

**Living Above Getting By  
Matthew 5:13-44**

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Dr. J. Howard Olds**

Have you heard the story about the farmer who tried to enter his mule in the Kentucky derby? The media went out to interview the old gentleman. "Did you really think your mule could compete with the finest thoroughbreds in the world?" asked the reporter. "I reckon not," drawled the farmer as he spit some tobacco juice toward the reporter. "But I did think the company would do him a world of good."

Charles Swindol in his book on Mediocrity asks why people insist on scratching around with the chickens when they were created to soar with the eagles?

EXCELLENCE! We want it in sports, service, and the stock market. We want it in social situations. So, I ask you today, why don't we aspire to excellence in our spiritual lives as well? When it comes to faith, forgiveness, love, and loyalty -- why not the best? Well, why not? Excellence is exactly what Jesus had on His mind when He speaks to His followers in the Sermon on the Mount in the passages of Scripture we read today. Jesus concludes the Scripture lesson in these words, "Be perfect, for your Father in heaven is perfect." How can we be all that God wants us to be? Let me suggest some places to start.

**If you want to live above merely getting by, then make a move from isolation to community.** Matthew 5:13: You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its saltiness where with shall it be salted? Verse 14, You are the light of the world. So let your light shine before people that they may see your good works and glorify your father in heaven.

It is time for Christians to come out of the closet. It is time for Christians to season society. Before I was big enough to read the Bible, I learned that people in our community were called the "salt of the earth" people. They were the moral, stable, solid citizens who preserved and enriched the community. One of them was my grandfather. He dug out a living on a hill farm refusing to raise tobacco when tobacco was the main cash crop in the area because he had a conviction. He believed he ought not to make money on something was unhealthy when people inhaled it. That was more than fifty years ago. We thought he was an old fogey. We thought he was a fanatic. We would call him a fundamentalist behind his

back. In reality, he was a man way, way ahead of his time. He was a salt of the earth kind of person.

It is time for Christians to shine the light for everyone to see. Verse 15, "You do not light a candle and then hide it under a bucket, you put it on a candlestick so the whole house will have light." When our boys were teenagers and headed into the night on their own, we had a saying. The saying was this, "We'll leave the light on for you." We wanted them to know wherever they roamed in the community at night that there would be people waiting with open arms to welcome them home. One night when Wes, our oldest son, was unusually late coming home, he found his mother sitting in the living room under that lamp waiting for him. Wes has always believed a good offense is better than a bad defensive. He immediately said to his mother, "What on earth are you doing up this time of night?" His mother softly said, "I was just praying that you would get home alright." You see, the images that Jesus chooses were carefully selected. Salt is seldom noticed in its work of seasoning. Light shines silently.

When I talk about coming out of the closet, I am not suggesting more conference resolutions or more money to the Board of Church Society to lobby in Washington. I am certainly not talking about the Christian right, which often, in my opinion, neither Christian nor right. I am talking about seasoning society and shedding light along the path of righteousness that others may find a way to walk in right living. It is time for Christians to restore community. In community, people look out for one another. They talk with one another. In community, everyone is included. Everyone pulls for the well being of everybody else. Community is society's weakest link.

We have fax machines but we don't have much family time. We know how to travel to the moon but we are scared to death to walk across the street and meet our neighbor. We know more about the Internet than we know about interaction with others. We have big debts but not many front porches anymore. You see, fear has put us in gated communities behind locked doors with security systems and caller ID's on our phones in order to be safe. But I ask you -- at what price have we gained our privacy? And what has happened to the world because of it?

Week before last, I was down at Monteagle Assembly speaking for the week. This left over 1800's assembly takes community seriously. After I had been there a few days, I started trying to figure out the secret of this place. By Thursday, I said to the community that gathered for worship, I

have discovered two things about this community that I think should suggest be legislated into law. Every house in this village has a front porch and it is close enough so you can talk to your neighbor. People walking along the narrow streets stop by for raspberry and blackberry pie every night after my sermons. That will make you want to go to church! Something I found to be significant was printed all over the publicity. From 1:00 to 2:30 every afternoon, everybody is supposed to have a quiet time. I thought to myself the first day, "I can see these young mothers in this assembly trying to get elementary and preschool children quiet for an hour and a half." But surprise, surprise! The place got totally quiet for an hour and a half every afternoon! Now that will change the world; it really will! If you want to live above merely getting by, move from isolation to community.

**If you want to live above merely getting by, make a move from rules to relationships.** Verse 21: You've heard do not kill—but I say anger is deadly; verse 27: You've heard it said, do not commit adultery but I say lusts corrupts; verse 31: It's been said, divorce is legal, but I say to you the bonds of marriage do not break easily verse 33: It's been said that perjury is punishable but I say speak the truth all the time.

What was Jesus trying to say? May I make a suggestion? He was trying to say that laws are essential but extremely limited. Put a bad dog on a strong leash and a proud owner may rightly proclaim, "My dog never bit a neighbor," but don't be fooled. It's the strength of the leash not the goodness of the dog that makes the neighborhood a safe place.

The law can never get from us what is not in us. There are some things that can never, ever be legislated. It reminds me of the old story about the toddler who was having trouble sitting still in church as every toddler does. His dad tried distracting him and when that didn't work, he tried scolding him and then when that didn't work, he finally just restrains him with his arm. The defiant little boy looked up at his daddy and said, "I might be sitting down on the outside but I'm still jumping up and down on the inside." There are some things the law cannot do.

During Ronald Reagan's administration, an expensive campaign was instituted across America encouraging teenagers to "just say no" to drugs and alcohol. Statistics reveal that even those who pledged no failed to say no when pressured by their peers to say yes. You see, righteousness is a matter of relationship. It's a matter of attitude as well as action.

Did Mr. Clinton really have sex with Monica Lewinski? Jesus would say that's not the question. Jesus said we ought to just say yes or no whether or not there are a stack of the Bibles on the table or a judge threatening us with perjury. We should just be honest anyway.

Yes, you can go down to the courthouse and file for divorce, which will cost you more than a marriage license. But as every divorced person in this room knows – divorce is not that easy. Divorce is a heart-wrenching, soul-searching business even when it's necessary to do. The people who hurt the most are children.

Can we pass enough laws to control road rage on our highways or control passenger rage on our airplanes or abuse in our homes? Will it not take something else happening in the hearts of people to transform society into a new way of relating with one to another? Somebody asked a cleaning lady one day, "What difference does Jesus Christ make in your life?" The cleaning lady said, "I don't sweep the dirt under the carpet anymore." That might be wise for people in Washington and in Brentwood and all the way around the world.

Max Lucado put it this way, "By nature, I'm a slob. I couldn't comprehend the logic of neatness. Why make up the bed in the morning when you're going to mess it up at night? Replacing a cap on the toothpaste or hanging up a towel seemed like a waste of time. Then I got married. My wife said she's willing to tolerate that kind of messiness if I lived outside. So I decided to change. I entered a 12-step program for slob. 'Hi, my name is Max and I hate the vacuum cleaner.' Physical therapy helped me develop the muscles I needed to hang up my shirts. By the time my in-laws arrived, I was a new man. Then my wife went out of town. For a whole week, I was free to revert to my slobbish ways, which I fully intended to do. Something strange happened. I could not relax with dirty dishes on the counter and towels and clothes thrown everywhere. I was no longer comfortable with the old way of life."

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Jesus the Christ invites you and me into a relationship that will transform our lives. It will change us from the inside out. It's not the rules; it's the relationships that lift us to a higher standard of living. If you want to live above getting by, then move from rules to relationship with Jesus Christ.

**If you want to live above merely getting by, move from getting even to going on to perfection.** Verse 39 says, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say whoever smites you on your right cheek, turn to

him the left also. Verse 43: You've heard it said, Love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say love your enemy, bless those who curse you and pray for those who persecute you. Verse 46: If you love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. Verse 47: If you say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run of the mill sinner will do that.

Verse 48: Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect. The word is telios. It means complete. Accomplish the purpose for which you were born. Average is not enough for Christians. That's why opinion polls should never set the standards for morality. Try telling God that everybody else is doing it. I've got a feeling He doesn't care.

Ted Koppel said some months ago, "I fear we in the mass media are creating such a market for mediocrity that we have diminished the incentive for excellence." Thank you, Mr. Koppel, many others agree with you.

I know, I know, the word perfect scares us. It makes us nervous. Who is perfect? Who can expect perfection of anybody in any way, any time? Don't dismiss that word too quickly though. There are times and places when I want things to be perfect. When I'm sitting in an airplane and the word comes from the pilot that we're about to make our final descent into the terminal, (I love the language!), I don't want that guy just too get close. I want him to hit the runway right on the target – I want him to be perfect when he brings that plane down. When I check into the hospital and some surgeon comes to see me, sharpening her scalpel, ready to make a slice on my body, I want her to be more than a nice lady with good intentions. I want her to know exactly what she's doing. I want perfection. Don't limit that word.

Wesley's gift to Christian theology was a serious call to the holiness of heart and life, which he called Christian perfection. Why not be all God wants you to be? Why not? So once every June, I listen to a Bishop in our church ask ordinands, "Are you going on to perfection? Do you hope to be made perfect in this life? Are you earnestly striving for it?" Somewhere in the pew, I bow my head and say, "Lord, it's been 31 years since I took that vow and I'm running out of time. Is that any hope for an old sinner like me?" That's when the Holy Spirit says, "It's grace, Howard. It's all about grace. It's grace upon grace, upon grace, upon grace."

Wesley said in prevenient grace, Christ knocks on the door. In justifying

grace, Christ is the door. In sanctifying grace, Christ enters the door and makes His way into every room of our heart. He lifts the shades and lets the light of His love shine through. The only thing He needs from me is permission.

The Savior is waiting to enter your life, why don't you invite Him in?