

YAMs

Summer Midweek 2009



Week Two:

If we cannot meet God's standards, why does he set them? Why try?



covenant chapel

Question: If we cannot meet God's standards, why does he set them? Why try?

The Short Answer:

God's standard is perfection, defined more precisely in The Law given through Moses to the Israelite people. But because of sin by our nature and choice, we are unable to meet this standard.

That, however, is exactly the point. God sets his standard to show us we can't meet it. His standard reveals and actually *increases* the sin in our lives, and thereby reveals our desperate need for Jesus to save us. Moreover, God sets his perfect standard as a guide for how transformed people will live.

As followers of Jesus, we try to meet this standard because we are called to (Matthew 5:48), although we no longer look to The Law, but to transformation from Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit to do so. Finally, we should *want* to pursue God's perfect standard because as transformed believers, we are dead to sin and our deepest desire should be for Jesus and the things he calls us to.

The Long Answer

What are God's standards?

Holiness/Righteousness/Perfection

God, the creator and sustainer of all things, is holy or set apart from all he created. The holiness of God means that God is more pure, good, righteous and worthy of praise than any of his created things. He is completely without sin. He is perfect.

Deuteronomy 32:4 - The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.

2 Samuel 22:31 - This God—his way is perfect; the word of the LORD proves true; he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him.

This holy, righteous, perfect God then creates man and woman in his image – originally as sinless, perfect creatures. In God's initial creation of human beings they were able to enjoy perfect community with God. It didn't last long. But God created man in his image to be perfect as He is perfect.

Jesus, as fully God and fully man, is the only human to live up to God's standards. But despite the fact that he is the only one to do so, Jesus affirms that we are called to perfection:

Matthew 5:48 - You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect

In short, God's standard is perfection. And at first that is a seemingly ridiculous high standard. But we must acknowledge that this is the standard or we will

begin to say things like “pretty good” or “good enough” when asked how we’re doing with the struggles in our lives. “Pretty good” doesn’t equal perfect.

But what, according to God, does perfection look like?

The Law

God is just and does not condemn without just cause. And so, because he loves his created people, he reveals himself and his standards to us. This happens in two ways.

One, God reveals himself generally, to all people, through creation, through our conscience and through his providential care – like providing rain so that food grows so that we can eat.

Second, God reveals himself specially, or specifically, to some people through his Word, through Jesus, and through the miraculous. This special revelation lets us see more of who God is and more of what he specifically requires of us.

And so, after God decided that that the Israelites would be his chosen people, he gave them a special revelation defining his standards of perfection. This revelation came in the form of a moral code known as The Law, and was given by God through Moses to the Israelite people as they wandered in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land.

Whether you think you know The Law or not, most of you are familiar with at least its most famous part: The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17). But in addition to those ten regulations, there are over 600 more that deal with everything from slaves to debts to who should marry a widowed woman. These laws make up large chunks of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

Though many of these laws are specific and some deal with very particular situations (like how much to compensate someone if your animal gets in a fight with his animal and kills it), The Law is summed up by Jesus like this:

Matthew 22:37-39 - You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.

In summary, recognizing that God’s standard is perfection, The Law provides the substance so we can define what perfection is – how perfect people should and would act. But, as it is probably obvious by your own life and by our world, we do not meet this standard.

Why Can't We Meet God's Standards?

In a word: sin. We by our nature and by our choice are sinful people who rebel against the God who created us. This started with Adam and Eve and has continued since.

We talked about this last week, but in order to understand this, we have to recognize that man is not good by nature. We are born with sinful, rebellious hearts and we can do nothing but sin unless God changes our hearts.

This sin usually takes two forms: evil or goodness. And that's confusing, so let me explain.

First and most obvious, evil is sin. There are some people who disregard God's standards completely, live in defiant opposition to them and try to break every single command God gives. People with any kind of moral code would look at people who murder and rape and steal and cheat and oppress others and clearly be able to see the sin.

But what's much more subtle, and yet equally sinful, is goodness – seeking to obey all of God's standards on the surface while our hearts are still separated from him. Depending on the motivation of our hearts, it can be equally bad to try and perfectly obey God's standard as it is to disregard it completely.

Why is that? It's because when our hearts are separated from God, anything "good" we do is done out of pride or self-righteousness. We are trying to make ourselves better than others, or worse, we are trying to somehow put God into our debt by doing enough "good" things to earn his favor.

Christianity is unique in this regard, because other religions, by definition don't see this as sinful. In fact it's the opposite – goodness is the way they achieve eternal life or enlightenment or whatever the end goal of their lives are. Islam, for example, teaches that at judgment, our good deeds on the Paradise side are weighed against our bad deeds on the Hell side and whichever side of the scale is heavier is where we go.

Contrarily, during his three years of ministry on earth, the people Jesus most violently spoke against were the religious people, the Pharisees – "good" people who not only obeyed the 600-plus rules in The Law, but also added hundreds more to show just how "good" and "righteous" they were.

For example, in The Law, God commanded that we are to honor the Sabbath day and keep it holy; in other words to have a day of rest and set it aside to worship God. The Pharisees took that a few steps further by creating and following laws about how far you could walk on the Sabbath, avoiding moving objects from one

place to another, and, my favorite, spitting only on rock because spitting on dirt would make it turn to mud, which apparently was considered work.

But despite their following of the written law, the Pharisees were sinful in their hearts. They were doing good to look good for others and to earn God's favor. And Jesus called them out on it:

Matthew 23:26-28 - Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

The "goodness" of the Pharisees was just as sinful as the evil of others. So, whether we try our hardest to follow God's standards or defiantly oppose them, it is impossible for us to meet them. But that is the entire point.

Why Did God Set the Standards?

This would lead us to the logical, and fair question: if we can't meet God's standard of perfection, why did he set it in the first place? From the Bible, I see four reasons: to reveal sin, to *increase* sin, to reveal our desperate need for Jesus, and to show us how people with transformed hearts live.

To Reveal Sin

Whoever asked this week's question asked a question that people have been asking for 2000 years. Paul encountered this question and wrote about it in his letter to the church in Galatia:

Galatians 3:19-22 - What, then, was the purpose of the law [God's standard]? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator. A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one. Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.

What's Paul saying here? He's saying that The Law was given to Moses to reveal and define sin. As we've already discussed, God gave The Law to Moses to provide substance and a definition of his perfect standard. And in so doing, God also defines sin as anything that falls short of that perfect standard.

Paul also clearly says here that The Law was put into effect to reveal our need for Jesus, but we'll get to that one in a moment.

To Increase Sin

Not only does God set his standard to reveal sin, but he sets it so that sin would actually *increase*...

Romans 5:20 - The law was added so that the trespass might increase.

How does God's standard increase sin? It draws out our sinful nature in two ways. First, as disobedient, rebellious sinners, we now have a whole list of rules we can break. Before the rules existed, we may not have done those things or even wanted to do them. But once they become rules, our rebellious nature kicks in and we automatically want to do the opposite.

For example, let's say your parents are going out of town for the weekend and leaving you at home. Just before they leave they tell you, "Don't have any parties while we're gone." What's the first thing that crosses your mind? Party time.

Why? Because our sinful nature is naturally rebellious. Before your parents set the rule, the thought of having a party may have never crossed your mind. But once it became a rule, your first thought was how you could break it. God's standard increases sin because once the rules are in place, we break them more often. Paul says it this way:

Romans 7:7-8 - Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead

Second, God's standard draws out our sinful nature by appealing to our pride and self-righteousness. If we can follow the rules better than other people, we must be better than them. Or, if God has rules in place and we can obey them, God owes us, right?

Wrong. In fact, in trying to earn something that only God can give, we put ourselves in the place of God and thereby break the first two of the Ten Commandments. In other words, because of our "obedience" we've sinned more.

So God's standard not only reveals, but increases sin. Why would God set a standard that caused sin to increase?

To Reveal Our Desperate Need for Jesus

This is the most important reason why God sets a standard we cannot meet. The whole point of The Law - the perfect standard of God - is to make us realize that, whether we try as hard as we can to obey or blatantly disobey, we are incapable of perfection. Consequently, we are not righteous and cannot restore the perfect relationship with God we were created to have.

But Jesus can. And that's the point. We cannot, so God sends Jesus to live the perfect, sinless life – in every way meeting God's perfect standard. And so, Jesus is righteous and does not need to die as payment for failing to meet God's standard.

But he goes to the cross anyway – in our place, to pay for our sin, as a substitute for us. And in his death and resurrection, Jesus defeats sin, defeats death, defeats Satan. He also gives us his righteousness...

2 Corinthians 5:21 - For our sake he [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

This is why Jesus is the only way to God. Apart from Jesus we have no righteousness and God's relationship with us cannot be reconciled. We must believe and trust Jesus' death and resurrection. God set his standard to show us exactly that.

Galatians 3:23-25 - Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

The Law holds us as prisoners. Christ sets us free. We are cursed under The Law. Christ becomes a curse for us to save us (Galatians 3:13). The Law leads us to our desperate need for Jesus.

Because we can only be justified – counted righteous – by faith in Jesus, God had to set an unattainable standard so that we would look to Jesus to save us. If God set an attainable standard, we would waste our whole lives trying to do it on our own, fail, and be forever separated from God in Hell.

In Jesus then, we are set free from The Law. But that doesn't mean we go do whatever we want.

To Show Us How Transformed People Live

Lastly, God set a perfect standard to show us how transformed people live. When we read verses like Galatians 3:25, we may be prone to think that the law doesn't apply to our lives anymore.

And in one sense, that is true. We are free from depending on The Law for righteousness. We are free from the condemnation that comes from failing to live up to God's perfect standard (Romans 8:1).

But we are still held to the standard of perfection, which The Law was put into place to define. And Jesus – the one who frees us from The Law – says that The Law still applies:

Matthew 5:17-18 - Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished

So The Law still has purpose and use for us. But rather than a list of rules we are to follow, The Law now serves as a guide for how people whose hearts have been transformed by Jesus will live. We trust Jesus for our salvation and his Holy Spirit transforms our hearts so we can become like Jesus.

We no longer follow rules, we follow the Holy Spirit – who will still lead us to the perfect standard of God.

Why try?

Which leads us to the last part of this week's question: if we can't meet God's standards, why should we try?

We're Told To

The first reason is simple, but not popular: We try because we're told to. We can't forget Jesus' words from Matthew 5:48 when he tells us to be perfect as God is perfect. And all over the Bible, we're called to be set apart and live a holy life. We're told that the most satisfying, joy-filled life we can experience is that in which we follow Jesus.

In this pursuit we no longer look to The Law to become perfect; instead we look to Jesus and the righteousness he gives to us. But the standard doesn't change, just the means of getting there.

Even as believers whose hearts have been transformed by Christ, we may never be perfect until Jesus comes again and makes us perfect (Philippians 1:6), but in the meantime, that is the standard we're called to pursue.

We Should Want To

Finally, we should, by the power of the Holy Spirit, try to be perfect. As followers of Christ we should want to do just that.

Why? Because our hearts have been changed by Jesus. We should no longer be satisfied with sin in our lives. We are now dead to sin (Romans 6:1) and we should desire to please Jesus and glorify God with the things we think, say and do.

People who have not been transformed by Jesus don't think this way. Rather than want to follow Jesus, they want to follow rules that earn them the benefits of Jesus.

As an example, we can look at the story of the rich young man in Matthew 19. This man comes to Jesus and asks him how he can have eternal life. Jesus responds that he should keep the commandments – which sounds contrary to what we've just said, but hang in there.

The man says he has kept the commandments – The Law – since his youth, to which Jesus replies that this man still lacks one thing:

Matthew 19:21 - Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."

This, too, sounds like Jesus is adding one more rule to obey in order for this man to have eternal life. But that can't be what he means because if we could be saved by obeying rules, Jesus would not have had to come and die in our place.

Instead, Jesus is exposing this rich man's heart, and in so doing, showing his disciples that The Law cannot save. Because if we remember the story, the man goes away sad because he is rich and has a lot of stuff. Though he followed commandments, in his heart he treasured his wealth above God. He didn't really want Jesus, he wanted the benefits without the cost.

As Christians, our deepest desire should be for Jesus. It should be to do what he has called us to do. More than likely, we'll still sin. But when we do, our transformed hearts should feel conviction and regret and desire to repent so we can go on desiring Jesus.

Moreover, every time we sin, we should be reminded of the beauty and grace of the gospel. We should be reminded that we can't meet God standards, and that *that's* the point because it leads us to our desperate need for Jesus. We should repent and then thank Jesus for saving us.

God's unattainable standard of perfection leads us to both humility and confidence. We are humbled because we recognize we can never live up to the perfection required of us. At the same time we are confident because we recognize our need for Jesus, trust him for salvation, and by the power of the Holy Spirit use our lives to follow him.

Learn More

From the Bible:

Matthew 5

Romans 5-8

Galatians 3

From Books:

***The Divine Conspiracy* - Dallas Willard**

***What's So Amazing about Grace* - Phillip Yancey**