

## 19. Morality, 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.”

**Question:** How does God measure morality?

**Trajectory Verses:** Matthew 5:32, **44**, 48

Jesus makes a simple but stunning statement: to enter God’s kingdom we have to be more righteous than the Pharisees. These religious leaders were meticulous in their religious observances. They fasted twice a week. Do you? They tithed off their garden herbs. Do you? They paused for prayer three times a day. Do you? If not, perhaps we should realistically ask if it’s possible to exceed the righteousness of the most faithful faction of Jesus’ day.

The answer is a resounding “yes”! Not because we can do more personal improvement but because we can improve our personal motives. Jesus is not asking for a broader righteousness but one that is deeper. He does not expect us to go to church more often, tithe a greater percentage, or pray for more minutes. Rather, he is calling us to purer motives. How does this work?

### The Practice of Deeper Righteousness

For the remainder of Matthew 5, Jesus gave six examples of this principle of deeper righteousness. In essence, Jesus says, “The heart of the matter is the heart of the matter.” The Law of Moses said, “Don’t Murder.” Jesus said to eliminate the source of murder which is anger. The Law forbids adultery; Jesus prohibits lust that leads to adultery. The Law says to keep your oath; Jesus says to keep our word. On it goes. The law can only adjudicate justice for *actions*. True righteousness derives from *motives*. Here’s why motives are actually more important than actions. If I keep the law by not killing, I’m still liable to destroy a life by gossip. If I love my neighbors, it’s likely good for me. If I love my enemies, it’s likely because I’m good. The Law can only manage behavior; Jesus wants to transform our character. Moral behavior benefits you; moral motives can transform your community. We typically evaluate our morality by the things we abstain from in private. Jesus evaluates morality by the things we attend to in public.

Notice in the list below that Jesus extends what the law prohibits and restricts each legal permission. By doing so, he makes the heart of the matter the heart of the matter.

Law	Type	Pharisees	Jesus
Murder (21-26)	Prohibition	Restrict to the Act	Extend to thoughts
Adultery (27-30)	Prohibition	Restrict to the Act	Extend to thoughts
Divorce (31-32)	Permission	Extend for nearly any cause	Restrict to adultery
Oaths (33-37)	Prohibition	Restrict to only certain promises	Extend to yes/no

Retaliation (38-42)	Permission	Extend to “just” Causes	Restrict to nothing
Love (43-48)	Prohibition	Restrict to neighbors	Extend to enemies

Let’s look at each in turn to try to understand just how intense is Jesus’ measure of morality.

**1. Murder.** Clearly murder is against the law, not just the Mosaic law but virtually every legislation known to humanity. However, murder is merely a symptom, not the cause. The cause is anger. Anger is impetus for murder. So Jesus demands that we deal with it. If we don’t, we wind up of doing precisely what Jesus predicts: insulting, slandering, accusing, and dividing. While libel may be legal, it is more lethal than murder. Far more families are destroyed because of gossip than homicide. Far more businesses fail through slander than manslaughter. More marriages are divided by isolation than assassination. Jesus is right in addressing the heart of the issue not the manifestation of an action.

**2. Adultery.** Again, nearly every legal system devised prohibits adultery though lust is generally accepted as inevitable. For Jesus this was a nefarious oversight. Dealing with our lust is so essential that he suggested we amputate offending limbs. Obviously this is a metaphor not to be taken literally. Yet that doesn’t mean it should be taken lightly, particularly given the pornography available in everyone’s pocket. Our sex-saturated culture has been fueled by lust. We are experiencing unprecedented levels of sexual dysfunction including millennial males resorting to Viagra to maintain interest in a living breathing female. Females are consuming pornography at alarming rates as a tutorial to attract or retain a lover. The photo-shopped images create unrealistic and unsustainable expectations. Males not only normalize lesbian relationships but become aroused while viewing other males in coitus. Thus the rise of gender confusion, violent sexual deviancy, and the continued objectification of women. Never has Jesus’ call to personal purity been more relevant or critical. This is not an issue of protecting prudish Puritanism. It is an issue of family survival, mental health, human decency, and even societal stability.

**3. Divorce.** This was perfectly legal in Judaism and for almost any reason. Jesus wanted to put a stop to marital triage when he said, “But I say to tell you that everyone anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality for marital unfaithfulness, makes her commit adultery to become an adulteress, and whoever anyone who marries the a divorced woman commits adultery” (Matthew 5:32). This saying has been unfortunately used to cause pain when Jesus intended it to reduce pain, particularly for victims of divorce. Remember, Jesus’ point is not a stronger law but a deeper morality. The Pharisees said that a man could commit divorce with impunity, but not adultery. Jesus is saying, “Now wait a minute, doesn’t divorce cause the same damage as adultery?” A divorced woman is subject to the same devastation as an adulteress—both lose economic security, both are ostracized as sinners, and both are vulnerable to predatory males. When Jesus said “divorce = adultery” it was a

metaphor like when he said, “You are the salt of the earth.” He didn’t mean you were sodium chloride! Clearly, the two transgressions of divorce and adultery are NOT the same thing. Yet they do bring the same fate. In fact, many women, abandoned by a man through divorce, may be largely innocent yet suffer identical effects of an adulterous woman. Those Pharisees who justified their divorce as legal must now explain to Jesus how their actions are any different than forcing their spouse to commit adultery. Furthermore, divorce was a legal means for men to make themselves sexually available to another woman. Therefore, if adultery was illegal so too should divorce be.

**4. Oaths.** Oaths are an attempt to differentiate situations that require honesty and those that do not. In normal situations we can fudge the truth or lie outright. But under oath a magic wand is waved that requires us to be more moral than normal. Jesus points out what nonsense that is. Either we are honest or we are not. Oaths gave a false sense of trustworthiness. Why? Because some oaths were considered binding and others were not. If you didn’t have the legal expertise to tell the difference, then too bad for you. Specifically, binding oaths were those that called on collateral you were obligated to pay. So, according to the text (v. 34-36; see Matt 23:17-18), if you swore by the temple, you could not pay that collateral because you could not “sell” the temple. So it was not a binding oath. If you swore by the altar, it was likewise invalid. But if you swore by gold on the temple or the gift on the altar, you could actually ransom that. Hence, these were binding oaths. This hypocrisy is colossal. You use an oath that suggests you *can* be trusted but do so in a way that invalidates the promise. Here’s a better idea: Say what you mean and mean what you say. Or to quote Jesus, let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no’ (see also James 5:12).

**5. Retaliation.** The Law of Moses limited retaliation to equal measures: “Eye for eye and tooth for tooth” (v. 38, see Exod 21:24). Jesus instructed a far more effective mechanism for retaliation: Nonviolent Resistance. The idea is simple—Don’t just submit to your oppressor but overcommit to them. That way you will expose their true motives and the crowds will see his true colors, causing them to come to your defense. His famous illustration is to turn the other cheek. Yet look more carefully: “But if anyone slaps you on the *right* cheek, turn to him the other also” (v. 39). Since most people are right handed, the mechanics are clear. Someone gives you a backhanded slap on the right cheek. When you expose your left cheek you force them to hit you again only open-handed and with greater force. By this, the watching crowd will see the true aggression and violence motivating their insult. Again, Jesus says, “If anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well” (v. 40). For a first century Jew that meant giving him your outer garment (cloak) in addition to your inner garment (tunic). By giving your aggressor both garments you stand there naked and exposed. Such embarrassment drives home the point that your oppressor’s real motive is to strip you to nothing and leave you exposed. The final illustration is more of the same: “If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles” (v. 41). The Roman Imperial forces had the legal right of

proscription of citizens. They could legally force the locals to carry their bags for a mile. By going two, you show his true intent is not to get support but to enslave you. This is a brilliant strategy proven effective by the likes of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

**6. Love.** Everyone agrees that you should love your neighbor, your family, and your friends. Jesus said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (v. 44). This is, perhaps, his most offensive command. It is not merely counter-intuitive; it is culturally precarious. Remember, Jesus said this in the Middle East where terrorism was endemic. To love your enemy was not to feel good about them but to support them. It might mean harboring a fugitive, feeding a refugee, or protecting an adversary. This takes us back to the seventh beatitude: “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called ‘sons of God’” (v. 9). To be a son of someone meant you acted like them, you followed their vocational track, and you treated people in the same way. In short: “like Father, like son.” So it is hardly surprising that Jesus chases this unprecedented command with this explanation (v. 45): “So that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” God’s blessings of this good earth fall undifferentiated on those who inhabit the planet. Should our behavior be any different if we share our Father’s character? In a final foray to punctuate the point, Jesus admonishes us to “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” This is not a call to moral perfection. Rather, the word “perfect” indicates “mature” or “holistic.” In the current context Jesus is saying we should love as holistically, maturely, and openly as God does if we want to carry out his agenda in our culture. For Jesus, unconditional love is the heart of morality. Just when we are prone to protest how difficult this is, we remember Jesus’ model of prayer for his enemies with his dying breath, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

**Key Points:**

- Jesus is calling us to deeper, not broader righteousness.
- Each of the six illustrations Jesus gives forces us to get to the root of morality which is our motive.
- To love our enemies is not only Jesus’ most offensive statement, and most challenging moral expectation, but the one he devoted his life and death to illustrate most fully.

**Action Step:** Write a note to self, identifying your nearest enemy who you need to love as Jesus does.

**Further Resource:** Bob Goff, *Love Does* (2012).