

# Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

## DYING TO BE PERFECT

Matthew 5:21-37

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## Analysis by Chris Repp

[20For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.]

21“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ 22But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. 23So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 25Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

27“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ 28But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30And if your right hand

causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell. 31"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 32But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

33"Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' 34But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

[48Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.]

*Note: I have chosen to add v. 20 onto the front of this pericope for context, because I don't think we can understand what Jesus is talking about without it. This entire pericope is showing us what "righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees" looks like. And v. 48, tagged onto the end, helps us see where Jesus is going with this.*

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Good-Enough Righteousness**

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : Murder, Adultery, Falsehood

"Well, this stuff isn't really a diagnosis for good, upright, church-going folks like me. But God knows it's the problem with society and the world at large. Drug cartels slaughtering each

other and innocent bystanders along the Mexican border, gangs in the inner city, terrorists blowing up market places in the Middle East, a mentally-imbalanced young man shooting a nine-year-old girl and a congresswoman for goodness sake! And speaking of politicians, I'm sure this unfortunate (and attractive) congresswoman was one of the good ones, but you know the rest of those guys in Washington are a bunch of crooks and liars. They promise one thing just to get elected and then turn around and do the opposite. And you know all those famous people are running around having extramarital sex. I read about it every time I go through the line at the supermarket. You'd think they'd never heard of the Ten Commandments."

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Anger, Lust, Deceit***

"Well, sure, I get angry from time to time. Who doesn't? My boss is kind of a micro-manager and that can be irritating. And then there's that tree-hugging, socialist hippie that I work with, and that right-wing, nut-job fascist who lives across the street. And really, how can you drive in this town and not find yourself shouting the "f" word (fool!) from time to time? Have you seen how some of these idiots drive?

"Do I look at other women (men) on occasion? It happens. Swimsuit edition? Celebrity sex tape? Maybe. But I'm faithful to my wife (husband). Look, but don't touch, that's my motto. That convention in Vegas? We didn't actually... you know. It wasn't really...

"Look, I'm an honest person. When I make a promise, when I give you my word, it's as good as gold. Fudging on your taxes doesn't count. Neither does that "sick day" I took last month. And that dinner on my expense account? It was technically a business meeting."

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Dismissed (Offering Rejected)***

"Enough with the uncomfortable questions. I just want to come here, to church, to reconnect with God. It's a refuge from the rat race, this place. I feel comfortable here with these people. I can collect my thoughts, be reassured of God's love, and be able to face the week ahead. At least I got out of bed today, unlike most people I know. I'm here. My butt's in the pew. That's gotta count for something.

"What do you mean, 'not good enough'? Who are you calling a hypocrite? I'm a good person. I play by the rules. No, I'm not perfect. Nobody's perfect! But be reasonable. Why are you picking on me, anyway? There are so many worse people. What? Go? You want me to leave? I have to be reconciled first? With those jerks? What did you say?: Before I can come here and worship my God? You can't be serious."

## **PROGNOSIS: Exceeding Righteousness**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Reconciled (Offering Accepted)***

"You are serious. Dead serious. Yes, I see. There is somebody who is perfect. It's you, isn't it? Hanging there on that cross, dying for the sin of the world. For my sin. For the sin of all those people I can't stand. The perfect one dying for the imperfect ones, making peace between us and God. That is so not right. So not how we would have done it. But this is what you meant, isn't it? This is the righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, righteousness that goes so far beyond what is required as to be unthinkable.

"What do you mean, 'it's ours'? You're giving it to us? Your righteousness for ours? No, we couldn't possibly... Oh, that's the point, isn't it? It's because we couldn't possibly that you have to give it to us. Well, this is awkward."

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Good Will, Devotion, Honesty***

“Okay. All that stuff I said before? All that finger-pointing? All those excuses? All that self-justification? Let’s forget about all that. I don’t really want to live like that. It’s just a vicious circle that gets us nowhere. Being a better jerk than others still leaves me being a jerk. I don’t want to be a jerk. No more excuses. No more finger-pointing. I’ll take your call and your promises instead. Your righteousness for our unrighteousness. Here is bread and wine, your body and blood, for us. Make us become what we receive.”

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Life, Faithfulness, Integrity***

“What? Go? You want us to leave? But, but ... Oh, because we have been reconciled to God, to you – and to one another. Because there are so many people out there who also need to hear your call and your promise, to know your love. Still, I don’t know if we’re ready. It’s kind of scary out there. What’s that? You’re coming with us? Well, that’s different. What are we waiting for? Let’s go!”