

Matthew 5:17-6:18 | “Three Common, Yet Wrong Routes”

Preached on May 28, 2023 by Pastor Matt Brown

You can turn in your Bibles to Matthew 5:17.

We will be covering a larger portion this morning, but all of it is related to righteousness. *[pause]*

Jesus has been talking to his disciples about different qualities that they are to show.

And we saw many of those qualities in the Beatitudes, and then we saw last week how we are to relate to the world as salt and light.

Now Jesus will continue talking about His disciples, and will explain the righteousness that His disciples ought to be displaying. *[pause]*

This has all been important for our study on discipleship.

We must know who we are, and how we ought to live before we can accomplish our mission better.

So today we will learn about the true, deep righteousness that Jesus has called us to live out. *[pauseeee]*

Have you ever taken a wrong route?

Once when I was on a church canoeing and camping trip in Canada, I took a wrong turn and got lost.

What happened was that I was carrying a canoe on my back and I was the first one down the path. *[pause]*

Typically, you follow one long path and you end up where you're supposed to be.

But on this particular path, there was a fork in the road. *[pause]*

I looked up and saw two divergent paths - one was the right way, and the other was wrong.

I quickly looked at both of them, and without thinking further, (for I was merely focused on getting to the end), I chose the one that looked more common, and more worn.

But it was a bad mistake.

I had chosen the wrong path, and continued to walk for a long time. *[pause]*

After a while, I was wondering if I had chosen the wrong route, for no one was in sight and no end was near.

So eventually I turned around and the rest of the group figured out my mistake, and we were reunited. *[pause]*

But what happened to me in Canada can happen to any of us when it comes to how we live.

We can so easily choose a common, yet wrong route. *[pauseeee]*

Here's the temptation with wrong routes: wrong routes are often common routes.

They look good because they are well-worn paths that are commonly taken by others.

We think, "Well it must be the right path because look at how commonly it's walked on."

But that's our mistake, we ought not to look at what's common, we must look at what's right. *[pause]*

In Canada, I should have slowed down, and looked closer and deeper into what was the right path, instead of just assuming which one was right.

So also, we must slow down and look closer at what paths of righteousness we must take.

We don't pick which paths to take, but we must let him lead us in paths of righteousness.¹ *[pauseeee]*

In how Jesus speaks, you can tell that He is going after certain incorrect thoughts and mindsets about righteousness.

And He shows the correct way to think and live, and so by doing this, He shows us that there is a true, right way and there are various wrong routes that must be discarded. *[pause]*

So that's why I have framed the outline for this morning the way that I have.

We will see three common, yet wrong routes, and the first one is...

I. Independent Christianity

I have young children, and young children go through a certain stage of trying to be independent even though in many ways, they aren't at the place to be independent yet. *[pause]*

You offer to put their shoes on for them, but they say, "No, I do it!"

And then they struggle and struggle until eventually you have to put their shoes on them anyway. *[pause]*

Just this past week, my 2 year old daughter needed a spoon for lunch.

¹ A reference to Psalm 23:3.

She went to get it, but because I was standing right there, I grabbed a spoon for her and gave it to her.

I thought I was being kind by getting her spoon for her, since I was standing right by the spoons.

But, oh no, she did not like that *she* was not the one who actually got the spoon out, so she put the spoon back, and then got it right back out.

She wanted to be independent. *[pause]*

While it's a good thing for children to grow up and eventually be able to do things on their own, we tend to carry this independent mindset over to Christianity, which isn't good. *[pause]*

You see, some Christians want a Christianity that is *independent from righteousness*.

They claim, "We are free!"

Or, "God doesn't care how we live, for He's a God of grace!" *[pause]*

There tends to sometimes be a lack of a desire to pursue holiness, but to just revel in how far they can take things. *[pause]*

Instead of thinking, "I want to live how Christ has told me," it becomes more so about, "How far can I go and not sin?" *[pause]*

Now in many ways this tendency is a reaction to the legalistic upbringing that they had, yet they have gone too far. *[pause]*

Does God care about how we live? Of course!

Look at what Jesus says, starting in verse 17. *[READ 5:17-20]*

Jesus cares about the commandments, and desires people to do them.

He cares about people living righteously, even calling for righteousness that exceeds the scribes and Pharisees. *[pause]*

Skim down through the rest of chapter 5, and you see Jesus teaching about various subjects like anger, lust, divorce, oaths, etc.

Even going into the first half of chapter 6, you see Jesus talking about giving, prayer, and fasting. *[pause]*

In each one, we see that Jesus shows us the correct way to live in regards to each of those subjects.

He cares about righteousness!

He cares about how we live!

He never says to just shake off the shackles of living a holy life, but instead, He lifts up living righteously as something needed and important. *[pause]*

Now it's critical to know that Jesus doesn't teach works righteousness, whereby we gain our standing with God because of our righteousness.

Rather, it is only because of Christ's righteousness that we can stand justified in God's sight. *[pause]*

But this doesn't mean that we just live how we want now, but instead, we are to live out righteousness in our lives.

Our righteous life doesn't gain our standing with God, but our righteous life flows out of a genuine faith in Christ. *[pauseeee]*

So is a Christian free and independent from righteousness?

Certainly not, for even Jesus says that He didn't come to abolish the Law or the Prophets.

He doesn't discard the Law.

Jesus doesn't say, "Live how you want guys!" but instead, "Live how I tell you." *[pauseeeee]*

Jesus cares about righteousness.

So do our lives look more in line with the righteousness that He called us to live, or do we look more like the world around us?

As Jesus says in verse 48, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

We are to imitate our holy God, as we seek to live out holy lives empowered by His Spirit. *[pauseeeee]*

Another independence that some Christians try to strive after is an *independence from the Old Testament*.

In fact, a well-known, popular preacher said a couple years ago that we should "unhitch" the Old Testament from our faith. *[pause]*

But is that the view of Jesus?

Look at what He says in 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." *[pause]*

Apparently, some people may have been thinking that Jesus was disregarding the Old Testament, and bringing something completely new.

But Jesus makes it clear that that's not the case.

He cares about the Old Testament, so much so that he says that if anyone who...

“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.” [pause]

He's not throwing off the Old Testament and bringing something completely new.

Rather, He has come to “fulfill” it. [pause]

The Old Testament was pointing towards Christ and the new age that He would initiate.

He fulfilled the Law and Prophets by living them out perfectly and fulfilling what they said in His life.

But He also fulfills it by showing the true intention of the Law. [pause]

He goes on to show us the deepest and fullest meaning of the Law.

This is why He goes on to talk about murder, adultery, and things like that and shows how they actually point to deeper truths than just the base understanding. [pauseeee]

Jesus had a very high view of the Old Testament Scriptures.

Yet it's common nowadays for some people to look down on the Old Testament. [pause]

Something is taught in the Old Testament, but Jesus doesn't mention it, and they say things like, “Well Jesus never said anything about it.”

But all of the Bible is inspired, all of the Bible is God's Word, all of the Bible is important.

Yes, some of it is fulfilled in Christ, but that doesn't mean it's discarded as unimportant. [pauseeee]

How do you view the Old Testament?

As old and outdated, or as God's very Word?

Much of it was fulfilled in Christ, for it pointed to Christ and His work, yet “not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.” [pauseeee]

Another manifestation of independent Christianity is a Christianity *independent of Christ's authority*.

Some people want the blessings of Christ, but not the authority of Christ.

They want eternal life and forgiveness, but not the hard sayings and commands of their Savior.
[pause]

This is seen especially when Jesus talks about Hell, when He talks about carrying our cross, and things like that.

They want a version of Jesus made in their own image, instead of the Jesus of the Bible. [pause]

They do not submit and bow the knee to King Jesus, but only use Him as a Giver of blessings alone.

Yet you can't walk away from our passage without seeing that Jesus is truly our authoritative Teacher. [pause]

The way He talks is as one with authority.

He constantly says, "Truly," emphasizing the truth and veracity of what He says.

But notice how when talking about murder, adultery, and the other various topics, what does he state?...

He says, "You have heard that it was said...But I say to you." [pause]

He is spotlighting His own Word as the truth in contrast to prior understandings of the Law.
[pause]

Look over at chapter 6...

Verse 2, "When you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you."

Verse 5, "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites."

He goes on like this even more.

He is speaking as an authoritative Teacher showing us: "don't do that, but do this." [pause]

He is showing us throughout these teachings that what He says goes.

He is speaking like God, for He is God. [pauseeee]

Christianity is never and can never be independent from Christ's authority.

He is Lord, He is our Master, and we follow Him.

That means that we accept and live out the easier-to-do commands, but we also submit to and obey the hardest commands to follow.

Whatever He says goes. [pauseeee]

You may say that you don't live out an independent Christianity trying to live independent from Christ's authority, yet I wonder if your actions would say otherwise. *[pause]*

When you read a hard saying of Jesus, what's your response?

Excuse it away? Neglect it?

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you - do you listen to that command?

*Forgive someone seventy times seven - how about that one?*²

The real question is whether we actually live in ways that submit to Christ's authoritative teaching. *[pauseeee]*

Is your time submitted to Him or is your time under your sovereign authority?

Do you serve others in the church?

That's not optional - just read all the 'one another' passages in the Bible. [pauseeee]

In our world, the push to be independent is strong.

Will you be influenced to go the wrong route of independent Christianity, or will you submit to God's righteousness, God's Word, and Christ's authoritative teaching? [pauseeee]

So we saw that one wrong route is independent Christianity, but we also see another one that I've called...

II. Checklist Christianity

Are you a checklist person? *[pause]*

For me, I should probably be more of a checklist person than I am when it comes to daily tasks. [pause]

In seminary, I got overwhelmed by the many tasks that I had to do and I was talking to a friend one time about this.

He mentioned that if you make a checklist of everything that you need to do, it actually helps you because now it's down on paper and you don't feel as overwhelmed thinking about it all.

You can just slowly chip away at the checklist. *[pause]*

I tried this checklist trick, and it worked! [pause]

Because everything I had to do was down on paper, I didn't feel the need to keep thinking and rethinking about all that I had to do.

² See Matthew 18:21-22.

And it helped me see that I was making progress. *[pause]*

But while checklists are good and helpful for your daily tasks, they are not so good when it comes to your faith. *[pause]*

Yes, we like to see all that we have to do and see it checked off, but that can't be the way that we relate to God.

We can't put a checkmark next to our righteous deeds, and say, "OK, I'm good with God now."

Yet that's how many of us treat our faith, we are checklist Christians. *[pause]*

That's how the scribes and Pharisees treated their faith.

They looked at the list of commands, even creating their own additional lists, and would check them off the list and think, "Wow, look at me. I'm so righteous."

"I didn't murder anyone or commit adultery, so I'm good with God."

But Jesus shows them that this checklist religion is not good. *[pause]*

Checklist Christianity is shallow Christianity.

It's hollow, external religiosity that is only concerned with the bare minimum actions, and not the heart. *[pause]*

The scribes and Pharisees thought they were godly people, but Jesus dismantles their self-righteousness right in front of them. *[pause]*

In a way, he takes a shot at the scribes and Pharisees' righteousness in verse 20.

Listen to what He says, "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." *[pause]*

What does that imply?

The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees isn't enough for them to enter the kingdom of heaven.

They are more righteous in their own eyes than they actually are.

And the reason is because their righteousness was only external and puddle deep. *[pauseeeee]*

True righteousness that God desires is deeper than you think. *[pause]*

You see, righteousness that exceeds the scribes and Pharisees was a righteousness that came out of the heart.

So our only hope for this kind of righteousness is the righteousness that comes to us through faith in Jesus Christ.³

We trust His work, and His righteousness is credited to our account. *[pause]*

But that's not all, for we receive the Spirit, who empowers us to obey the Lord and live out this righteousness from the heart.⁴ *[pause]*

The Pharisees didn't have that kind of righteousness, but instead, it was a "checklist righteousness".

They thought that they were good with God as long as they didn't murder anyone or commit adultery, but Jesus shows them that true righteousness is deeper. *[pause]*

Listen to verses 21-23. *[READ 5:21-23]*

Now listen to verses 27-28. *[READ 5:27-28]*

Jesus is deepening the standard to show that true righteousness isn't just about doing the bare minimum, but it's about the heart.

You may not have murdered anyone, yet if in your heart you are angry with that person, then you are still guilty.

You may not have slept with anyone, yet if you lust after that person, you are committing adultery in your heart. *[pauseeee]*

Sadly, the truth is that we can easily become like the scribes and Pharisees.

We easily become checklist Christians, who only focus on the outward actions, instead of the heart.

We begrudgingly help someone out, and yet pat ourselves on the back because, you know, look at how we helped them!

We reluctantly give to God, and yet we check 'giving' off our list because we still put money in the offering plate.

We do our devotions out of mere duty, and yet consider ourselves very spiritual for doing so.

That's checklist Christianity! *[pause]*

We think we are good with God just so long as we can check it off the list, yet our hearts and motives are not in the right place. *[pause]*

³ See Romans 3:22.

⁴ See Ezekiel 36:26-27.

Instead of just trying to get by, just to say that we did what was right - out of our hearts, we should desire to do what's right.

We shouldn't look for ways to divorce our spouses, but strive to keep our marriage bonds.

We shouldn't try to get out of telling the truth by swearing oaths by certain things, but we should just be truthful, reliable people.

We shouldn't be people who retaliate, but who sacrificially give to those who oppose us out of our hearts.

And we should be people who reflect God, who shows love to even the ungodly by giving them sun and rain. *[pause]*

I think each of us are probably guilty of some checklist Christianity in our lives.

What about you?

Is doing the whole church thing only something to check off your list so that you feel better about yourself?

Are you driven by duty or fear, or does following Christ and doing what He commands come out of your heart?

Let's confess our sin, rest in the forgiveness and righteousness of Jesus, and ask God to help us to obey out of our hearts. *[pauseeee]*

There's a third common, yet wrong route that we go down when it comes to righteousness, and it's...

III. Performance Christianity

As people, we like everything to look good. *[pause]*

We love homes that are clean, decorated, and attractive.

We like to dress up and look put together.

We love going to performances like a show or a play, where everything is buttoned up and entertaining.

We get to sit back and enjoy the show, so they say.

Everything is timed perfectly, and not a mistake is made in sight. *[pause]*

This kind of thing even flows into our thinking when it comes to church.

We like to look put together and well dressed as we come into church.

We like to sit back and enjoy the service, as others run the service, making sure that everything is timed to perfection. *[pause]*

In some churches, it's like a show.

The lights dim at just the right moment, the music sounds like it's from a professional band, the pastor's sermon sounds like a TED Talk, and no mistakes are made. *[pauseeee]*

Now while wanting certain things to look nice isn't always bad, this performance and show mentality is very bad when it comes to our righteousness. *[pause]*

You see, we can easily move into performance Christianity when it comes to our righteousness.

Our lives can turn into shows, into performances in front of others that look so good, and are all buttoned up.

Our lives can turn into something akin to a perfectly decorated home, or like a person dressed up to please.

But Jesus goes straight at performance Christianity and tears down its facade to show its ugliness underneath. *[pauseeee]*

Turn over to Matthew 6, verse 1, "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." *[pause]*

This is His main point, and then He will give several examples of how we could do this. *[pause]*

He talks about how we shouldn't give to the needy and make it this big deal so that others will praise us, but we should give in secret.

We shouldn't pray in public places simply to be seen as spiritual, but pray in a room alone, knowing that God sees it.

And when we fast, we shouldn't make a point to highlight our fasting, but make a point to hide our fasting, so as not to bring attention to ourselves. *[pause]*

In each case, Jesus is attacking performance Christianity that does right things in order to look good to others. *[pauseee]*

You see, Jesus calls us to not *just* do the right things.

Many of us think this way: "Well, as long as I did the right thing, that's all that matters, right?"

No, it's not right.

Christ cares about our hearts!

He wants us to do the right things *for the right reasons*. [pause]

True, genuine righteousness is not a performance.

No, no, for performance Christianity is fake Christianity.

You may put on a good show, acting as though you are godly, and many people may think you are godly, but you are not. [pause]

Jesus is showing us that you can actually labor for righteousness, but not really be that righteous at all. [pause]

They may think they are going to get a big reward for all the giving, praying, and fasting they did, but they have already received their reward: human praise.

But those who give, pray, and fast in secret will receive rewards from God the Father. [pause]

Jesus doesn't only care about our actions, but He cares about our hearts, which should lead to genuine godly actions.

He wants a genuine relationship with the Lord that desires to do what's right, and not to do what's right to get noticed. [pauseeee]

We, as people, are often duped by what people do, but God is not.

We look at millionaires who give tons of money to charity, and we think, "Wow, they must really be a good man," and yet do we ever think, "Did they do it for the right reason?" [pause]

This is because in many ways we can't see the heart.

We can't see if it was genuine, and we can't perceive the motives all the time, but God does.

He knows exactly what your motives are when you do something, so we must remember that we can't trick God.

He sees through our performance, through our facade, through our outward righteousness, and sees our heart, and will reward us accordingly. [pauseeee]

This is so challenging because it's so easy to start doing things for the wrong reasons.

We may even start out innocently enough, and then once we see the praise that we get from others, we start doing it more and more to get *more* praise. [pauseeee]

So when you give, do you give in such a way so that others see that you are giving?

When you pray in public, do you pray to sound spiritual, or do you pray from your heart? [pause]

Do you come to church because you genuinely want to be here, or so that you can be seen as a godly person who goes to church?

Do you serve so that others see that you serve, or do you serve because you really want to step up and help others? *[pauseeee]*

God cares about and rewards us according to our “why”.

Not just do we do things, but *why* do we do certain things?

So we must continually reflect upon our real reasons for doing good things. *[pause]*

Don’t just think, “Well at least I’m doing it.”

No, for remember that Jesus said not to do these things to be seen, but to do them from a genuine heart desire to obey the Lord.

So confess your sin where needed, rest in the forgiveness and righteousness of Christ, and ask God to help you do things for the right reasons. *[pauseeeee]*

Independent Christianity, checklist Christianity, and performance Christianity - three common, yet wrong routes when it comes to righteousness.

And each wrong route keeps pointing us back to this truth...

Christ wants more than external obedience, He wants obedience from the heart.

I don’t know your heart.

I don’t know *why* you do certain things, or *why* you may or may not step up and do other things.

I can’t stand here and say that I do, but God does.

And so this is a time to slow down and do a heart-check.

So get out your stethoscope and ask God to reveal your heart. *[pause]*

Have you been trying to live life independently from Christ’s authoritative Word, and not submitting every area of your life to Him?

Have you been just trying to check some religious things off of a list to feel good with God?

Have you done some good things, but only so that you will be seen by others? *[pause]*

Ask God to change you from the inside out.

Ask Him to empower you to live rightly from the heart. *[pause]*

Only He can bring the change needed in your life, for He has to impact your heart with His grace first.

We each have to be brought to our knees admitting our prideful self-righteousness, and we must once again remember that only Christ's righteousness gains our standing with God. *[pause]*

As the saying goes: Jesus lived the life that we couldn't live, and died the death that we deserved.

Being impacted by that truth shouldn't cause us to be independent, check off some lists, or perform, but to respond with genuine hearts of desiring to live rightly in response to His grace.