. Authentic righteousness is deeper than actions, it's about the desires of the heart. Take a look at where Jesus goes next. Verse 21:

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. (v. 21-22)

Jesus quotes here from the Law, from the 10 commandments. "Do not murder." He is in effect illustrating what the righteousness of the religious people looks like. He says for them, righteousness looks like not murdering. But then he drops the bomb. Jesus says, but I say, that even if you get angry with someone, that is the same as murdering them. Jesus says, even if you insult someone (which is what the word Raca was), that is the same as murdering them, because it shows where your heart is. Jesus says, in his kingdom, righteousness penetrates right to the heart, deep down to our desires. Jesus says, not only shouldn't you murder, you shouldn't even get angry at someone.

As part of my training to be a Pastor, Chapel Hill has given me some leadership development training. One part of it was a personality assessment to help me become more self-aware. It's called an Enneagram, and some people claim it has its origins in a 4th century Christian mystic who lived in Alexandria called Evagrius Ponticus. There are nine different personality types in this assessment and this past week I went back and reread through my top type, which in case you are interested in these things is number 3: The Achiever. Now I know I have a tendency to get angry, but what was interesting was the description I read this week about what this personality type is like at its worst. It said this: "[This person can] become vindictive, attempting to ruin others' happiness. Relentless, obsessive about destroying whatever reminds them of their own shortcomings and failures. Psychopathic, murderous." Apparently anger does lead to murder...

Jesus says that at the heart of right living is not our actions but our desires. It is not simply refraining from murder, but not getting angry. Jesus' authentic righteousness is not just acting right in spite of your desires, but having right desires and acting out of them. Let me say that again: Jesus' authentic righteousness is not just acting right in spite of your desires, but having right desires and acting out of them. Jesus says that authentic righteousness is not refraining from murder despite feeling angry, but rather not getting angry in the first place, and hence not murdering. He will go on to say that authentic righteousness is not refraining from adultery despite feeling lust, but rather never

lusting in the first place, and hence not committing adultery. Authentic righteousness is when your desires and your actions line up, and they both line up with Jesus' desires and Jesus' actions.

Now, let me be clear. Jesus is not saying: if you don't have the desire to act right, then you get a free pass. He is not saying: Follow your heart. Jesus says he did not come to abolish the Law. Jesus says you must act right. But Jesus says that authentic righteousness, the kind that goes beyond the religious leaders, goes to the heart. Authentic righteousness is when you not only do what is right, but you want to do what is right. But if that's true, how do we get there? I mean, no matter how hard I try, I still get angry. I can't control it. It just happens. "Jesus, how do you expect me to change something I can't change?"

As I was preparing for this message, our choir director Margie Dickerson popped into my office and handed me an essay written by a 19th century Scottish pastor, professor, scientist, evangelist, explorer, author and missionary (basically this guy was an over-achiever) called Henry Drummond. In it he says this:

Souls are made sweet not by taking the acid fluids out, but by putting something in—a great Love, a new Spirit, the Spirit of Christ. Christ, the Spirit of Christ, interpenetrating ours, sweetens, purifies, transforms all. This only can eradicate what is wrong, work a chemical change, renovate and regenerate, and rehabilitate the inner man. Willpower does not change men. Time does not change men... **Christ does.**

Like I said before, I have a tendency towards anger. But there are times in my life, when I have been following hard after Jesus, when I've noticed a lack of anger where it would normally be. Five years ago, I spent the summer working for a bookstore at a set of large Christian conferences. Now, in the UK, we do Christian conferences properly. We don't meet at a sports arena or conference venue and all stay in nice hotels. We meet in a massive tent on a farm and all sleep in tents. All 10,000 of us! Well that summer I spent a lot of time seeking God, because for five weeks that was all that life was about. I spent a lot of time worshipping him, studying the Bible and praying. And it changed me. The following incident may seem trivial, but it sticks out in my memory. One day after work, I came back to the campsite to find my taillight had been broken and a dent in the rear of my car. Normally, that would have got me fuming. But I didn't feel angry at all. In fact, my boss said, "I would have been fuming! How come you weren't?"

Or I remember two summers before that, when I went on my first mission trip to Kenya. It involved a lot of serving others. And I've never really wanted to serve people. In fact, I still struggle with it. But I was pursuing Jesus so hard on that trip, relying upon him in a way I never had before that my attitude towards service was totally transformed. I came back from that trip so excited to serve

others (which may be normal for some of you, but it was not for me). So much so that my girlfriend at the time remarked: "You've changed. You've become too selfless. You need to be more selfish."

The only path to authentic righteousness, the only way that right desires and right actions can line up is through Jesus. The Law could not do it. The Law was powerless to do it. But the Law pointed us to Jesus, the one who can do it. We cannot do it. We are powerless to do it. So we must point ourselves to Jesus the one who can do it. Jesus called his disciples saying, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Jesus doesn't say, "Follow me, and make yourself a fisher of men." No! Jesus says, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Jesus is the only one who has the power to transform us; he is the only one who can change our desires. And He will give us a new heart, he will write the Law onto our hearts. When we delight in him, he will change the desires of our hearts. It is only in and through Jesus Christ that we should ever follow our hearts, because it is only in and through Jesus Christ that our hearts can be made right. So follow him, and let him transform you from the inside out.

Sermon Questions

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- **DIG DEEPER**
 1. What do you find attractive about authenticity?
 2. Where do you portray an image of yourself that isn't reality?
 3. Where could you be accused of being self-righteous?
 4. Where do you need Jesus to change your desires?