

# DEEP GOODNESS

SERIES: BLESSED ARE



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Matthew 5:17–20

4th Message

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*Matthew 5:17–20*

Twenty-five years ago, I wasn't happy with who I was. It just so happened that at the same time, I also started as a pastor at PBC. I decided to read through the New Testament with one goal in mind: to find out what the Holy Spirit was doing in my heart. If the Spirit was supposed to change me, I figured that it would be helpful to take a fresh look at what the Scriptures said about the Spirit.

In the course of my reading, I made what was for me a startling discovery, which has helped me personally and has in many ways been a North Star for me as a pastor. I consider it providential that I made this discovery just as I was starting as pastor.

The discovery has much to do with our text today in the Sermon on the Mount, though the Holy Spirit is not mentioned in it. Jesus tells us that our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. He's talking about a different kind of righteousness, what we can call a deep goodness, which the Holy Spirit has much to do with. The kingdom of heaven has drawn near, first with the coming of Christ and second with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

## Fulfilling the story

**Matthew 5:17-18:**

**“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. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.”**

In Jesus' day, “the Law and the Prophets” was a conventional way of referring to what we today call the Old Testament, or what I prefer to call the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus comes to fulfill the biblical story, which in short goes like this:

God created humans to be in relationship with him and thus to be his representatives on earth, but humans

rebelled against him. God then created Israel as the new humanity to bring the rest of humanity back to him, but Israel likewise rebelled against him. Jesus then comes as the faithful Israelite, who represents the representative nation, in order to bring humanity back to God, thus fulfilling the Law and the Prophets.

Jesus is faithful to God, culminating in his crucifixion, which he saw as fulfilling the Scriptures (Matthew 26:54, 56). God then pours out his Holy Spirit on Jesus' followers, thus nurturing their relationship with God and enabling them to be faithful to God. First Jesus fulfills the Scriptures and then the Spirit enables his followers to fulfill the Scriptures.

Called to be the light of the world, Israel became part of the darkness (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6). Jesus comes as the faithful Israelite: “the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, / and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, / on them a light has dawned” (Matthew 4:16). Then Jesus tells his followers in the section of the Sermon on the Mount just before this one: “You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14).

## Love fulfills the Law

His followers fulfill the Scriptures as the Spirit nurtures their relationship with God so that they love others. Jesus says later in the Gospel of Matthew, “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12). Note: loving others is the Law and the Prophets; loving others is the Scriptures. Jesus makes it possible not only for his followers to love their neighbors but also to love their enemies (Matthew 5:44).

The apostle Paul in the book of Romans retells the biblical story and shows that it is now fulfilled not only by Christ and the Spirit but also by followers of Christ who are indwelt by the Spirit. Finally, Paul says that “love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:10).

Jesus assures his followers in the strongest possible terms that “all” will be “accomplished.” Jesus is not simply saying that he came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets,

he is also promising that the Law and the Prophets will be fulfilled.

You will notice, if you stick around this church for a while, that we study and teach from both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. Moreover, when we teach from the Hebrew Scriptures, we will often refer to the New Testament, to show how the story is fulfilled in Christ, the Spirit, and the church. Likewise, when we preach from the New Testament, we will often refer to the Hebrew Scriptures, to show where the story began. The New Testament, including the Sermon on the Mount, only makes sense when understood as the completion of a story.

Jesus fulfills the Scriptures. Now, he turns to a particular part of the Scriptures: the commandments.

## True meaning

### Matthew 5:19:

**“Therefore whoever relaxes 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 does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”**

Doesn't Jesus “relax” the commandments of the Law in the gospels, and don't his apostles do the same in the book of Acts and in the epistles? By the time you get to the end of the New Testament, you realize that biblical commandments regarding circumcision, Sabbath keeping, and food have been reworked, not least in order to throw open the kingdom of heaven to Gentiles. However, Jesus and the apostles aren't relaxing the commandments; they're excavating the reasons for the commandments to bring out their true meaning.

For example, the rite of circumcision was supposed to indicate that the people of Israel belonged to God. It was supposed to be an outward sign of an inward reality: circumcision of the heart (Deuteronomy 10:16). But as the people rebelled against God, circumcision became a dead ritual. Therefore, God promised that he would circumcise the hearts of the people (Deuteronomy 30:6). With the coming of the Holy Spirit, he does just that.

Now that the reality to which the rite pointed has come, the rite becomes unnecessary, especially inasmuch the rite had become a dead ritual. The apostle Paul could therefore say that “circumcision is a matter of the heart,

by the Spirit” (Romans 2:29). He could also say, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6).

Jesus does not relax the biblical commandments, nor does he teach others to do the same. On the contrary, he and his apostles fulfill them: they bring out the true meaning of the commandments, which had been covered up by centuries of nationalism, legalism, and hypocrisy. Bringing out the true meaning of the commandments: that's exactly what Jesus does in the Sermon on the Mount.

As I listen to what Jesus says, I am convicted that when I teach the commandments, I must be doing them. The order is important: “whoever does them and teaches them.” First I do; then I teach. If I'm not doing, or if I'm struggling to do, I must be honest with myself, with God, and with others.

In speaking of those who are called least in the kingdom and those who are called great in the kingdom, Jesus is not saying who's in and who's out, nor is he talking about ultimate rewards. He's talking about quality of discipleship. If you want to follow Jesus, do what he teaches and teach other followers to do the same. In contrast, Jesus says of the scribes and Pharisees, “For they preach, but do not practice” (Matthew 23:3).

And what of the scribes and Pharisees?

## The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees

### Matthew 5:20:

**“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”**

The “righteousness” of the scribes and Pharisees focuses on actions, especially easily doable actions. Later in the Gospel, Jesus rebukes them: “For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness” (Matthew 23:23).

The “righteousness” of the scribes and Pharisees was an outworking of national identity. They focused on certain deeds to bolster their identity, as John the Baptist told the Pharisees and Sadducees: “And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham” (Matthew 3:9).

With this kind of righteousness, one that focuses on actions as an outworking of national identity, the likes of the scribes and Pharisees “will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Indeed, Jesus tells them later in the Gospel, “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in” (Matthew 23:13).

## Better righteousness

The righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees is wrought in the human heart. Later in Matthew, Jesus tells the Pharisees: “How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil” (Matthew 12:34-35). Jesus also told the scribes and Pharisees, “So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matthew 23:28).

If you believe in Jesus, then the Holy Spirit resides in your heart; therefore, your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees and you belong to the kingdom of heaven. If, however, you don’t believe in Jesus, then the Holy Spirit does not reside in your heart; therefore, your righteousness does not exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees and you do not belong to the kingdom of heaven, and you do not have what the New Testament calls eternal life.

Therefore, if you don’t believe, do what both John the Baptist and Jesus, just prior to the Sermon on the Mount, instruct you to do: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2, 4:17). That is, turn from your sinful ways and invite Christ into your life.

The righteousness that Jesus offers us does not begin with actions, much less with actions that bolster national, ethnic, or tribal identity. The righteousness that Jesus offers us is entirely different. It begins in our hearts, in the inner dimensions of our personalities, and works its way out not least in deeds of justice, mercy, and faithfulness—that is, deeds of love. Again: love fulfills the Law. This kind of righteousness is a deep goodness.

## Deeds-based righteousness

A deeds-based “righteousness” has its appeal. The person who aspires to this kind of righteousness can take pride in her actions. He can feel that he belongs and quite possibly distinguish himself as someone who stands out among those who belong. She can, through

her actions, feel good about herself, at least at times. Paul, before coming to Christ, could call himself “a Hebrew of Hebrews” based on his heritage and his deeds (Philippians 3:5).

This kind of righteousness doesn’t need God. In fact, the person who opts for a deeds-based righteousness probably doesn’t want God. He wants to be good enough so that he can order his life as he chooses without God getting in the way. If she’s good enough, she thinks she doesn’t need God.

This kind of righteousness doesn’t get to the heart of the matter—the human heart, that is. It is not sufficient to address our sorrows and longings, from which our actions emerge. It doesn’t go deep enough. It will not heal you. It will not give you hope. On the contrary, it will lead you into self-protection or self-destruction.

John Wesley writes of the days when he invested in a deeds-based righteousness:

*I aimed at the image of God by doing his will, not my own. Yet after continuing some years in this way, I found myself near death. All my holiness brought me no comfort or assurance of acceptance with God. I was very surprised at this. I had been building on sand, never knowing that no other foundation can man lay than that which is laid by God, even Jesus Christ.*

Wesley, embracing a deeds-based righteousness, almost destroyed himself.

## Heart-based righteousness

Thomas Ashbrook, in his book *Mansions of the Heart*, comes to the realization that a deeds-based righteousness is insufficient: “I realized that I wanted much more than to hear God’s voice of instruction and to follow Him. I wanted to really know Him, to experience His love so profoundly that it would push out my own self-hatred and enable me to truly love those around me.”<sup>1</sup>

There is a kind of righteousness, the kind that the scribes and Pharisees adopted, that leaves the heart untouched. It will not, for example, push out self-hatred. It will not enable you to truly love those around you. Ashbrook wanted more: He wanted to experience the love of God so profoundly that it healed him and inspired him to love others.

Is this what you want? Do you want to be healed? Do you want to be inspired to love those around you? This is what Jesus wants for you.

## You're blessed

That's why he preaches the beatitudes. To all those who are in hard places, he says, "You're blessed." What have the first people who heard these words done other than follow Jesus up the mountain? Nothing. You don't do anything to be blessed; you're just blessed!

Nine times Jesus uses the word "blessed." It's as if he's ringing hidden chimes in your heart with a repetition and rhythm and sound unlike anything you've heard before. Open your heart.

In thinking back to the beatitudes, I was reminded of that powerful scene in the movie *Good Will Hunting* featuring Will, a victim of child abuse, played by Matt Damon, and his therapist, Sean, played by Robin Williams. In one session, Sean repeatedly tells Will, regarding the abuse that he suffered, "It's not your fault," while moving closer to Will all the time. In fact, he says "It's not your fault" ten times, and finally Will breaks down and collapses into Sean's arms.

You're blessed! You're blessed! You're blessed! You're blessed! You're blessed! You're blessed! You're blessed! You're blessed! You're blessed! You're blessed!

Open your heart.

Jesus wants you to experience the love of God so profoundly that it heals you and inspires you to love others. That's why he preaches the beatitudes. That's also why he sends his Spirit into your heart.

## Abba! Father!

Twenty-five years ago, as I painstakingly made my way through the New Testament, I eventually came to Galatians 4:6. I'm sure I had read it dozens of times before, but for some reason, probably having something to do with my needy condition, the verse chimed in my heart in a new way. I got up from my desk, pointed at my Bible, and said, "That's what's the Spirit is doing!"

Listen to Paul: "And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" The Aramaic word "Abba" was used in the first century by children and even adults when addressing

their fathers in an intimate, trusting manner. Was there ever a more intimate, trusting prayer than the one that Jesus prayed in Gethsemane? "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36).

The Spirit is in my heart right now crying for an intimate, trusting relationship with my heavenly Father. That's what the Spirit is doing right now, and was doing twenty-five years ago. If you believe in Jesus, he's crying out in your heart too.

Paul again: "For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" (Romans 8:15) The Spirit is crying out in your heart for an intimate, trusting relationship with your heavenly Father, and the Spirit is also inspiring you to cry out cry out for this kind of relationship. It's what you want, isn't it—an intimate, trusting relationship with God? This kind of relationship transforms us from the inside out.

Can you hear the Spirit? Can you hear your heart?

## The Father's answer

Jesus offers us a heart-based righteousness, deep goodness, that begins with relationship with God, transforms us from the inside out, and enables us to love those around us.

The Spirit is cries out in our hearts. Our hearts cry out. How about the Father? Does he answer the cry?

The Father spoke to Jesus, his Son, when he was baptized, and if you believe in Christ, you have been baptized into Christ (Mark 1:11, Galatians 3:26). Therefore, when the Father spoke to his Son, he is now also speaking to you. What does he say?

"You are my beloved son. You are my beloved daughter. With you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11).

## Endnotes

- 1 Thomas Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart* (San Francisco: Jossey-Boss, 2009).