



True Righteousness

JESUS DEFINES WHAT IT MEANS TO LIVE IN HIS KINGDOM.

Scripture Passage: Matthew 5:13-20,43-48 Memory Verse: Matthew 5:20

God's kingdom requires true righteousness. Quoting Jesus's Model Prayer (Matt. 6:9-13), we say, "Your kingdom come" (v. 10), but what does that mean? Living in a democracy, many westerners don't resonate with kingdom concepts. But the easiest way to grasp this idea is to reflect on the next line of the prayer: "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (v. 10). Living in God's kingdom means seeking and doing the King's will here on earth with the same level of instant and unreserved obedience that exists in heaven. We do so through faith in Christ.

Many times, people want to know God's will, but they try to carry it out on their own terms. They impose human values and behavior on His Word. Instead of embracing Christ's righteousness, people pursue what seems right or makes sense to them. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught His followers to go beyond rituals and to live out true righteousness in Him. As you study this session, consider what it means for you to be salt and light in the world and how you can move the adults in your Bible study to submit to King Jesus by living out His plans for you each day.



Weekly Podcast: Group Leader Training

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A new phenomenon over the last fifteen years has been the advent of social media influencers. In fact, the term “influencer” was not added to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* until 2019. These “influencers” on the internet produce interest in a variety of products and ideologies. This approach to marketing has a value of well over \$20 billion dollars. Some of these influencers have become folk heroes to many internet users. (PSG, p. 40)

Who are some social media influencers you are aware of?

Are you able to identify ways that you have been impacted by these influencers?



Understand the Context (Matthew 5:1-48)

When large crowds turn up at religious events, we get excited. We post about it on social media, write about it in religious publications, and tell everyone we know. Jesus took a different approach.

As His ministry attracted people from all over Israel, He withdrew to a nearby mountain. There, He focused on equipping His followers so they could portray the way of life that should be normal for believers. What they heard was revolutionary. It upended many of their long-held beliefs about what God expected of His kingdom citizens.

In eight amazing statements that we call the Beatitudes, Jesus taught His disciples to apply an entirely different set of standards when it came to defining righteous living. Rather than repeating conventional wisdom, He shared God’s wisdom. Instead of relying on human ideas about the law, He explained God’s actual intentions for the law.

In God’s kingdom, blessed people are not necessarily the rich and powerful, but the poor in spirit. Those who mourn over sin find comfort in God’s grace and forgiveness. In the divine agenda, the humble inherit the earth and those who hunger for righteousness are filled. Jesus also taught the value of nurturing purity, making peace, and enduring persecution.

Jesus’s goal was to help people be salt and light in a needy culture. For so long, God’s people had depended on external rituals associated with the Mosaic law rather than embracing the spirit behind the law. Jesus illustrated what being

kingdom citizens meant in the practical experiences of life. He didn’t come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it by embracing a higher law, the law of love.

Previously, the average Jew thought the gold standard of righteous living was represented by the scribes and Pharisees. These religious leaders taught that righteousness came from keeping the law of Moses. Trying to protect the law, they built “hedges” of additional regulations around it. By valuing their own rituals over true righteousness, though, they created a society where people failed to know and love God—and one another.

People need to understand that murder begins with anger. Adultery is rooted in lustful thoughts. All should be avoided in God’s kingdom. Marriage and honesty are virtues to be cherished, as is conflict resolution. It’s not enough to love one’s family and friends. Godly love also extends to our enemies.

Jesus sought to help His disciples not only understand true righteousness, but also to live it out through kingdom behavior. After He returned to heaven, it would be up to them to take the kingdom message to the world—person by person, life by life. They were God’s plan for accomplishing His will on earth as it is in heaven.

Read through Matthew 5 in your Bible. Which of Jesus’s teachings about what it means to follow Him presents the greatest challenge for you? (PSG, p. 41)

ENGAGE



PREPARE: Display **Pack Item 2** (Poster: Outline of Matthew 1–13) and **Pack Item 3** (Poster: Jesus’s Mission). Make copies of **Pack Item 11** (Handout: The Sermon on the Mount).

ASK:

Who are some social media influencers you are aware of? Are you able to identify ways that you have been impacted by these influencers? (PSG, p. 40)

DISCUSS:

Call on a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 40 of the PSG. Facilitate a brief discussion about the positive or negative impact of various influences on the lives of adults.

REVIEW:

Explain that following Christmas, this session places us back into Jesus’s ministry. Allow adults to recall things they remembered from earlier sessions. Direct attention to **Pack Item 3** (Poster: Jesus’s Mission). Emphasize Jesus’s commitment to the Father’s plan and the Father’s kingdom.

RECAP:

Point out that this session (and the next two) focuses on the Sermon on the Mount. Share this information from page 41 of the PSG to set the context:

Matthew 5–7 make up what is normally called the Sermon on the Mount. In many ways, this set of teachings was for the disciples only. Jesus was teaching them what it meant to follow Him. . . . He spoke of what makes His followers distinct from the rest of the world.

TRANSITION:

Examining the Sermon on the Mount offers a great opportunity to consider Jesus in the context of an influencer. He transforms His people, and He calls each of us to make a difference in the world around us. These verses from Matthew 5 will guide us in becoming positive spiritual influencers for God’s kingdom.



Group Activity Option

Music

Play “I Will Follow” by Chris Tomlin. If possible, provide the lyrics for the song. Lead adults to recall ways the song highlights Christ’s influence in one’s life. Invite them to give specific examples of how they have chosen to go, stay, move, love, and serve based on His leading. Play the song a second time and encourage the group to pray it back to God, asking Him to use today’s verses to draw them into a closer walk with Jesus.

Influence Your Culture (Matt. 5:13-16)

13 “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt should lose its taste, how can it be made salty? It’s no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet. **14** You are the light of the world. A city situated on a hill cannot be hidden. **15** No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, but rather on a lampstand, and it gives light for all who are 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 in heaven.”

(v. 13) Every culture has its virtues and vices. Left to its fallen nature, human society confuses the two and begins to view ungodly attitudes and actions as acceptable behavior. Like meat in an unrefrigerated room, culture begins to spoil and stink.

Jesus taught His followers to be the **salt of the earth**. In Jesus’s day, salt was valued not only because it gave flavor to food, but also because it preserved food. In this passage, the “earth” did not refer to the physical planet or to a worldly viewpoint. Instead, it reflects human habitation and relationships. To be the salt of the earth involves protecting society from putrefying. Christians should influence culture by reflecting kingdom values.

Salt cannot accomplish its function if it loses its saltiness. Jesus noted that if **salt should lose its taste**, it could not be **made salty** again. Instead, it is useless and might as well be **thrown out**. Some scholars think the picture of salt being **trampled** referred to worthless salt being tossed out onto road beds. If believers lose their effectiveness because of sin or spiritual neglect, they will not fulfill their God-given purpose. The analogy is an illustration and doesn’t mean we can lose our salvation.

(vv. 14-15) In another analogy, Jesus called His disciples **the light of the world**. Notice, He did not say “a light in the world” but “*the* light of the world.” We are not one of many sources of illumination in a darkened culture. By revealing Christ, who is the ultimate Light of the world, we help people experience light and life in Him (John 8:12).

Such light **cannot be hidden** any more than a **city situated on a hill**. If we have the light of Christ within us, people will see it. It’s undeniable.

Similarly, lamps give light to a room. It would be foolish if someone **lights a lamp and puts it under a basket**. Doing so defeats its purpose—

and creates a fire hazard! Instead, the light is placed **on a lampstand**. Lamps in biblical days typically used olive oil held in a reservoir that fueled a wick. It was then placed on a stand to help the light reach around the room. Thus, it provided **light** for everyone **in the house**.

(v. 16) Jesus often used ordinary items or aspects of everyday life to illustrate spiritual principles. In this case, believers should not hide their faith. Like lamps on stands, Jesus said believers should **let your light shine before others**. We don’t do so to get favorable attention, but to bear witness to the Source of the light.

Christians are called to live in a way that allows people to observe our **good works** and **give glory to** our heavenly **Father**. After all, we are “his workmanship” created by God to perform good works (Eph. 2:10). Our good works don’t save us (2:8-9), but they do demonstrate the salvation we have experienced. Our works reveal God’s work in and through our lives as we strive to be His hands and feet for His glory.

By being salt and light, kingdom people make a positive impact on others. Like our heavenly Father, we should not be content to let the world around us remain as is. We should long for it to be transformed for His glory.

Key Doctrine

Evangelism and Missions

It is the duty of every child of God to seek constantly to win the lost to Christ by verbal witness undergirded by a Christian lifestyle, and by other methods in harmony with the gospel of Christ. (See John 20:21; 1 Thessalonians 1:8.)



APPLICATION POINT: Kingdom people make a positive impact on the world for God's glory.

CONTEXT:

Draw attention to **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Outline of Matthew 1–13*). Identify the Sermon on the Mount as the first of Jesus's major discourses in Matthew. Distribute **Pack Item 11** (*Handout: The Sermon on the Mount*) for further study.

READ:

Direct a volunteer to read **Matthew 5:13-16 aloud** as the group notes words or phrases that stick out to them. Discuss the words and phrases they noted. Affirm that salt and light are the primary metaphors in the verses.

ASK:

What makes salt and light good illustrations for faith?

RECAP:

Summarize the following information (PSG, pp. 42-43) to explain the importance of salt and light in the first century:

“Salt was a valuable substance, often traded as a part of transactions for goods and services. . . . In Jesus's day, the primary use of salt was for preservation. Lacking refrigeration, salting meat was essential to preserving it. . . . Chemically it is impossible for salt to lose its salty taste, but it certainly can be “defiled.” . . . Jesus reinforced this word picture [of light] by pointing out that many towns were built on the summit or side of a hill where they were seen from a distance. They were visible by day, and the light from every home would make the cities visible at night.”

ASK:

What happens when believers serve as salt and light in the world? (PSG, p. 43)

SAY:

As salt, believers reflect God's kingdom values. As light, we reveal Christ to the world around us. By being salt and light, we point people to Jesus and bring glory to God.

Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: Salt

Use a salt grinder to create pile of salt. Point out that when the grains are together, salt can be used as a preservative or to enhance flavor. Blow on the salt to dissipate it. Point out that when salt grains are spread out, impurities are more likely to defile it. Affirm the church's responsibility to influence culture positively, along with identifying other elements that might try to influence culture in a negative way.

Obey Your Father (Matt. 5:17-20)

17 “Don’t think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. **18** For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or one stroke of a letter will pass away from the law until all things are accomplished. **19** Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commands and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever does and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. **20** For I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven.”

(v. 17) Some of Jesus’s listeners believed that He opposed the Mosaic law. On the contrary, He asserted that He did not come to **abolish the Law or the Prophets**. By “Law” Jesus referred to the instructions God gave Moses in the first five books of the Bible, known as the Pentateuch or the Torah. “Prophets” meant the writings of the four major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel) and twelve minor prophets (Hosea-Malachi). Together, these terms encompass the entirety of the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Greek word translated “abolish” means to dissolve or destroy. Jesus intended neither to diminish the law or to eliminate it. Instead, His mission would **fulfill** all of God’s Word, completing it to the fullest extent. While the Jewish sacrificial system pointed to Christ’s death, His life taught the true meaning of both the law and the prophets.

(v. 18) With the word **truly**, Jesus strongly validated the authority of the Scriptures. He left no room for equivocation. One day, **heaven and earth** will **pass away**, but God’s Word will endure. Just as God is eternal, so His Word is eternal.

Jesus added that even **the smallest letter** and **stroke of a letter** in Scripture were more permanent than all of creation. We might compare it to crossing a “t” or dotting an “i.” Jesus emphasized that **all things**—even the finest points of the Word—would be **accomplished** in Him.

(v. 19) As a result, Jesus warned against violating even **the least of these commands** or leading **others to do the same**. The term **breaks** meant more than simply going against a command. It included the idea of disregarding it completely. Jesus called out sins of both commission and omission—along with those who influence other people to sin.

In contrast, Jesus said the one who is truly **great** in the **kingdom** is the one who **does and teaches** God’s ways and, by implication, encourages others to follow suit. Jesus apparently included both kinds of people among kingdom citizens, but He distinguished between their place in the kingdom and their effectiveness as teachers.



The Kingdom of God

What is the kingdom of God, and how should we live as its citizens? Scan this QR code to explore these truths.

(v. 20) Jesus criticized the way **scribes and Pharisees** portrayed God’s Word. These leaders took pride in their own **righteousness** based on the law and traditions. They thought a right relationship with God could be earned and maintained by human effort. But Jesus urged His disciples to seek a righteousness that **surpasses** legalistic dependence on man-made rules. God is not interested in ritualistic righteousness. He requires faith in Jesus.

Jesus later noted a hypocrisy between what the religious leaders said and did. He encouraged His people to respect the leaders’ position, but He warned them about imitating the leaders’ practices because they ignored the deeper meaning of God’s laws (23:3-4).

The scribes and Pharisees paid lip service to God through traditions and rituals, but their hearts lacked love for Him or others. Such a low view of God and misplaced trust inevitably prevents individuals from entering the **kingdom of heaven**. True righteousness comes through faith in Jesus, which leads us to embrace the spirit, as well as the letter, of His Word.

**READ:**

APPLICATION POINT: Kingdom people find genuine satisfaction and purpose by keeping God's commands.

Read Matthew 5:17-20 aloud as the group identifies Jesus's relationship to the Law of Moses.

ASK:

When have you been accused of something that wasn't true?

RECAP:

Share this content from page 44 of the PSG to explain why Jesus emphasized His relationship to the law in verse 17:

Much of the "law" of the Pharisees was man-made traditions for which Jesus had little use. Because of His disdain for these traditions, He was accused of wanting to abolish the law. Jesus, however, told His disciples that He hadn't come to "set aside" the law. His was no movement to overthrow or destroy the Law and Prophets. . . . Instead, Jesus came for the purpose of bringing the law to its intended goal.

EXPLAIN:

Emphasize that Jesus described God's Word as eternal—just like God is eternal. Point out that because it reflects the nature of God, His Word must be obeyed. Affirm that Jesus showed us how to live out our faith in a genuine way by fulfilling the Word down to the smallest detail.

QUESTION:

How can followers of Jesus impact society? (PSG, p. 45)

MEMORIZE:

Highlight Matthew 5:20 as the session's memory verse. Emphasize our responsibility to point people to God in a way that helps them see Him as He really is.

SAY:

That doesn't happen through religious rituals. It happens through a relationship with God that transforms our relationships with others.

Group Activity Option

Bible Skill

Read Matthew 5:20,44-45 and highlight the terms *righteous* and *righteousness*. Scribes and Pharisees thought righteousness was achieved rather than received. To understand righteousness, read how the following verses answer these questions: **What is the source of righteousness?** (1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 2:21) **How do people become righteous?** (Rom. 3:22; 4:3-5) **How can believers demonstrate righteousness?** (Rom. 6:13-20).

Love Your Enemies (Matt. 5:43-48)

43 “You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. **44** But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, **45** so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. For he causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. **46** For if you love those who love you, what reward will you have? Don’t even the tax collectors do the same? **47** And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what are you doing out of the ordinary? Don’t even the Gentiles do the same? **48** Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

(v. 43) Hearing radically new standards for spiritual behavior challenged Jesus’s disciples. In verses 21-48, Jesus gave specific examples to illustrate His point, including the connections between anger and murder, adultery and lust, and marriage and divorce. He also affirmed the importance of honesty and forgiveness.

Throughout these verses (including v. 43), Jesus reminded His followers of familiar sayings: **You have heard that it was said**. Yet, injunctions against murder and idolatry, as well as admonitions to **love your neighbor**, only told part of the story. In God’s kingdom, loving neighbors falls flat if one chooses to **hate your enemy**. This approach appeals to human nature, but it fails to reach the level of true righteousness.

(vv. 44-45) To introduce the kingdom’s new paradigm, Jesus underscored His own divine authority, **But I tell you**. Instead of hate, Jesus instructed His disciples to **love your enemies** and to **pray for those who persecute you**. We might claim to love our enemies, but it’s harder to pray for people who intentionally harm us. Yet, Jesus’s teaching wasn’t rooted in some vague theological theory, but from a heart that would forgive those who crucified Him.

We love our enemies because we are **children of our Father in heaven**. Loving one’s enemies does not make us God’s children but demonstrates our relationship with Him. Because we belong to Him, we act differently.

As our Creator, the Father takes an active role in the lives of all humanity. He **causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good** and **sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous**. Through what is known as God’s “common grace,” He intentionally chooses to bless every person. So, to love like He loves, we must imitate His grace. We must show love and concern for all people—even those who oppose and oppress us.

(vv. 46-47) Jesus acknowledged that it’s easier to **love those who love** us. This approach is no different than the actions of unsaved people around us. It offers no genuine **reward** in this life or the next.

As an example, Jesus pointed to **tax collectors**. These Jews were despised by their own people because they collected taxes for the Roman government, often overcharging the people and pocketing the difference. Yet, even they returned love for love. If the disciples only loved people who loved them, they were no better than those who set the lowest moral bar in that culture.

Similarly, if we **greet** (or welcome) only our **brothers and sisters**, how are we demonstrating the uniqueness of kingdom citizens? Developing loving and respectful relationships solely with people who are like us and agree with us reveals nothing **out of the ordinary**. We look like everyone else instead of embracing a life that sets us apart as God’s people and points others to Him.

This twist in teaching would have been startling for Jesus’s disciples. They lived in a context where loving friends and taking revenge on enemies was the conventional wisdom of the day. What Jesus was proposing turned everything they knew about righteous living on its head.

(v. 48) Throughout the Torah, God challenged His people to be holy because He is holy (Lev. 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7,26; 21:8). Likewise, Jesus told His disciples to **be perfect . . . as your heavenly Father is perfect**. Here, the idea of perfection relates to moral qualities and behavior, but it also suggests spiritual maturity. As God sets the standard of moral maturity, we allow the Holy Spirit to work out the process of sanctification in our lives. We’ll never achieve sinless perfection, but we must not settle for less than what God expects.



READ:

APPLICATION POINT: Kingdom people reflect their heavenly Father by loving their enemies.

Read Matthew 5:43-48 aloud as adults consider why Jesus's words would have seemed too radical to His listeners.

ASK:

What was so revolutionary about Jesus's teaching in these verses? What makes it difficult for us today?

RECAP:

To set the context for Jesus's teaching about loving our enemies, summarize this information from page 46 of the PSG:

"The command to 'love your neighbor' is from Leviticus 19:18. The second part of Jesus's statement, 'hate your enemy,' was added by the scribes and Pharisees. Hating your enemy is easy. That is the problem with man-made traditions. No wonder the Pharisees and scribes thought they were righteous. They could keep their traditions and convince themselves they were fulfilling the demands of God's law. Jesus called His followers to a higher standard: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. This likely was startling to His hearers. The culture and traditions of the day taught the opposite."

ASK:

What are some obstacles to loving our enemies? (PSG, p. 47)

DISCUSS:

Guide adults to suggest groups that might be considered "enemies." (*Suggestions: other races, other religions, other political parties, friends or family members who have betrayed our trust, and so forth*) Record their responses on the board. Encourage adults to suggest practical ways believers can demonstrate God's love to those groups each day.

SHARE:

Explain that the Greek word for "love" used in these verses is *agape*. Note that this is a God-driven love that puts the needs of others above our own needs. Remind adults that this is the kind of love that God showed toward sinful humanity when He sent His Son to die for us.

SAY:

Living out this kind of love was unconventional—and even dangerous—in the first century. It's really no different today. If we're going to move beyond the rituals of religion and live differently from the world around us, we have to live and love radically. This is the path to developing the spiritual maturity God desires in us.

CHALLENGE

REVIEW:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 48 of the *Personal Study Guide*.

- *Kingdom people make a positive impact on the world for God's glory.*
- *Kingdom people find genuine satisfaction and purpose by keeping God's commands.*
- *Kingdom people reflect their heavenly Father by loving their enemies.*

REFLECT:

Encourage adults to consider a principle or truth that resonates with them from this session's verses. Encourage them to record that thought in the margins of their PSGs.

SAY:

Use that statement as a prayer prompt during your times with God this week. Keep it in front of you and ask God to show you how He wants you to live it out each day.

DISCUSS:

Direct attention to the second set of questions on page 48 of the PSG. Facilitate a brief discussion on ways adults can serve as a positive influence to those around them this week. Encourage them to identify and pray for opportunities to touch the life of one specific person.

PRAY:

Close in prayer. Ask God to help adults be wise as they strive to become salt and light in the world every day and to learn how to love others in a way that brings glory to Him.

AFTER THE SESSION

Text or email the group, reminding them to continue working on the memory verse for this session, Matthew 5:20. Remind adults to continue praying for opportunities to be salt and light to those around them and to look for ways to be a positive influencer the life of the person they have been praying for this week.

LEADER EXTRAS



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