



RELIGION RESTORED - Restored Heart - Matthew 5:21-48 - February 20-26

Main Idea: True faith isn't lived in external rules, it's in a restored heart.

Look Back (Remind yourselves of the challenge from last week)

This week we are beginning a new series in our continual journey through the book of Matthew. This series focuses on a section of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount where he addresses the ways that religious tradition and excess had been getting in the way of a heart that truly longs after God and his Kingdom on earth.

Look Up (Wrestle with the passage itself)

Read Matthew 5:21-48 together.

Each section of this reading begins with some form of the phrase, "You have heard that it was said." This is an important detail if we seek to understand what Jesus is trying to do here. Remember that this comes immediately after Matthew 5:17-20, where Jesus states that his Kingdom is going to be built on his fulfilled law, a reconceptualization of what it means to live according to God's purposes and precepts.

Here he begins to unpack what that means in more detail. The 1st century world was very different from today. People did not carry copies of the Old Testament around in their pockets or on their phones. Typically, the only opportunity that they had to consume God's word was in the

times of corporate worship where it would be read aloud, thus “you have heard that it was said” could be similar in meaning to saying today, “As you have read in your Bibles ...”

And so Jesus turns the concepts of the Old Testament law on its head. His Kingdom is about the heart - about the relationship between God and one another (Matthew 22:37-40). Following God’s commandments, then, is about what is going on internally just as much, if not more, than what is happening externally. Murder is about hatred, adultery is about desire, marriage is about honor, oaths are about character, justice is about mercy, and if our love doesn’t carry over to our enemies than it really isn’t love at all. No longer will external fulfillment around legal requirements, while the heart stews within sin, be tolerated.

Discussion Question: Is this struggle between external actions and internal formation still a problem for God’s people today? Where do you see it? How have you discovered it within yourself?

Jesus ends his statements with the phrase, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” There’s much discussion around what this could mean. Perfection, after all, is impossible. This is a divine task that only God, lived through the person of Christ, can achieve. Some believe that Jesus knows this and is using these high standards to further convince us of our sin and need for a savior. Others believe that the translation points back to the previous statements, and could be understood to mean, “These teachings are making you more perfect, in reflection of your perfect Father.”

Discussion Question: What do you think? Why do you think Jesus makes this statement? If perfection isn’t possible, what is Jesus really trying to say?

Look Forward (Challenge to do something with it)

This section, and by extension this whole series, is about getting our life back on track to where it needs to be. As followers of Jesus, we are not to be focused on religious requirements or maintaining an external tradition. We are about living in a loving relationship with God which overflows into an invitation for others to do the same.

Discussion Question: Spend some time together in silence pondering this question: where am I missing the internal change God’s wants for me? In other words, where am I making the same mistake of focusing on religion over relationship?

Challenge: After you have considered this issue, pair up with another person in the group. Avoid spouses if you have one. Confess what God is putting on your heart.

Prayer challenge: Pray together that God would reveal his love to each one of us through knowledge and experience, allowing this love to change us from within.