

The First Baptist Church, Midland
May 22, 2011
Matthew 5:17-20

Universal and Impossible...
A Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick
Theme: The Call to Be Righteous

The story is told of Mahatma Gandhi, the great national leader of India, and Lord Irwin who served as England's ambassador to the Indian republic. Through their professional acquaintance, the two grew to be good friends. On one occasion when Irwin was visiting with Gandhi, the Englishman asked the statesman: "Mahatma, as man to man, tell me what you consider to be the solution to the problems of your country and mine." Taking a little book from the nearby lamp stand, Gandhi opened it to the fifth chapter of Matthew and replied, "When your country and mine shall get together on the teachings laid down by Christ in this Sermon on the Mount, we shall have solved the problems not only of our countries but those of the whole world." That response came from a Hindu!

The Sermon on the Mount is one of the most highly regarded works in all of literature ó more than that, in all of history. If the Christian code of living were to be briefly summarized, these words in Matthew 5, 6 & 7 would undoubtedly express the message as concisely and eloquently as any other segment of scripture. Yet its demanding simplicity has been the topic of a wide range of debate across the generations.

For example, there is a lot of discussion over why it was written in the first place, and many theories have been floated to explain its meaning and purpose. There are those, for instance, who suggest it was created to be a universal ethic. These words of Jesus were brought together by Matthew, they believe, to be directed to all people in all times. I imagine Gandhi was speaking to Lord Irwin through this perspective. If all people could subscribe to the code of conduct outlined by Jesus, the world would be a better place.

Then there are those who believe the Sermon On the Mount is an impossible ethic. The mode for living described by Jesus is simply too idealistic. Let's face it! It's impossible to always avoid being angry with your brother. It's impossible to love your enemy and constantly pray for those who are persecuting you. It's impossible to live a life without lust. It's impossible to avoid all anxiety. It's impossible to go from day to day without passing judgment somewhere along the way. But, the people with this perspective say, when we grow to the point of realizing that we cannot possibly live the life described in our Lord's sermon by ourselves, we turn to and place our dependence upon Him. Hence, the purpose of this sermon is to make people realize their radical reliance upon God because of the impossible nature our our Lord's expectations.

Or, consider a third way of looking at this sermon. Some have referred to it as the interim ethic. The person most widely recognized for holding this point of view is Albert Schweitzer. He believed that the words of Jesus were rooted in what he referred to as "the terrible earnestness of the hour." He believed the end of the world was at hand. It was his thought that there was very little time and humankind was under a compulsion to do all it could

to make itself right with God. In short, this sermon was a last call to repentance before it was too late. Yes, it was very demanding and probably unrealistic. But, these folks believed, it was never meant to be handed down from generation to generation because this human enterprise was going to be coming to an abrupt end in their immediate future. It's a little like the Paul had when writing his New Testament letters.

So where do you fall when you think of these alternative explanations for the Sermon on the Mount? Do you embrace the Universal Ethic, the Impossible Ethic or the Interim Ethic? Personally, I'm inclined to identify most intimately with the first while taking a bit of the truth from the second and disregarding the third. By the way, you may have heard that the founders of a Christian radio station started in 1958 by Harold Camping believe that Judgment Day was just yesterday. That's right, it was all supposed to come to an end yesterday. I wonder if they were disappointed when they woke up this morning and discovered that we're still here?

Okay, putting this teasing aside, I do believe the Sermon on the Mount is meant to be a lifestyle toward which all people in all times must strive. It is not a word of limited duration or application. It is universal. Yet I'm also realistic enough to know we can't possibly adhere strictly to all of these tenets on our own. We are dependent upon God to give us the strength and character to follow these rules for living. Are you with me on this?

If you are (or even if you aren't ☺), let's move along in our consideration of these three chapters in Matthew's gospel. Simply stated, these lessons are brought together to help the person who has discovered his or her faith in Jesus to live the Christlike life. Put another way, chapters 5-7 of Matthew's gospel are directions enabling us to "live rightly" our daily journey of faith. "So," you're sitting there thinking to yourself, "that's pretty simplistic." And you're right. But it's also a very significant statement in light of the new Testament literature. Here's why.

Within the early church, there were two kinds of preaching: proclamation and teaching. In his book, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments*, C.H. Dodd draws the very clear distinction. The first, proclamation (taken from the Greek kerygma), is missionary preaching. This is the message that is grounded in the crucified and risen Lord and His return. These are the words that lead one to make a confession of faith. This is the invocation that touches the human spirit and through the power of God, brings about change. The kerygma is John saying in his gospel that "**God so loved the world that He gave his only Son that whoever believes in him would not perish but have eternal life.**" (John 3:16) It is Paul writing to the Corinthians to say, "**For I delivered to you as of first importance what I in turn had received...**" He then described the salvation process and ended by saying, "**But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain.**" (I Corinthians 15:3-10) You see, the kerygma is the word designed to touch and change the human heart and bring a person to Christ.

On the other hand, once the confession of faith has been made, it is necessary to provide instruction for daily living. Now that I have accepted Christ and his grace has entered my life, what difference will it make? Or maybe it's better to ask, *what difference should I make?*

This second kind of New Testament and early church preaching is meant to answer this question. It is not proclamation but rather it is simple teaching (taken from the Greek didache).

Now that we have Christ in our heart, these words are designed to help us ðlive rightð. The Sermon On the Mount is Christian teaching at its finest.

In these three chapters, Matthew has drawn together the sayings of Jesus as they span the three years of his public ministry. In a sense, it is the course outline for one of the first Christian church membership classes. These teachings were originally designed to be used by the baptism candidates either immediately before or after their baptism into the church. While they speak to many aspects of human experience and responsibility, the teachings were held together by a common theme: *righteousness*. *This we heard just a few minutes ago in our reading...* **“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”**

Now with this foundation in place, let’s focus upon this theme because after these introductory verses the words of Jesus address this concept of righteous living through the rest of the sermon and that happens on three levels.

First, Jesus speaks about righteousness in relation to the scribes. We know these guys were the theologians of the day. They had a formal education in the field of theology and their teaching often conflicted with the insights from Jesus. So through Matthew’s fifth chapter (verses 21-48) the debate is aired and the conclusions are clear. **“You have heard that it was said...”** Jesus declared ð **“but I say to you...”** This formula was used six times by Jesus to differentiate between his beliefs and the perspectives of the scribes. In the process, six important lessons related to ðliving rightð ranging from anger to lust to divorce to swearing to generosity and to love were highlighted. And in the process, our Lord was establishing his code of righteousness.

In the next major segment, verses 1-18 of the sixth chapter, the Great Teacher goes on to explode the viewpoint of the Pharisees related to righteous living. Now he’s talking to the pietistic laymen from every part of town: the traders, craftsmen, and professional people. Jesus was concerned because these folks saw righteousness as the art of bringing glory upon themselves. We’re talking here of giving alms to the poor in order to gain personal recognition for overwhelming generosity. We’re talking about praying out loud not to be in conversation with God, but rather to look good and to draw the attention of people all around. We’re talking about fasting in order to gain the respect of peers rather than fasting as an act of grateful obedience before God. In other words, Jesus was seeking to correct the inaccurate perception of what it meant to live right that had become the predominant point of view in his day.

Now this brings us to the highlight of the sermon (no, not this sermon ð I mean the one Jesus preached ð) Having addressed the scribes and Pharisees, he now addresses a new way to live right for all who were choosing to follow his way. In other words, this is where he is specifically talking to you and me and his message implores us to become radically dependent upon God. *Don’t worry about your treasures on earth, Jesus said, instead be concerned about your treasures in heaven... Don’t be anxious about today. Rather place your trust fully in God and allow him to carry the burden of your anxiety... Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness... Do not judge other people. Instead worry about your own judgment in the eyes of God... If you have a need, ask God. Seek and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to*

you... Beware of false prophets. Instead listen for the word of God...build your house of faith upon a firm foundation and the rains will fall, and the floods will come, and the winds will blow but your home will be strong and it will not be destroyed. This is the way of righteousness.

When you come right down to it, Gandhi was right. This sermon does hold the key to solving the problems of our world. If only we could find a way to bring these solutions to life in the way we treat one another as human beings. Imagine if al-Qaeda and the Taliban and the democracies of the world could fashion a way to live together embracing these universal yet seemingly impossible principles! imagine if the faithful people of the world expressing their belief in and their love for God in their unique ways could come together around these universal yet seemingly impossible principles! imagine what our world would be like.

This is the legacy we want to leave to new and future generations, isn't it? This is what the righteousness of God is all about.

Pie in the sky? Maybe!
Universal? Definitely!
Impossible? Not really!

The time has come to live rightly in the eyes of God. But we better get with it before it's too late. And perhaps the best thing we can do is start right where we live. For if we can begin to bring these principles to life in our own schools and neighborhoods and families and workplaces and halls of government, maybe our leaders can catch the vision and one day more faithfully seek to reconcile all people across the lines of religion and politics and economics and all the other realities that distort our ability to love one another. Indeed, maybe the experience of that young man in Korea might lead the way for us all!

A missionary met him one day and in the process of creating a new friendship he shared the story of Jesus. The young man quickly responded and began to study the gospels in his hunger to better understand the significance of his newfound faith.

You can imagine how surprised the missionary was when meeting with this young man shortly after his conversion. Believe it or not, he could recite the entire Sermon on the Mount. "How can this be?" the astonished servant of God wanted to know. "You've been a Christian only a few months."

Listen to the young man's response. He said: "At first I tried to commit it (referring to the Sermon on the Mount) to memory verse by verse because you told me it was so very important. But it wouldn't stick. I couldn't remember all the words. So I tried a new plan. I took just one little bit of the sermon every day and said, 'Tomorrow I am going to try that on my neighbor. And it worked!'"

What a revolutionary thought! bringing this teaching about living right to life bit by bit by trying it on our neighbors. What do you think? Here's what I think! *this message from Jesus... it will really preach!*

Amen and AMEN!