



January Sermon Series

Practicing Righteousness

Fasting, Giving, and Prayer

Following Jesus is Practicing Righteousness

Matthew 5:1-20 and 6:1-18

January 2, 2022

Main Idea: Following Jesus is practicing righteousness.

Personal Study Guide

READ ENTIRE TEXT: MATTHEW 5:1-20 AND 6:1-18

Matthew 5:1-20

The Sermon on the Mount

5 Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.

The Beatitudes

2 And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

5 "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. **12** Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Salt and Light

13 "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

14 "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. **15** Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. **16** In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Christ Came to Fulfill the Law

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. **18** 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. **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. **20** For I tell you, unless

your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.¹

Matthew 6:1-18

Giving to the Needy

6 “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

² “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

The Lord’s Prayer

⁵ “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁷ “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. ⁹ Pray then like this:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
¹⁰ Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread,
¹² and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
¹³ And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Fasting

¹⁶ “And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.²

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Mt 5:1–20). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Mt 6:1–18). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

Highlight – What stands out?

1. Is there anything surprising to you in this text? Or what ideas do you see here that you have never heard before?
2. What questions do you have about the text?
3. Do you notice any repeated words, phrases, or themes?
4. What do you learn about God?
5. What is one truth you want to expand or study more from this text?

Explain – What does this mean?

1. Look back at Matthew 5:1-6. What is the progression that leads to practicing righteousness?

2. Matthew 6:1 sets the context for our entire January sermon series. Read Matthew 5:16. What are the similarities between these verses? Do they contradict? How so?
3. Look at Matthew 5:20. What do you think Jesus means when he says this? Is this possible? How so?
4. These words about practicing righteousness are not unique to Matthew. Look up John 15:1-10, John 3:5, 1 John 2:28-3:10. Based on these verses how do you get right with God and continue in obedience?

Apply – How does this change me?

1. Look at Matthew 5:6. This is the culmination of all of these things (knowing your sin makes you poor in spirit, being poor in spirit leads to mourning over sin, which leads to be humbled, and then you thirst and hunger to be righteous). Of these steps, which one do you need to take first in order to hunger and thirst for righteousness?
2. Think back to what Jesus is calling us to in these verses. Does it feel impossible to you? How does the work of the Spirit and the truth of the Gospel shape how you live this out?

3. Is there a spiritual discipline or practice you do that you secretly wish others would notice you for? If so, what is it? How does this text transform that internal desire?

Respond – What’s my next step?

4. Imagine an unbeliever (or a child) were to ask you: “How can I practice righteousness?” How would you answer?
5. Write a prayer repenting of your hypocrisy and asking God for more grace to practice true righteousness for the right reasons.

Commentary

*This commentary section is slightly longer, but it sets the context for the entire Sermon on the Mount for the January series.

The King’s Sermon

MATTHEW 5-7

No matter how many times we’ve heard the Sermon on the Mount, there is still more to be gained from this most majestic sermon from the greatest preacher who ever lived. Here in Matthew 5-7—just 111 verses—is the fullest exposition of Jesus recorded in the Gospels. John Stott referred to it as “the nearest thing to a manifesto that [Jesus] ever uttered, for it is his own description of what he

wanted his followers to be and do” (Stott, *Sermon on the Mount*, 5). To put it differently, the Sermon on the Mount teaches us what it means to be a citizen of Christ’s kingdom.

Although few people have heard of him today, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Billy Sunday was a well-known evangelist. Sunday was known for his unique, sometimes bombastic style of preaching. He would act out skits sometimes as he preached. He would use slang-filled language. As a former baseball player, he would sometimes slide across the stage as he was making a point. By the time of his death in 1935, he had preached to millions of people. And he was a forerunner of sorts to the Billy Graham evangelistic crusades and campaigns that were to come in the latter twentieth century.

Billy Sunday was also a vocal critic concerning certain vices that he perceived in the culture in his day. Two of those vices were card playing and dancing. Sunday warned, “I believe that cards and dancing are doing more to damn the spiritual life of the church than the bars.” He also said, “The dancing Christian never was a soul-winner,” and dance is “simply a hugging match set to music.” Now, the twenty-first century Christian laughs at those seemingly antiquated notions. (If only our main worry were card playing!) Yet Billy Sunday thought them significant. He considered them matters of life and death. And it raises the question, “Why?” Why so much worry over things so incidental? Well, it’s simply because in his mind activities like card playing, dancing, and theater were a separation point. There was to be a clear line of demarcation between believers and unbelievers. These were things that marked off the people of God—things that marked out holiness, godliness, and salvation. He had a certain picture of what it looks like to be a believer in Jesus, and anything outside that didn’t fit.

While we may reject Sunday’s picture of what it looks like to be a Christian, the truth is we do the very same thing. We have our own picture of what it looks like to be a Christian—certain behaviors that fit and certain ones that do not, or certain attitudes that we ought to possess to be a Christian in our particular culture. Perhaps that means being of a particular political persuasion, aligning ourselves with certain groups within the Christian subculture, and so on.

For Billy Sunday in his day, and for us in ours, Jesus repaints the picture. Better, Jesus has already painted the picture, and it’s for succeeding generations to make sure their conception of the Christian life matches the one painted on the Galilean hillside long, long ago. And it’s to that portrait we now turn.

Although the Sermon on the Mount certainly merits verse-by-verse consideration, here we’ll take a 30,000-foot view of the sermon, seeking to get at the heart of Jesus’ message. We’ll begin with the setting of the sermon.

The Setting of the Sermon

Literary Context

First of all, we must remember the context of the sermon in the Gospel of Matthew. Both the beginning and end of this Gospel are especially important for this point. Consider: **Matthew begins by calling attention to the sins of God's people.** And we have in mind here that particularly crucial statement in the opening chapter of the Gospel: "She will give birth to a son, and you are to name Him Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins" (Matt 1:21). Very simply, the Gospel of Matthew is about Jesus granting salvation from sin, not our achievement of our own salvation.

Similarly, consider the close of the Gospel. **Matthew ends by calling attention to the death of God's Messiah.** The last eight chapters of the book of Matthew are all consumed with the very last week of Jesus. In other words, Matthew does not end his Gospel at chapter 7, as if the main point were: "This is what Jesus taught. This is how Jesus showed us what it means to be a disciple. This is what it looks like. This is how you ought to behave. This is how you ought to think. These are the attitudes that you are to have. Now go and do it."

No, the cross is absolutely necessary for understanding the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, the cross is predominant when you come to any of the four Gospels. Whether you're reading Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, you can never read these accounts apart from the very end of the story. The cross is always looming; it's always lurking. The cross should always impact what we're reading, even though the crucifixion hasn't yet happened in the narrative. This is especially true for the Sermon on the Mount. The last thing we need to come away with is an imposing and crushing laundry list of things that we must do in order to be accepted by God.

When you read the Sermon on the Mount, you should not walk away thinking, "I must turn the other cheek in order to be accepted by God. I must love my enemies and pray for those who persecute me in order to be accepted by God. I must follow the Golden Rule perfectly in order to be accepted by God." We are not accepted by God because of anything that we do. We are accepted by God completely and totally because of a perfect Savior who has died a bloody death in our place and who has risen again in victory. Yes, we pray for our enemies, we love those who persecute us, and we follow the Golden Rule. But we do these things not in order to earn acceptance before our God, but *because* we have acceptance by God and we want to glorify Him in everything that we do.

Historical Context

In addition to considering how the Sermon on the Mount fits in the Gospel of Matthew, **we must remember the context of the sermon in the history of redemption.** In particular, how does Matthew's Gospel containing the Sermon

on the Mount fit with the story of the Old Testament? Over and over in Matthew's Gospel we see phrases like, "Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet" (1:22). Matthew is deeply concerned to show the continuity between his Gospel and the Old Testament, a continuity that is highlighted in the life of Jesus. And we see that concern in at least a couple of ways here in this text.

First, we see that **Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah**. We've noted this in a couple of places in this Gospel already, and here in the Sermon on the Mount Matthew continues that theme by showing Jesus as the new and better Moses. Consider the following: as a child, Jesus was providentially delivered from a massacre of children in Bethlehem (2:13–18), a deliverance reminiscent of Moses' own rescue as a child in the midst of Pharaoh's mass murder of Hebrew children in Egypt (Exod 2:1–10). The parallels between Jesus and Moses continue in Matthew 5:1: "When He [Jesus] saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain, and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him." Notice that expression, "He went up on the mountain," as this very same wording is used in the Greek Old Testament when Moses went up onto the mountain to receive the law (Exod 19:3). Just as Moses went up on the mountain, Matthew is telling us, so Jesus went up on the mountain, and in the same way that Moses spoke with authority, so now Jesus speaks with authority. These parallels also extend to the very structure of Matthew's Gospel, for just as Moses authored five books—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—so Matthew's Gospel gives us five speeches of Jesus, or five main blocks of teaching material. The message resounds that a new authority is now on the scene, so much so that at the end of the Gospel, Jesus is able to say,

All authority has been given to Me [not Moses] in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I [not Moses] have commanded you. (28:18–20)

Matthew is showing us that Jesus is the One greater than Moses, the One who has come and delivered His people, and who has now given them the Word. Of course, Moses would not chafe at this idea, for he said, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him" (Deut 18:15). Charles Quarles helpfully sums us this idea of Jesus as the new and greater Moses:

Just like Moses, the Great Redeemer (speaking of Jesus) has cried out, "Let My people go." He has removed their shackles. He has killed their harsh taskmaster. He's buried his body in the sand. He has crushed the power of the dark Pharaoh with one plague after another, and He has led His people to freedom across the parted sea. (Quarles, *Sermon on The Mount*, 27)

After seeing that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, we must also see that **His is the long-awaited kingdom**. Again, this point is critical to understanding the Sermon on the Mount—there is indeed a new kingdom, a new people. It was God’s intention all along not just to give commandments to His people, but to create a new people with new hearts, new affections, and new attitudes. This newness is what Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and the rest of the prophets were anticipating. They looked forward to a new exodus—a greater and final deliverance from sin’s penalty and power—for the people of God.

This Old Testament expectation of a people transformed by God’s Spirit is critically important for our application of the Sermon on the Mount. The larger context of redemption is a reminder that we cannot dismiss Jesus’ words because we think the standard too high, as if we can’t truly love from the heart or resist our lusts and temptations. We cannot throw in the towel on praying like Jesus, giving freely of our resources, or fasting in the right spirit. And this means that loving our enemies, perhaps the most difficult of all commands, is within the reach of every Christ-follower by the grace and power of God.

The Subject of the Sermon

5:17–20

Matthew 5:17–20 serves as the interpretive key to the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. Therefore, understanding this particular section of the sermon is critical for understanding the sermon as a whole. Jesus says in verse 17, “Don’t assume that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.” “The Law and the Prophets” is Jesus’ way of referring to the entire Old Testament (7:12; 22:40), and He says that He didn’t come to abolish the Old Testament, but to fulfill it. That word “fulfill” is the same one we noticed earlier, as we’re reminded again that Jesus came to fulfill the intention of the Old Testament, that is, to bring it to its intended completion. And the fulfillment Jesus has in mind here in relation to the Old Testament is not simply external conformity to its commands, but rather a heart alive to God. This is what the law was calling for all along (Deut 30:6).

The Demand for Exceeding Righteousness

Jesus continues in verses 18–20:

For I assure you: Until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or one stroke of a letter will pass from the law until all things are accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commands and teaches people to do so 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,

unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

When in the last phrase of verse 20 Jesus says, “you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,” He is not referring to some elite club for Christians or rewards for the extra-obedient. Instead, this is simply another way Jesus speaks about salvation. **Jesus demands a righteousness exceeding that of the scribes and the Pharisees.** That reality ought to shock us, and it should alert us that unless our righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, we will not enter the kingdom of heaven but will remain forever in the kingdom of darkness. In other words, this righteousness is the difference between heaven and hell.

In light of these truths, we’re left wondering what kind of righteousness the Pharisees had, given that our righteousness must exceed theirs. Although we could look at other passages for help with this question, Matthew 23:25–28 really captures the kind of righteousness that the Pharisees possessed. In verse 25 Jesus says,

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence!

Notice the contrast that Jesus draws between what is on the inside and what is on the outside. The Pharisees were clean on the outside, but they were full of greed and self-indulgence in their hearts. The same reality is presented in verse 26:

Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so the outside of it may also become clean.

Then in verses 27–28 Jesus gives perhaps the clearest and most picturesque illustration of the Pharisees’ righteousness:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and every impurity. In the same way, on the outside you seem righteous to people, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

The righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees was purely an external righteousness. But Jesus says that it’s not enough to be righteous on the outside if you are not also righteous on the inside. What Jesus is demanding is **not more righteous deeds by human effort, but more righteous hearts by divine grace.** He is not saying that you must have a *quantitatively* greater righteousness, something like a righteousness that is numerically greater than the scribes or the Pharisees. To use an academic analogy, it’s not that the Pharisees have scored in the low 90’s on the holiness test, and entrance into

the kingdom of heaven requires a score of 94, 95, or 96. This misses the point altogether. Rather, Jesus is talking about a *qualitatively* different righteousness—a righteousness of a different kind altogether. This is not an outer righteousness to show everyone how good we look, but an inner righteousness that shows how gracious and powerful God is.

Jesus spoke of this inner righteousness with Nicodemus in John 3. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a teacher of Bible and theology according to John 3:10, yet he didn't understand what Jesus meant when He said that someone must be "born again" (John 3:3). Nicodemus was thinking in terms of externals, as in re-entering your mother's womb, but Jesus informed him that a man must be born of water and the Spirit (John 3:4–5). Man must be given a new heart by God, just as the Old Testament prophets foretold (Ezek 36:24–28; Jer 31:31–34). Like the wind, Jesus says, this work of God's Spirit is not something we can bring about. We can only see the effects (John 3:8).

This idea in John 3 of being born again is precisely what Jesus is getting at in Matthew 5:20 when He says that our righteousness must be greater than that of the scribes and the Pharisees. We must have a righteousness that extends beyond externals and legal conformity. And such an exceeding righteousness is only possible by God's gift of a new heart.

The Evidence of Exceeding Righteousness

So how do we know that we have this exceeding righteousness? Or a new heart? Is there instant obedience to every command in Scripture overnight? Of course not. But know this: there will be some evidence. There will be some change in our life if we have been born again. And this is, in some measure, what the remainder of Jesus' sermon is about.

First, **this exceeding righteousness should be evident in our attitudes**. Six different times in Matthew 5:21–48 Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said ... but I tell you ..." The Pharisees had created all kinds of ingenious ways of working around the intentions of God's Word. For example, they found ways to harbor bitterness and hatred toward their neighbor while remaining innocent in their own eyes with regard to murder. They may have lusted after their neighbor's wives, but so long as they didn't commit adultery, they felt themselves to be holy, technically speaking. In general, they felt justified in blurring the edges of the truth. They would swear by this or that object and then back out on their promise, but so long as they didn't swear by the wrong things, then they were somehow people of integrity (see also 23:16–22). But that's merely an external righteousness, not the kind of righteousness Jesus brings about.

Of course, it's all too easy to pile on the Pharisees, as if we don't also struggle with this kind of duplicity. For example, I can maintain hatred toward my wife, bitterness toward my children, and jealousy toward my neighbor, all while technically never killing them or harming in them in any physical way. But self-

justification and good appearances are not what Jesus came to do for us and in us; that is not saving people from their sins. He came to give us a righteousness that works its way all the way down to the heart and then ushers forth in love, purity, and holiness. These are the new attitudes that Jesus is producing in His people by His Spirit.

The question we need to ask is this: “Do we see those new attitudes in our lives?” Is there genuine love, purity, integrity, and holiness? And this is where we desperately need the help of those around us. We need other Christians in our life who can say, “I see the grace of God in you,” or, conversely, “I’m not sure I see the life of Christ evident in your life.” The latter is difficult to hear, but it’s far better to hear that today than on the Last Day.

Second, Jesus says that our exceeding righteousness should be evident in our **desires**. In Matthew 6:1–18 Jesus refers to three different kinds of behavior: giving (vv. 2–3), prayer (vv. 5–14), and fasting (vv. 16–18). Just to be clear, Jesus is not telling His disciples to abandon these things, but to do them in the right way, a way that manifests God-glorifying desires. Jesus’ main concern in speaking of these subjects is stated in verse 1: “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of people, to be seen by them.” So, yes, we give, pray, and fast, but we should not do these things in order to attract attention.

There’s no denying that disciples of Jesus will continue to struggle with wanting man’s approval. At times we desire the applause of men and we seek to win their approval, but there should at least be combat against those sinful desires in a heart changed by God. Our ultimate desire should be for God’s recognition, regardless of what man says. We shouldn’t give in order to impress others, we shouldn’t pray in a way that highlights our spirituality, and we shouldn’t fast so that others are aware of our supposed humility. Rather, new desires are part and parcel of the exceeding righteousness Jesus is bringing about in His people.

Third, in Matthew 6:19–34 Jesus says that we must have new **ambitions**. He gives the following instructions in verses 31–33:

So don’t worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For the idolaters eagerly seek all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you.

Those who have a qualitatively different kind of righteousness, that is, a righteousness that flows from a heart changed by God, should no longer be consumed with the things of this world. Now, this does not mean that if we ever struggle or give in to the pull of the world, that we are not disciples of Jesus. There is an “already-not yet” aspect to the Christian life. We are already saved, but we are not yet in heaven. We are not perfected. We are not glorified. There will always be a struggle in this life. Nevertheless, Jesus’ point is that even though we will still battle these ungodly ambitions, and even fail many times,

there ought to be at least a competing desire in our hearts for the glory of God and for the kingdom of righteousness. On some level, we should be able to pray with sincerity, "Our Father in heaven, Your name be honored as holy. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:9–10).

The fourth evidence of an exceeding righteousness concerns new **relationships**. Jesus warns us in Matthew 7:1, "Do not judge, so that you won't be judged." Now clearly Jesus is not saying here that we never judge, that we never point out sin in our brothers and sisters, or that we never receive correction from others. In fact, He goes on to indicate that's exactly what we ought to be doing (vv. 2–5)!

For with the judgment you use, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye but don't notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," and look, there's a log in your eye? Hypocrite! First take the log out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

Jesus is not telling us to overlook sin in one another. Rather, Jesus is responding to Pharisees who have elevated themselves and demeaned others who didn't live up to their own particular standards. This was the Pharisees' way of life, their program of holiness. And Jesus' response to that is not to tell them to forget about holiness or to stop pointing out sin; rather, His response is to exhort them to consider their own sin before they begin pointing out sin in others. Undoubtedly, we should be willing to encourage one another and point out sinful habits in others, but only after a time of reflection on the ways that sin is present in our own life. And then, even when we do that, all of our correction, all of our admonition, and all of our encouragement should be seasoned with love, grace, and evident humility.

The bottom line is this: There should be something different about the lives of Jesus' disciples. Life in the kingdom will look different from life in the world. This is the exceeding righteousness of which Jesus speaks. So, do we see this difference in our lives? And do we see this difference in our churches?

The Seriousness of the Sermon

Like every good preacher, Jesus puts us on the spot and He calls for us to respond. He impresses on us here at the end of the Sermon on the Mount the seriousness of what He has said. Below we'll look at three different realities we are faced with in this text.

The options are limited

First, Jesus makes clear that the options are limited. There is one road that leads to life, and there is one road that leads to destruction. You see this point in a very familiar passage in Matthew 7:13–14, where Jesus says,

Enter through the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the road is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who go through it. How narrow is the gate and difficult the road that leads to life, and few find it.

Scholars have disagreed about whether it is a road that leads to a gate or a gate that leads to a road, but the bottom line is the same: there are only two ways. Just as Paul tells us in Romans 5:12–21 that there are only two kinds of people (those in Adam and those in Christ), Jesus tells us that there are only two kinds of roads, and everybody on the planet is on one of them. You're either on a road that leads to life, or you are on a broad way, an easy road—the way of the world—which leads to destruction.

The fruit is evident

Next, Jesus says that the fruit is evident. In verses 15–23, He says that one tree bears good fruit and one tree bears bad fruit. Everyone falls into one of those two categories. Either you have repented of your sins and Christ has changed your heart, and you're producing love, joy, peace, and other good fruit (Gal 5:22–23); or you're still trusting in yourself and rejecting Christ. Those in the latter category bring forth the works of the flesh (Gal 5:19–21).

The consequences are eternal

Finally, Jesus says that the consequences are eternal. This is not a temporal reality or a game. Nothing else in our lives is on par with this. In verses 24–27 He says that when the storm hits, one house stands upon the rock and one house crashes upon itself.

We must hear Jesus. When He says that there is a storm coming, He is not talking about what we so often identify as the “storms of life.” Those storms are real and they are painful—storms like cancer, divorce, and losing a loved one—and the Bible certainly addresses them. However, Jesus is referring to a cataclysmic reality, a final and utterly devastating storm of the future judgment of God. It may be tonight or it may be 10,000 years from now. But it will come. And Jesus reminds us that it doesn't matter how we've propped up our house or how we've fixed it up or what other people think of it. Unless that house is founded upon the Rock, its fall will be stunning.

In response to Jesus' teaching, do you see an “exceeding righteousness” to your life? Do you have a new heart? If not, God's judgment now hangs over you. But the good news—the gospel—is that it doesn't have to be that way. The good news is that you can withstand the judgment of God so long as you are

in Christ, who has already been judged (Rom 8:3). Place yourself totally, completely in Him. Don't rest in yourself; rest wholly in the Savior. That is the gospel.³

January Sermon Series

Practicing Righteousness

Fasting, Giving, and Prayer

Group Study Guide

*This lesson is for the Sunday School teacher to use to teach the lesson and facilitate the discussion. It is not intended that you will use every question in this guide during your group time. You will likely only be able to cover 4-5 questions, depending on how discussion goes. This guide is longer than what you will need but provides the freedom and flexibility to pull questions out for discussion that will best serve your group time.

³ Platt, D. (2013). [*Exalting Jesus in Matthew*](#). (D. L. Akin, D. Platt, & T. Merida, Eds.) (Mt 5–7). Nashville, TN: Holman Reference.

Tip: You may want to pull one question from each section for discussion or spend more time on a particular section than another on. It's totally up to your discretion.

Introduction

Icebreaker Question:

What new thing do you want to do this year (can be any habit or skill or goal)?

OR

Is there a spiritual discipline in your life (prayer, scripture reading, memorization, fasting, giving) that you want to grow in this year?

This entire series is on “practicing righteousness,” so if you are struggling to get into a spiritual habit, this series is for you!

READ ENTIRE TEXT: MATTHEW 5:1-20 AND 6:1-18

Highlight – What stands out?

1. What are some repeated words, phrases or ideas in these verses?
2. Make a list of everything Jesus says is part of the blessed life. **(These can be popcorn answers)**
3. Based on Jesus' words in these verses, what is “practicing righteousness”?

Explain – What does this mean?

1. How does the world we live in view the blessed life? How do Jesus' words differ from the world's definition?
2. Look at Matthew 5:20. What do you think Jesus means when he says this? Is this possible? How so?
3. These words about practicing righteousness are not unique to Matthew. Have someone in your group look up these verses: John 15:1-10, John 3:5, 1 John 2:28-3:10. Based on these verses how do you get right with God and continue in obedience?

Apply – How do I live this out?

6. Think back to what Jesus is calling us to in these verses. Does it feel impossible to you? How does the work of the Spirit and the truth of the Gospel shape how you live this out?
7. What is your definition of a blessed life? How is that different than what Jesus is getting at here?

THIS IS A GOOD PLACE FOR THEM TO INSERT AN ILLUSTRATION. PROVIDE SOME QUESTIONS THAT CAN GET THE GROUP LEADER THINKING ABOUT A PERSONAL ILLUSTRATION THAT SERVES THEIR GROUP BEST.

For application, have your group look up these verses. How do these verses speak to what it means to practice righteousness or how practicing righteousness is possible?

- GALATIANS 5:16-25
- JAMES 2:14-26
- PSALM 1

Respond – What’s my next step?

1. Imagine an unbeliever (or a child) were to ask you: “How can I practice righteousness?” How would you answer?
2. Prayer time, confession time, or even a time of rejoicing if the text lends itself to that response.

Additional Resources:

Videos: [Bible Project overview of Matthew 1-13](#) (this sets the context for Matthew 5-7)

Additional Scripture Reading: The Book of James (he draws heavily on principles from Matthew and the Sermon on the mount). You could also watch [this James overview video](#).

Podcast: [This episode is an interview](#) with a Matthew scholar in the Sermon on the Mount. It helps set the context for Matthew 5-7, which is what our January series is set within (Matthew 6:1-18).