I ran track for three years in high school. And I have to be honest, it was *not* my favorite sport. The only reason I did it is because the football coach was also the track coach, and he told me to. And there is a very simple reason why I didn’t like track: you had to run too much. I mean, don’t get me wrong, in every other sport I played, we ran a lot. We ran as conditioning to get in shape. We ran as punishment for messing up. But we spent most of our time playing the actual sport… whether it was basketball or football or baseball or whatever. But in track running is not just conditioning. And running is not just punishment. Running *is* the sport. It’s all you do. You run so you can get in shape to run. And personally, I always wanted running to be for a reason. I didn’t want running to be the reason I was running. And there were several of my friends in that same boat with me. Several of us were just running track for football. And that meant we weren’t always real motivated when it came to track practice. We just wanted to do the short speed workouts that would help us in football, and the rest of the time, we tried to slide by as easily as possible. And I remember there used to be certain days when the coaches would make us run ten 300-meter dashes in under 50 seconds each. If we didn’t make it in under 50 seconds, it didn’t count, and we had to run another one. So, we would run a 300 in under 50 seconds, and then we were supposed to rest while we walked 100 meters back around to the starting line. As soon as we got there, we would run the next one in under 50 seconds. Rest while we walked 100 meters. Run the next one in under 50 seconds. So on and so forth, until we ran all ten. And one of the things that happened with that setup is that we got really good at running 300s in about 49.9 seconds. We would pace ourselves so that we got in just under 50 seconds, because we didn’t want to run any harder than we had to. And that would absolutely infuriate our coach. He would tell us, “Look, the point is not that you just barely make it in under 50 seconds. The point is that you run as hard as you can and get in shape!” You see, the 50-second time limit wasn’t supposed to be the goal for us. It was supposed to be a guide that helped us get in better shape. The problem was that we only wanted to do just enough to get by. But our coach wanted us to give everything we had. And that is a great parallel to Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount today. Turn in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 5. We’re looking at verses 38-48 today. Matthew 5:38-48. Jesus says, *“You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.*

*“You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”*

In a lot of ways, Jesus is saying the same thing that my track coach used to say. Jesus is saying, “Look, it’s not enough to look at the law and say, ‘OK, what’s the least I can do to get by? How can I meet this standard with the least effort and the least amount of righteousness possible?’ That’s not enough. God intends for your life to be much greater than that.”

People are always asking, “What’s God’s will for my life? What’s God’s purpose for me? What does God intend for me?” Well, in our text today, Jesus tells you very simply and very clearly what God intends for your life. And just to make sure that you get it, He tells you in two different ways. Look at verse 48: *“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”* God wants you to be perfect like Him. God wants you to be like Him. And Jesus says almost the same thing in verse 45: *“That you may be sons of your Father in heaven.”* You should bear a family resemblance to your Father. You should be like God. But there’s also another layer of meaning for us to see here. When Jesus says we are to be sons of God that means we are to be like *the* Son of God. In other words, Jesus is telling us that we are to be like Him. God’s intent for your life… God’s will for you… is that you would be like God by becoming like Jesus.

And in a very real sense, all of Christianity boils down to that. The only thing that matters about your entire life is that you become like Jesus. That *is* what it means to follow Jesus. Nothing more… and also nothing less. And Jesus really drives that home in our text today. Jesus calls us to go above and beyond any external standard of righteousness. The goal is not that we will be just good enough to get by. The goal is that we will actually become like Jesus and that His righteousness will be on display in our lives.

And in our text today, Jesus identifies at least three areas where we are often tempted to settle for an external standard of righteousness, instead of truly following Jesus and becoming like Him.

The first external standard of righteousness that Jesus mentions is the law. In verses 38-42, Jesus alludes to several legal standards that were enforced in His day. Jesus says, *“You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.”*

Jesus’ teaching for us today starts in the same way that it has started for the past three weeks. He quotes the Old Testament, *“Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.”* And then Jesus challenges the typical religious understanding of that law by saying, *“But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person.”* He’s telling us that it’s not enough to just live up to the external standard of eye for eye and tooth for tooth. There is something more that needs to take place in your heart if you are going to follow Jesus and become like Him.

You see, when God gave the command, “Eye for eye and tooth for tooth,” what He meant is that the punishment is supposed to fit the crime. Eye for eye and tooth for tooth is a law about justice. It was intended to limit the amount of retribution you can seek when someone wrongs you. For example, if you break a window in my house that costs $100, I can’t charge you $1000. Or if you ding my car door in the parking lot, I can’t demand the death penalty. Your punishment should cost what the crime cost. But what often happened is that instead of people treating eye for eye as a *limit* *on* retribution, they treated it as a *command* *for* retribution. Instead of saying, “OK, this is the absolute maximum repayment that I can demand,” they said, “OK, I’m going to get every last penny out of you that I can.” It’s remarkably similar to the lawsuits that we see in our day. I’m going to get as much for myself as I can. I want revenge. I want retribution. I’m going to look out for myself. I’m going to seek my own good. And I hope you see that people could technically obey the law and stay within the standards, and their heart could still be in a horrible condition full of bitterness and revenge.

And Jesus says, “That’s not good enough. Your heart should be so pure and merciful and forgiving that you don’t even resist an evil person.” Now, this is one of those times where Jesus’ teaching can easily be misunderstood. So let’s take just a minute to make sure we’re clear on what Jesus means by, *“Do not resist an evil person.”* Does He mean that we should never resist any form of evil in any way? Is Jesus saying that if a burglar breaks into your house, you shouldn’t protect your family? Is Jesus saying that if a terrorist hijacks a plane, you shouldn’t resist them and try to overpower them and even crash the plane to save lives? No, that’s not what Jesus is saying. And there are at least two really good reasons why we know that. First of all, there are other places in the Bible where we’re commanded to resist evil. For example, James 4:7 and 1 Peter 5:9 both tell us to resist the devil. Even more, the word translated resist can also be translated oppose. And it’s the exact same word that we find in Galatians 2:11 when Paul says that he opposed Peter to his face for refusing to eat with Gentiles. Peter’s attitude toward the Gentiles was undermining the gospel, and it was right for Paul to oppose or resist Peter for the sake of the gospel. So clearly, the Bible does not teach that we should never resist any form of evil in any way. Whatever Jesus means here, He doesn’t mean that.

The other reason we know that’s not what Jesus means is because He gives us five straight illustrations to help us understand what He does mean. He says, *“If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.”*

Now, what you may not realize is that all five of those examples are connected to different legal situations similar to eye for eye and tooth for tooth. For example, *“If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”* Since most people are right-handed, in order to strike you on the right cheek, they would have to backhand you. And in Jesus’ day, a backhand was such a serious insult that it was punishable with a fine. You could take someone to court and get a financial settlement if they backhanded you. But Jesus says instead of taking them to court and getting the maximum amount of money you can for yourself, you should have enough grace and love in your heart that you endure their insult and even allow them to insult you again.

The next example is very similar. *“If someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.”* A tunic was an inner garment, like a shirt. And a cloak was an outer garment, like a coat. And according to Jewish law, someone could take your tunic as collateral if you owed them money. But they weren’t allowed to take your cloak. So when Jesus says, “Let them have your cloak as well,” He’s saying you should give them even more than they can legally demand of you. Don’t settle for just doing what the law requires and no more. Be so righteous that you go above and beyond the law.

The third example also has a legal background. Jesus says, *“If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.”* Jesus is referring to a Roman law that said soldiers in the Roman military could force you to carry their luggage for them… but they could only force you to carry it for one mile. And Jesus says you should do even more than they can legally demand of you. They can only demand one mile. You go two. You should have such a servant’s heart that you serve them even more than the law says you have to. You’re not serving because of the law. You’re serving because it’s in your heart to serve.

The next example Jesus gives is, *“Give to the one who asks you.”* Most likely Jesus is referring to the beggars on the streets in His day. And when we think about the legal pattern that Jesus has been emphasizing so far, we realize that beggars had no legal rights to your money whatsoever. But Jesus says even though they don’t have any legal claim on your money, be generous and give to them if they need it.

And then finally, the fifth example may sound just like the fourth to us, but it’s actually slightly different. When Jesus says, *“Do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you,”* the word for borrow means taking a loan. It’s not begging. It’s when you borrow money and pay interest on it. Now, in the Old Testament, God told the Jews that when they loaned money to other Jews, they weren’t allowed to charge interest. But when they loaned money to non-Jews, they were allowed to charge them interest. And it’s probably the case that because of that command, some Jews were willing to lend to non-Jews, because they could charge interest and make money on it. But they weren’t willing to lend to other Jews, because they couldn’t charge interest and make money on that. And so Jesus is saying, “Even though you legally don’t have to lend to them, and even though you financially aren’t going to benefit from it, you should still lend to the ones who need to borrow from you.” In other words, *don’t* *not* give just because you legally don’t have to. Give above and beyond the law. Give even when the law doesn’t require it, simply because it’s in your heart to give.

So all of Jesus’ examples have some sort of legal connotation to them. And in every case, the point Jesus makes is that you should go above and beyond what is legally required of you. The point is not to do just what the law requires. The point is to become like Jesus and to love people the way Jesus loves people and to do whatever you need to do for them.

And hopefully you can see how all of this is connected to eye for eye and tooth for tooth. The law allowed you to demand what was rightfully yours. And that meant you could meet the standards of the law and still be completely self-centered and vengeful and greedy. And Jesus tells us that that is not nearly good enough. It’s not about living up to legal standards of righteousness. It’s about being like God by becoming like Jesus.

The second external standard that Jesus mentions is in verses 43-44. He says, *“You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”* Jesus does something very interesting when He quotes, *“Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.”* The first half of that quote comes from the Old Testament. In Leviticus 19:18, God commanded the Israelites, *“Love your neighbor.”* But the second half of that quote is nowhere to be found in the Old Testament. God never gave the command to hate your enemy. What happened is that over time, the Israelites took the command, *“Love your neighbor,”* and instead of focusing on the command, “Love,” they focused on the word “neighbor.” And they started to argue about who was and who wasn’t a neighbor. And basically, what they ended up saying was that only other Jews qualified as a neighbor, which meant that they only had to love other Jews. The Pharisees went even farther and said only other Pharisees were their neighbors, so they didn’t have to love anyone who wasn’t a Pharisee. So they took a command that was supposed to make them love people, and they used it as an excuse to hate everyone who wasn’t just like them. Just like they twisted “eye for eye and tooth for tooth” to mean that they should get as much revenge as they could, they twisted “Love your neighbor” to mean that they could hate anyone who wasn’t their neighbor.

And what I really want us to notice right now is that the way they twisted this command was by adding their own religious tradition to it. God had *only* said, “*Love your neighbor.”* Period. No qualifications. But in the religious tradition of the Jews, they added the explanation, “And hate your enemy.”

So the standard Jesus is attacking here is a religious standard. The command, “Love you neighbor,” communicated exactly what God wants to see in our hearts. He wants us to be loving people. But the religious tradition interpreted that to mean that they could hate their enemies, and that caused them to totally miss what God wanted to do in their hearts. Instead of saying, “OK, God wants me to love people,” they said, “OK, I’m going to hate everyone who’s not my neighbor, and I’m going to use my religion as the excuse for doing it. I’m going to use my religious traditions to justify the hate in my heart.”

And I hope you see what that means. It means that they could follow their religion and live up to this religious standard, and their heart could still be in a horrible condition full of hatred and spite. And Jesus says, “That’s not good enough. It’s not enough just to live up to your religious standards. Your heart should be so pure and loving that you even love your enemies.”

In other words, Jesus says you should go above and beyond what your religious traditions require of you. The point is not to do just what your religion requires. The point is to become like Jesus and to love people the way Jesus loves people.

And, Church, do you know how hard that can be? Do you know how easy it is for us to hate people in the name of our religion? Do you know how easy it is to claim that we’re hating sin when we’re really hating sinners? There’s always a danger that we will use aspects of truth within our religious tradition as an excuse to hate people. And Jesus tells us that’s not good enough. It’s not about living up to religious standards of righteousness. It’s about being like God by becoming like Jesus.

The third external standard that Jesus mentions is in verses 46-47. Jesus says, *“If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?”* Now, this standard is really closely connected to the religious standard that we just mentioned. When Jesus says, *“If you love those who love you… If you greet only your brothers,”* He’s still referring to the Jewish religious tradition that they only had to love other Jews. But notice what else Jesus says about it. He says, “Don’t even the tax collectors do that? Don’t even the pagans do that?” In other words, loving people who love you and are just like you isn’t even a religious standard. It’s pretty much a social standard across the board. Most people, religious or not, love the people who love them.

And if you live up to that social standard of righteousness, if you love your parents and love your wife and love your kids and love your friends, society will say you’re a pretty good person. And that’s a good thing, but that doesn’t guarantee that your heart is right. You see, if you only love the people who love you, if you only love the people who are like you, if you only love the people who are good to you, if you only the people who deserve it, then you haven’t really become a loving person. You’ve just become a person who loves when it’s convenient. And I hope you see that means you could technically obey society’s standards, and your heart could still be in a horrible condition full of hatred toward anyone who’s not like you and bitterness toward anyone who’s ever hurt you and vengefulness toward anyone who’s ever done anything to incur your wrath. And Jesus says, “That’s not good enough. Your heart should be so pure and loving that you love everyone, whether they deserve it or not, whether society expects you to or not.”

You should go above and beyond what is socially required of you. You should love even when society doesn’t require it, simply because it’s in your heart to love. That’s because the point is not to do just what society requires. The point is to become like Jesus and to love people the way Jesus loves people. It’s not about living up to social standards of righteousness. It’s about being like God by becoming like Jesus.

Jesus is telling us the purpose of your life is to be like God by becoming like Jesus. And before we close, there are three major truths that grow out of Jesus’ teaching that I want us to see. The first truth is a truth about the very essence of Christianity. And I pray that you hear this, because this at the heart of what distinguishes Christianity from every religion that the world offers. Christianity is about pursuing Jesus Christ. Christianity is about pursuing Jesus Christ. You see, Jesus tells us that it’s not enough to live up to legal standards or religious standards or social standards or any other external standards of righteousness. You have to follow Him and be like Him. And what that means is that just avoiding sin is not enough. And just doing good things is not enough. The purpose of your life is to pursue Jesus Christ with reckless abandon and to become like Him. As we’ve seen in our examples today, you may avoid all sorts of sins and follow all sorts of religious rules and do all sorts of good things and still be rotting away on the inside. But when you focus on Jesus Christ, when you give your life to Him and pursue after Him, He changes you at your very core and gives you His righteousness and you start to become like Him. So, Christianity is about pursuing Jesus Christ. Nothing more… nothing less.

The second truth grows out of that. Jesus calls His followers to go above and beyond all the standards of the world. I don’t want us to minimize this aspect of Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus really is calling us be different from the rest of the world. Something should set us apart as followers of Jesus. We should live differently because we’re following Jesus. We should be kinder. We should be more patient. We should be more faithful. We should honor our marriages. We should have purer hearts and purer thoughts and purer conversations. We should be more honest. We should be more forgiving. We should be more loving. We should go above and beyond the standards of the world, because we are following Jesus and becoming like Him. Jesus is our standard.

And that brings us to our third truth. Jesus teaches that the only hope we have is the grace of God. Remember what Jesus is teaching about in this entire sermon. He’s teaching about what it means to be part of the kingdom of heaven. And Jesus makes it absolutely clear that no external standard of righteousness by itself is good enough for the kingdom of heaven. Legal standards, religious standards, social standards… they aren’t enough, because they don’t change your heart. The only way to get into the kingdom of heaven is to be like God by becoming like Jesus.

And then Jesus tells us what that looks like. Do not resist an evil person. Turn the other cheek. Give to the one who asks you. Love your enemy. Pray for those who persecute you. And then the kicker: Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. Jesus tells us that if we’re part of the kingdom of heaven, our lives *will* look like this. And in order to be part of the kingdom of heaven, our lives *must* look like this.

And I don’t know about you, but one of my main thoughts when I hear Jesus’ teaching in these verses is that pretty much not a single thing He says here comes naturally to me. At best, there’s always a remnant of hate for my enemies and a selfish desire to look out for my own needs and bitterness toward those who oppose me and a temptation to seek revenge. So Jesus tells us what our lives should look like when we follow Him, and I look at my own heart, and I know that’s not naturally true of me. And I know it’s not naturally true of you, either.

But here’s the thing: That’s the whole point. These things don’t come naturally to us. These things only come spiritually. They only come super-naturally. If we are going to be like Jesus, that requires the supernatural work of God’s grace to change our hearts and make us like Jesus. You only get into the kingdom of heaven when Jesus changes your heart and makes you like Him. That’s the reason Jesus starts this sermon by telling you that you have to recognize that you are poor in spirit. You are bankrupt before God, and you need to mourn over that. You should be broken and humble and meek before God. And when you come to Him and trust Him and hunger for the righteousness that you don’t have, He graciously fills you up with His righteousness. It’s not an external standard that gets you into the kingdom of heaven. The grace of God working in your heart is the only hope you have.

Now, please, don’t hear what I’m not saying. I’m not saying you don’t have to become a righteous person. Absolutely you do. If you aren’t a righteous person, you don’t get into the kingdom of heaven. What I’m saying is that that realization should drive you to the grace of God, because that’s the only way this is going to happen in your heart. You may live up to legal standards and religious standards and social standards, but the only way you will meet God’s standard of righteousness is if you trust Jesus and throw yourself completely on His grace and receive His righteousness from Him. You are poor in spirit. You are bankrupt before God, and you desperately need God to do what only God can do. So Jesus’ teaching reminds us of how great God is and how small we are and how much we need His grace. The grace of God is your only hope.

So, Jesus tells us that doing just enough to get by will never be enough for the kingdom of heaven. Living up to legal standards and religious standards and social standards will never be enough for the kingdom of heaven. The only thing that is enough for the kingdom of heaven is to be like God by becoming like Jesus. And I pray that truth will drive you to do three things. I pray that you will pursue Jesus Christ with reckless abandon. I pray that you will live out the righteousness of Jesus by going above and beyond the standards of the world. And I pray that you will throw yourself completely on the grace of God, and you will find your hope in Him.