

6th Sun. after Epiphany  
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Measuring Up To God's Standard

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Matthew 5:17-37

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

There is a widespread assumption in all world religions... and even among people who don't consider themselves religious, and even within Christianity, that in order to find acceptance with God... in order to get into a right relationship with God... in order to enjoy his good graces... we have to work. We have to perform. We have to try. We have to do. Almost universally, human beings have this concept that God is good and we are not, and that if God is going to accept us and be pleased with us, then we have must do more. We must improve. We must get better.

People naturally feel this way because of the way we are made deep down inside. We were created with a conscience. We have an innate sense of good and bad... holy and wicked. Now this sense isn't totally identical in everyone, and this sense isn't as strong in everyone, but we all have it. *When* (not if) we do wrong, this conscience in us starts to scream at us. "You messed up! You did evil! You're accountable! God is not happy! Stop what you're doing!"

It doesn't matter if you are Christian, Buddhist, or even atheist... that conscience screams at us when we do wrong. That bad conscience nags at us. It eats at us. It can make us lose sleep. It can make us feel embarrassed. It can make us feel sick. It makes us feel ashamed. And it leads us to a conclusion: "I have to do something to make this feeling go away. I need to do something to get back into God's good graces. I need to make up for the bad I've done so that God will not be angry at me any longer but will accept me and love me."

This is just the way we're all built, and if you'll honestly evaluate your thought processes and behavior, you'll admit this sounds familiar. When we mess up our life and do something seriously wrong, do we typically come running to church? If this has happened in your life, did you think: "I messed up and I need to turn my life around. I've been behaving badly and once I stop, I'll go back to church. Once I make amends and get my life in order, I'll go back to church... when I'm good enough." Has a guilty conscience ever kept you *out* of church?

That means, you've thought that by your efforts, by your repentance, by the changes you make in your life, by the things you do to make up for the bad you've done... you will be at a point where God will accept you again and you can go back to church. You have instinctively felt that you have not *met the conditions* that God must have for you to come to him in worship or speak to him in prayer. You feel you must make yourself more worthy before God will have anything to do with you.

So we all have this natural feeling in us: *If I better measure up to God's standards, he will accept me.* It is this notion... this *false* notion that we are going to look at in more depth today.

Let's approach this logically first. If I must meet a certain standard to have God's acceptance, then logically, I have to know what that standard is, right? So what is God's standard we must measure up to? Do you know what that standard is? **Many people feel that the standard is ultimately unknowable. So you must do whatever you feel is right.** The thought is, "I'll do the best I can with who I am and what I have, and when I die, I'll just have to see how it goes." Really? Do you see the problem with this? It presumes that God has not and will not reveal to man what his standard really is. You just sort of have to guess at it and hope you get it right. What a horrible picture of God this paints. How would you like to work at a company that hires you and says, "Here you don't get a monthly pay check. You only get an annual paycheck. But the paycheck will be

\$1,000,000. You must work hard. At the end of the year, you will be evaluated, and if you have kept all of the company rules and performed up to our standards, you will receive that payment we have promised. If you don't meet our standard, you will be fired without any compensation."

"Ok, I guess that's fair," you say. "So, where is your manual?" "*There is none.*" "Where are the lists of rules and expectations?" "*We won't show you.*" "By what standard or benchmark will my performance be evaluated?" "*It's a secret.*" "Oh yeah, and what exactly is the job I'm supposed to do?" "*That's up to you figure out.*" Really? Would you work under those terms? It's not fair, is it? Yet some think God doesn't set out any kind of solid standard. They figure if they try their best, maybe they'll be good enough. But they don't know. Friends, if that's really what God is like, is it worth the effort to try to please him? If he is so calloused as to not reveal what he expects of us, and what it takes to make him happy, why would we want to try?

Some people believe there are standards... but those standards are set by society. Living up to the standards of the people around you is a sure fire way to disappoint God. There's a story told of a baker who took a dairy farmer to small claims court. In the court case, the baker claimed that every day for a year, he bought a pound of butter from the dairy farmer. But he discovered as the year went on that he was gradually getting a little less butter. When he weighed it after a year, he was actually only getting  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a lb. The judge turned to the dairy farmer to hear his explanation. "Well, your honor, I only have a balance scale to work with. I need one pound on one side of the scale in order to accurately measure a full pound of butter. Every day I buy a pound loaf of bread from the baker. I use that pound loaf as my counter balance when I weigh the butter."

You see, it was the baker that was trying to cheat the dairy farmer. The pound loaf was only  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a lb.

This kind of gives us a picture of what's happening when we weigh our goodness and morality in the balance, and on the other side of the balance is our fellow human being who is coming up short. We are using an imperfect measure when we measure up society's standard. We still fall short of God's measure.

So, saying the standard of God is unknowable surely doesn't help us out any. Such a God who hides his standards could not be called loving. Saying the standard of God can be determined by society doesn't work either, because society's standard is measured against imperfect, sinful human beings.

But we Christians know better, right? We believe the standard is knowable and it's outlined in the Bible. Good news, right? Knowing what God requires, having the instruction manual, performance expectations clarified, job description in hand, we are ready to meet God's standard, right? Hold on a minute. Let's take a look at what that standard is, and then we'll see where this whole concept of earning God's acceptance goes horrible wrong. We're going to look now at God's standard. And when you hear it, it ought to downright terrify you.

Maybe you saw the sermon text is Matthew 5:17-37. That's a lot of verses, so we're not going to read all of them. Truth is, a better sermon text would be Matthew chapters 5, 6, 7. This is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and it really does a great job of summarizing what God's standard is if we are to please him by what we do. But the selected verses we'll look at now will get the job done.

**Matthew 5:19-20 "Anyone who breaks 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 practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.**

Practice and teach the commandments of God and you will be great in the kingdom of heaven. Measure up to God's standard, and you're set! This is what our conscience tells us, and

what nearly everyone on the planet believes. Great! We're on the right track. But then Jesus says this: **"For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."** Now hold on. For us, Pharisees are bad guys, so it's not hard for us to accept Jesus' statement and move on. "Yeah, be better than those guys who ultimately killed Jesus. No problem. Move on." Don't look at them through your 21<sup>st</sup> century goggles. Instead, look at them as Jesus' original listeners did. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were *good people*. They spent their days studying and discussing the law of God. They memorized large portions of Scripture. They conformed their lives to the law of God and kept it in the littlest of details. These were the people that helped the poor and made sure widows got justice. These were the esteemed and beloved religious leaders of the people. Then Jesus drops this bomb: If you're righteousness does not exceed theirs, you won't enter the kingdom of heaven! The hearts of the people must have dropped. But Jesus didn't stop there. He goes on to clearly define just how high God's standard really is.

**"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'** Have you ever taken comfort in the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment? "You shall not murder." Yes! This is a commandment I have always kept. I have never murdered anyone. At least I've got one kept commandment to my credit!" Think again. Jesus said this: **But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' (that's Aramaic and means something like "empty head") is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.** Have you ever gotten angry at someone? Have you ever called someone an idiot? You have haven't you? Did you hear what Jesus says, "You're in danger of hell fire." It gets worse.

**"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.** The sixth Commandment says not to commit adultery, and maybe at first glance, some may think they've kept this one too. But then Jesus says: **"But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."**

At one of my Bible information classes in Russia, I mentioned this word of Jesus and carefully explained that if you have lusted after a woman, you have not met God's standard and you have disobeyed God. After the class, I was approached by a tall man in his early 50's, handsome looking, and certainly the lady's man type. He looked me in the eye and said, "If you're going to teach at this church that looking at a woman lustfully is disobedience to God, then you won't have a single man in your congregation." And with that he walked off and never came back to our church. You know what? He got it. He knew God's standard, and he didn't like it.

Okay, but maybe the consequence of sin isn't so bad. Maybe God just overlooks our shortcomings, smiles and pats us on the head as he reminds us to do better. I'm sorry, but you won't find comfort there either, because Jesus says, **"If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell."** Hell is the consequence for not meeting God's standard. And hell is such a horrible fate, that if gouging out your right eye would keep you from sinning such that you could meet God's standard and avoid hell, that would be the way to go. Same with your right hand. Better to lose body parts than to land in hell for not measuring up to God's standard.

We could go on and on with examples here. Jesus talks about wrongly getting a divorce... and most of them are wrong. Disobedience. He talks about taking an oath or needless swearing.

Sinful. And keep reading through the sermon on the mount and you'll find example after example of just how high God's holy standard is.

Friends, if you think that maybe somehow, some way you might try hard and work and perform, and finally, maybe measure up to God's standard... Jesus says, "There's no way." You have fallen short in your efforts. If God operates on a performance based system, and if the Bible is the Word of God, then we can reach no other conclusion than this: we have absolutely failed in our attempts to measure up to God's standards. And the Bible is perfectly clear about what happens to those who fail: hell fire. Amen.

I didn't fool anyone, did? That's not God's Amen. This isn't the end of the story. God saw our failure and helplessness, and in his love he decided to do something. God sent his Son Jesus, and he came to our world, not to show us how to measure up to God's standard. He didn't come thinking he'd help us get it right. He came because he knew we would get wrong. So he provided what we were lacking: a life that measures up fully to God's standard. He did it. He never called someone a fool. Was never wrongly angry at someone. He never lusted. He never swore. He fully measured up to God's standard. And because he knew we wouldn't get right, and because the punishment for not getting it right is death, Jesus came to offer his life for our life. He came accept the capital punishment sentence that our sins deserved. God's own Son was offered as the perfect sacrifice on the cross for your sins and mine. His blood shed and the complete payment for the sins of the world.

Really? For the sins of the whole world? How can we be sure? With the payment complete, Jesus rose from the dead on the third day, and he is alive and well today. He's got a place ready for you in heaven. He is with us here today. In Christ Jesus, dear friends, you do measure up to God's standard. Place your life into his hands. Trust him completely for the forgiveness of all your sins. All he offers is free of charge. It's a free gift to every one of you.

Now take another look at God's holy standard and see it from a different perspective. His commandments are not a condition of his acceptance and love. They are a confirmation of his acceptance and love. Not "If you keep them, you are mine." But "You are mine, so now go and keep them!" The commandments are expressions of his will and therefore his love. Our obedience is a joyful, willing, eager response to the love he's poured out for us in Christ Jesus.

Measuring up to God's holy standard: You can't do it. Christ did do it. Through faith in Christ, God accepts you as having met his standard. In joy, now, strive to meet this standard. You are set free from sin, not to sin, but to serve Christ in holiness. Respond to his unconditional forgiveness and acceptance, now, by living a holy life!

*Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you have given us a righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees. Help us to live each day to your honor and glory by living holy lives full of goodness and righteousness. Amen.*