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Understanding the 'identity of the righteous' in the Sermon on the Mount

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The Sermon on the Mount is a collection of Jesus's teachings recorded in Matthew 5–7. It was addressed to the disciples and a large crowd of listeners on a mountainside near Capernaum. Francois Viljoen points to Matthew's use of 'righteousness' in the Sermon on the Mount 'as an instrument to define the identity of his community'. He illustrates that righteousness is a key concept in the Sermon on the Mount in 5:6, 10, 20 and 6:1, 33. He concludes that 'the identity of the disciples is defined by their distinctive righteousness' (Viljoen 2013:9). This article interpreted the 'identity of the righteous' in the Sermon on the Mount in the light of theories of social identity and status. Identity is understood as how individuals perceive themselves and are perceived by others – a complex concept encompassing various aspects of a person's life. *Status*, closely related to identity, refers to one's standing within society. This article addressed the following questions: Is the righteous a spiritual or religious identity? Is it a personal or group identity? Is being righteous a status? What is Jesus's message about the righteous in the Sermon on the Mount? In interpreting the relevant passages in Matthew, the socio-historical background was considered. Lexical-syntactical, literary, and theological analyses were employed. To understand the nature of the righteous in these passages, various theories of social identity and status were applied. It was concluded that δικαιοσύνη in Matthew 5:29 and 6:1 refers to righteous behaviour. In the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:6 and 10, Jesus makes two pronouncements about righteousness as an achieved status. The δικαιοσύνη mentioned in Matthew 6:25–34 is a gift from God – an ascribed status under the grace of God. This status coheres with the spiritual and personal identity in Christ.

Contribution: The primary contribution was to offer a scientific investigation and an understanding of the identity of the righteous in the Sermon on the Mount.

Keywords: righteous; righteousness; δικαιοσύνη; Sermon on the Mount; Matthew 5–7; identity; status.

Introduction

Carter (2000:8) refers to the Gospels as 'identity-forming' and 'lifestyle-shaping narratives'. Viljoen (2013:2) argues that the Gospels have a community-building function by presenting biographies focused on Jesus, thereby offering a model for readers to follow. Gundry (2012:189) describes the purpose of the Gospel of Matthew as that of a manual for new converts or church leaders. Similarly, Turner (2008:1) and Osborne (2010: Introduction) affirm that Matthew conveys key messages for the life of the church, intending to equip readers with the teaching of Jesus.

The Gospel of Matthew displays a concentric structure, in which Mark offers his narratives while inserting discourses in between (see Gundry 2012:190–193). These discourses consist of sermons by Jesus, and within this structure, the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:1–7:29) is the first discourse section.

The Sermon on the Mount comprises a collection of Jesus's teachings found in Matthew 5–7. It was addressed to the disciples and a large crowd of listeners on a mountainside not far from Capernaum. Viljoen (2013:1) points to Matthew's use of *righteousness* in the Sermon on the Mount 'as an instrument to define the identity of his community'. He demonstrates that righteousness is a key concept in the Sermon on the Mount in 5:6, 10, 20 and 6:1, 33 and concludes that 'the identity of the disciples is defined by their distinctive righteousness' (Viljoen 2013:9).

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This article offers an interpretation of the identity of the righteous in the Sermon on the Mount in the light of theories of social identity and status. The central questions to be addressed are the following:

- Should the 'righteous' in Matthew 5–7 be understood as an identity or as a status?
- If the righteous is an identity, is it best described as a spiritual or religious identity, or rather as a personal or group identity?
- If the righteous is a status, what kind of status does it represent?
- Is Jesus's message concerning righteousness rather an identity or a status?

In interpreting the Matthew passages, the socio-historical background is considered and various forms of analyses are applied: lexical-syntactical, literary, and theological. To understand the nature of the righteous in these passages, different social identity and status theories will be used. These theories will firstly be discussed, after which righteousness in the Sermon on the Mount will be interpreted to clarify Jesus's message concerning the righteous in these texts.

Identity and status theories

Theories of social identity and status offer frameworks for understanding how individuals create and define their place in society. Identity and status are both key aspects of a person's sense of the self: *identity* is internal and relates to how one sees oneself, while *status* is external and concerns how others perceive one. To understand righteousness in the Sermon on the Mount, it is necessary to determine whether being righteous refers to the believer's *identity* or the believer's *status*. For this interpretation, relevant theories on both identity and status will be considered.

Identity theories

Over the years, various identity theories have been developed to explain identity formation. Among the most influential are the Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Esler 2014:13–40), the Self-Categorisation Theory (SCT) (Turner & Reynold 2012:399–417), and the Social Identity Complexity Theory (SICT) (Roccas & Brewer 2002:88–106). These frameworks provide terminology and conceptual tools that make it possible to analyse how identity is formed and expressed within social contexts.

VandenBos (ed. 2007:463) defines *identity* as an individual's sense of the self. An individual's identity can be organised into *multiple social identities*, including natural identity, ethnic and cultural identities, family identity, professional identity, religious identity, and spiritual identity (Cornelius 2024b:2). Among these multiple identities, one can also differentiate between a *personal identity* – one's core sense of self – and *social group identities*, 'whereby the individual is identified by his or her group memberships' (Nario-Redmond et al. 2004:144).

A religious identity is a social group identity, as it involves membership of a religious group, whereas a spiritual identity is a personal identity that is grounded in one's beliefs, values and behaviour (Chatlos 2023:161). Cornelius (2024b:11) describes *spiritual identity* as one caused by the actions of God and accepted in faith. She distinguishes spiritual identity from other identities by emphasising that it is a personal identity, in contrast to collective identities shared with others. A spiritual identity is not defined by group membership but by a personal commitment to God – an identity 'constructed through internal processes' (Cornelius Forthcoming).

Status theories

An individual's status refers to a position in society, which entails particular rights and duties, behaviour and tasks (Fiske et al. 2017:45; Linton 1936:113). Ridgeway and Markus (2022:2) note that status is associated with prestige, influence and privilege, and that it shapes how individuals are perceived and treated in social interactions. One's status reflects one's standing in society in terms of esteem, honour, respect, dignity, worth, value, and reputation.

Sociologists differentiate between *ascribed, achieved*, and *master* statuses. An *ascribed status* is a position an individual is born into or assigned involuntarily (Chowdhury 2023; Darlong n.d.; Linton 1936:115), while an *achieved status* refers to a social position attained through one's actions, choices, and efforts (Chowdhury 2023; Darlong n.d.; Linton 1936:115). A *master status* is the dominant status that overrides all other statuses and plays a significant role in shaping an individual's identity (Chowdhury 2023; Darlong n.d.).

Every status, according to Linton (1936:114), is tied to a set of expectations and behaviours considered appropriate for the person occupying that status – this is referred to as the *role* to be played. The expectations linked to a given status or role often originate from society, institutions, or other individuals and they may also carry legal implications.

Righteousness in the Sermon on the Mount

Viljoen (2013:2) argues that, given the frequency of the term *righteousness* in the Sermon on the Mount, it can be regarded as a key concept in this section of Matthew. He refers to Betz (1995:130), who also notes that the term *occupies a place of central importance* and to Davies and Allison (2004:499), who maintain that the word expresses the essence of the Sermon on the Mount.

The word δικαιοσύνη appears in five verses in the Sermon on the Mount, occurring in distinct sections of the discourse (see Figure 1).

It is important first to consider the meaning of the concept of δικαιοσύνη in Matthew 5–6. The word δικαιοσύνη can be translated as 'righteousness', referring to specific behaviour – particularly doing 'what God requires' and

5:6	'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled' [μακάριοι οἱ πεινῶντες καὶ διψῶντες τὴν **δικαιοσύνην**, ὅτι αὐτοὶ χορτασθήσονται].
5:10	'Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (μακάριοι οἱ δεδιωγμένοι ἕνεκεν **δικαιοσύνης**, ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστιν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν).
5:20	'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' [λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν ὅτι ἐὰν μὴ περισσεύσῃ ὑμῶν ἡ **δικαιοσύνη** ⸂πλεῖον τῶν γραμματέων καὶ Φαρισαίων, οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθητε εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν].
6:1	'Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven' [Προσέχετε δὲ τὴν **δικαιοσύνην** ὑμῶν μὴ ποιεῖν ἔμπροσθεν τῶν ἀνθρώπων πρὸς τὸ θεαθῆναι αὐτοῖς].
6:33	'But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well' [ζητεῖτε δὲ πρῶτον τὴν βασιλείαν καὶ τὴν **δικαιοσύνην** αὐτοῦ, καὶ ταῦτα πάντα προστεθήσεται ὑμῖν].

FIGURE 1: The occurrence of δικαιοσύνη in the Sermon on the Mount.

'what is right' (Louw & Nida 1988:744). On the other hand, δικαιοσύνη can also denote being declared righteous, or being accepted by God (Louw & Nida 1988:452–453). A third possible meaning is that of religious acquirements, observances or practices (Louw & Nida 1988:532). Additionally, δικαιοσύνη can be understood as acts of charity, almsgiving, or giving to the needy (Louw & Nida 1988:570).

Knowing the possible meaning of δικαιοσύνη in the Sermon on the Mount, it is important to determine where these verses on righteousness fit into the structure of the narrative of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7.

An outline of the Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7 is introduced in 5:1–2, and narrates that Jesus, after seeing the crowds, went up on a mountainside, sat down, and began to teach the disciples who came to him.

Matthew 5:3–7:25 can be outlined as follows, based on the interpretation of Allison (1987:437–438) (Figure 2):

In this Figure 2, the placement of verses on righteousness within the structure of the sermon is clear. This structure reveals that righteousness not only features repeatedly throughout the sermon but also that it is addressed in all its main sections.

Righteousness in the Beatitudes (5:3–12)

In the Beatitudes (5:3–12), the pronouncements about the kingdom include the term *righteousness* in two verses (5:6 and 5:10) (see Figure 3), and are intended to instruct the disciples, encourage a positive response and reveal the characteristic traits God approves of (Turner 2008:147).

In Matthew 5:6, Jesus pronounces and promises that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled, and in 5:10, that those who are persecuted because of righteousness will inherit the kingdom of heaven. These promises assure

Structure of the Sermon on the Mount – Matthew 5:3–7:25	Righteousness
Beatitudes for the people of God: 5:3–12 →	5:6; 5:10
The task of the people of God in the world: 5:13–7:12	
Statement of their identity and calling: 5:13–16	
The three pillars: 5:17–7:12	
1. The role of the Law: 5:17–48 →	5:20
2. The Christian cult: 6:1–18	
General principle: 6:1 →	6:1
A triad of specific instructions: 6:2–18	
Almsgiving: 6:2–4	
Prayer: 6:5–15	
Fasting: 6:16–18	
3. Social issues: 6:19–7:12	
God and Mammon: 6:19–34	
A triad on true treasure: 6:19–24	
Encouragement: 6:25–34 →	6:33
On one's neighbour: 7:1–12	
A triad on attitude toward others: 7:1–6	
Encouragement: 7:7–11	
Conclusion: 7:13–27	

FIGURE 2: 'Righteousness' in the structure of the Sermon on the Mount.

A pronouncement of invitation to those awaiting God's blessing

The poor in spirit (5:3),

those who mourn (5:4),

the meek (5:5),

those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (5:6),

the merciful (5:7),

the pure in heart (5:8),

the peacemakers (5:9),

those persecuted because of righteousness (5:10),

when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me (5:11).

Instructions about these situations

FIGURE 3: Structure of the Beatitudes (5:3–12).

the audience of the 'satisfaction of their needs' (Osborne 2010: ch. 11) and of their place in the kingdom. Striving for righteousness – and suffering persecution as a result – are presented as reasons for rejoicing, knowing that a heavenly reward is waiting.

While many scholars interpret 'righteousness' in the Beatitudes as referring to right behaviour before God, an upright lifestyle, and proper conduct (Carson 2010:IIB2a1; Turner 2008:151), Wilkins (2002:212) acknowledges the multifaceted nature of righteousness. He contends that righteousness in these verses refers not only to 'personal ethical righteousness' but also to a yearning for God's promised act of salvation.

These statements about righteousness in the Beatitudes, clearly indicate the active role of the believer in acquiring this righteousness, as the believer must demonstrate a hunger and thirst to be in a particular right-standing before God (see Louw & Nida 1988:452–453). In Matthew 5:6, the reference to hungering and thirsting for righteousness probably points to a human desire and need for δικαιοσύνη,

as being declared righteous and accepted by God. In Matthew 5:10, those who are persecuted because of righteousness are called blessed, as the kingdom of heaven belongs to them. In this context, being persecuted for δικαιοσύνη likely refers to being persecuted for being righteous in the eyes of God on account of righteous behaviour.

Righteousness in the first pillar

In the section referred to by Allison (1987:437–438) as the first pillar, which discusses the role of the Law (5:17–48), righteousness is once again mentioned (5:20).

In Matthew 5:20, Jesus declares that the δικαιοσύνη required to enter God's kingdom must surpass that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. In this context, δικαιοσύνη refers to righteous behaviour – doing what is right and what God requires (see Carson 2010:IIB3a; Turner 2008:164). Jesus calls for a righteousness that exceeds that of these experts in the Law, implying a transformation of the heart and a deeper relationship with God. Righteousness, therefore, is not limited to outward behaviour but includes inner purity and a life lived in obedience to God (Figure 4).

Righteousness in the second pillar

In the discussion of the second pillar of the Christian cultic practice (6:1–18), righteousness is mentioned in the statement of the general principle (6:1).

Verse 1, interpreted by Allison (1987:437–438) as a general principle, is presented as an exhortation to function as a warning to the readers. Jesus cautions his audience to be careful (Προσέχετε) in the way they practise their righteousness. It should not be done (τὴν δικαιοσύνην ὑμῶν μὴ ποιεῖν) in front of others with the intention to be seen by them (ἔμπροσθεν τῶν ἀνθρώπων πρὸς τὸ θεαθῆναι αὐτοῖς). The warning is that if righteousness is practised to be seen by others, there will be no reward from their Father in heaven (μισθὸν οὐκ ἔχετε παρὰ τῷ πατρὶ ὑμῶν τῷ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς).

In the instructions that follow on almsgiving (6:2–4), prayer (6:5–15) and fasting (6:16–18), Jesus makes it clear that in their giving to the needy, in their prayers and in their fasting, his followers must beware of being hypocrites (ὑποκριταὶ) – people who pretend to be other than they really are (Louw & Nida 1988:766). They are not to announce their good deeds with trumpets (6:2 μὴ σαλπίσῃς ἔμπροσθέν σου), nor let their left hand know what their right hand is doing (6:3 μὴ γνώτω ἡ ἀριστερά σου τί ποιεῖ ἡ δεξιά σου). Nor should they pray while standing in synagogues and on street corners to be seen by others (6:5 ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς καὶ ἐν ταῖς γωνίαις τῶν πλατειῶν ἑστῶτες προσεύχεσθαι, ὅπως φανῶσιν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις) or disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting (6:16 ἀφανίζουσιν γὰρ τὰ πρόσωπα αὐτῶν ὅπως φανῶσιν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις νηστεύοντες).

Instead, Jesus emphasises that almsgiving, prayer, and fasting should be done in secret (6:4, 6, 18 ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ). These acts of righteousness are meant to be seen by God, not performed to impress others or to be honoured by them (6:2 ὅπως δοξασθῶσιν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων). Jesus promises that God, who sees what is done in secret, will reward these acts (6:4, 6, 18 ὁ πατήρ σου ὁ βλέπων ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ ἀποδώσει σοι). As Carson (2010 IIB4) notes, Jesus expects 'superior righteousness', that is, not merely correct behaviour but sincere and hidden acts of devotion. The reference to δικαιοσύνη in this context thus clearly refers to righteous behaviour (Figure 5).

Righteousness in the third pillar

In the discussion of the third pillar, which addresses social issues (6:19–7:12), righteousness is featured in the encouragement found in Matthew 6:25–34.

In Matthew 6:19–7:12, Jesus addresses two social issues: firstly, that the believer cannot serve two masters (6:19–34); and secondly, the believer's relationship with others (7:1–12). On the first issue (6:19–24), Jesus exhorts his audience to make the right choices – regarding whom they wish to serve, whether they want light or darkness inside them, and where

The role of the Law in one's identity of being salt and light

- **Command:** [17] 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets;
- **Statement:** I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.
  - **Elaboration** [18] For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.
  - **Warning:** [19] Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven,
  - **Promise:** but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.
    - **Elaboration:** [20] 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.

Practical instructions on these laws (5:21–48)

FIGURE 4: Structure of the first pillar.

The Christian cult (6:1–18)

- **General principle:** [1] 'Be careful not to practice your **righteousness** in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.
- **Instructions on almsgiving (6:2–4)**
- **Instructions on prayer (6:5–15)**
- **Instructions on fasting (6:16–18)**

FIGURE 5: Structure of the second pillar.

Social issues 6:19–7:12

- **God and Mammon:** No one can serve two masters (6:19–34)
  - **A triad on true treasure:** You need to decide who you want to serve, if you want light or darkness inside you, and where you want to store your treasures **(6:19–24)**
  - **Encouragement:** Do not worry about tomorrow, but seek God's kingdom and his **righteousness (6:25–34)**
- **On one's neighbour:** How to treat others (7:1–12)
  - **A triad on attitude toward others:** (7:1–6)
  - **Encouragement:** Ask, seek and knock (7:7–11)

FIGURE 6: Structure of the third pillar.

they choose to store their treasures. Then, in verses 25–34, Jesus encourages them not to worry about the future but to continually seek God's kingdom and righteousness.

Turner (2008:201) and Carson (2010 IIB5b4) understand the righteousness to be sought as referring to an 'upright lifestyle' and 'righteousness in submission to the will of God'. However, it is important to take note of the phrasing in the exhortation: ζητεῖτε δὲ πρῶτον τὴν βασιλείαν καὶ τὴν δικαιοσύνην **αὐτοῦ**. The personal pronoun αὐτοῦ cannot be ignored. The genitive αὐτοῦ may be interpreted as indicating the source of the righteousness – but with what implication? Is the believer being exhorted to seek God's righteousness? Does the phrase refer to God's approval gained through obedient behaviour; thus, a self-produced righteousness? Or is it pointing to a righteousness that originates from God, made possible through the work of Christ? (Figure 6).

Understanding *righteousness* in the Sermon on the Mount within the framework of an individual's sense of self and how they are perceived by others

'When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to Him, and He began to teach them …' (Mt 5:1–2). Jesus spoke to his followers, teaching them how to live a life dedicated and pleasing to God. He begins his sermon with what is known as the Beatitudes – pronouncements about the kingdom that highlight the character traits God approves of.

In Matthew 5:6 and 10, Jesus makes two pronouncements about righteousness: those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, as well as those who are persecuted for righteousness, are blessed in the eyes of God. The statement about being hungry and thirsty for righteousness possibly refers to a deep desire for the status of being righteous before God – an *achieved status* resulting from righteous behaviour. In line with this, in Matthew 5:10, being persecuted for δικαιοσύνη, refers to being persecuted for one's achieved status as being righteous in the eyes of God, attained through righteous conduct. This status is considered achieved, as it is based on the believer's actions, choices and efforts. It must be kept in mind, however, that this achieved status is not self-defined but rooted in God's expectations of human behaviour. In these Beatitudes, Jesus pronounces that striving to be declared righteous before God and enduring persecution because of that status, will result in divine blessing.

Then, in Matthew 5:13–16, Jesus makes a statement about the identity of his followers: 'You are the salt of the earth …' and 'You are the light of the world …'. Using these metaphors, Jesus both reveals their identity and calls them to live accordingly – as salt and light in the world. Turner (2008:156) explains that these metaphors refer to being disciples or followers of Jesus. He interprets them to mean that disciples without good works are like tasteless salt or an invisible lamp. Osborne (2010: ch. 12) further explains that Jesus's point is that 'the kingdom people must make a difference in this world'. Carson (2010 IIB2b 1–2) states that Jesus's disciples are to act as preservatives in the world by conforming to kingdom norms; they must show good works, and others must see this light. According to Wilkins (2002), the metaphors of salt and light underscore their necessity for the welfare of the world. Based on their religious and spiritual identities as followers of Christ, the disciples are called to be salt and light in the world – salt that does not lose its saltiness, and a light that is not hidden under a bowl due to the absence of good works.

In the discussion on the role of the Law (5:17–48), Jesus declares and warns in Matthew 5:20 that the δικαιοσύνη required to enter God's kingdom must exceed that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. In this context, δικαιοσύνη refers to righteous behaviour – doing what is right and fulfilling what God requires – thus highlighting the roles played to achieve the status of the righteous. However, Jesus makes it clear that the roles and expectations associated with this status are not limited to outward behaviour. Rather, Jesus demands a complete transformation of the heart and a sincere commitment to God.

In the discussion of the Christian cult (6:1–18), Jesus begins with a warning in 6:1 not to practise righteousness in front of others only to be seen by them. This is a caution against performing behaviour that aligns with God's requirements merely for public recognition. Turner (2008:182–183) explains that this refers to obedience to God's laws. As an achieved status of being righteous is not awarded by humans but by God, practising righteousness is not meant to impress humans. In the subsequent instructions on almsgiving (6:2–4), prayer (6:5–15), and fasting (6:16–18), Jesus emphasises that such practices should be directed toward God – this is the essence of superior righteous behaviour. This type of righteousness flows from a deep personal commitment to God, which constitutes one's spiritual identity. Jesus warns his followers against practising righteousness in the way of the Pharisees, whose actions are limited to their religious identity, that is, their membership of a religious group (Cornelius 2023:12).

In the discussion of social issues (6:19–7:12), righteousness is mentioned in the exhortation in Matthew 6:25–34, where Jesus urges his audience not to worry about the future but to continually pursue God's kingdom and righteousness. They are instructed to seek God's righteousness (ζητεῖτε … τὴν δικαιοσύνην αὐτοῦ 6:33). But what does it mean to strive for God's righteousness? God's righteousness refers to his saving power and covenant faithfulness (Schreiner 2018:88). Cornelius (2024a:240) summarises this divine attribute as God's 'commitment to what is right', which encompasses his justice, wrath, grace, love, and salvation. As humankind can never possess this kind of righteousness, it seems unlikely that Jesus is calling his audience to attain it in Matthew 6:33.

Are the followers of Jesus in Matthew 6:33 exhorted to strive for an *achieved status* of righteousness based on their righteous behaviour, or does this exhortation point to an *ascribed status* of righteousness made available through the work of Christ? Although Osborne (2010: ch. 24) prefers to interpret 'his righteousness' in Matthew 6:33 as referring to a life conducted following God's will, he concedes that it could also allude to justification in a 'Pauline sense': thus, an *ascribed status* through the grace of God. MacArthur (n.d.) notes that while Jesus did not teach the doctrine of justification like Paul did, 'justification by faith underlies and permeates all his gospel preaching'.[1]

Seeking God's righteousness in Matthew 6:33 does not appear to refer to a righteousness attained through obedience to the Law but rather to a righteousness that comes through faith in Christ. In these verses, Jesus clarifies that the believer's main focus and guiding priority in life must be God – continually seeking God's kingdom, not their own, and pursuing God's righteousness, not a self-derived one. In this concluding section of the sermon – the last pillar addressing social issues in Matthew 6:19–34 – Jesus prepares his followers for life as Christians. They are urged to pursue what God has initiated and to long for what God will ultimately fulfil.

A righteousness that comes through faith in Christ is an *ascribed status* – granted by God, not earned by human effort but received through faith. Through the work of Christ – his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension – the status of being righteous in the eyes of God becomes available to the believer. As this ascribed status takes on greater significance in the believer's life, becoming a *master status*, it begins to shape the believer's identity into a new identity in Christ. Du Toit (2024) explains that this new righteous status coheres with the believer's in-Christ identity. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians describes this identity in terms of being the temples of God (1:18), the body of Christ (2:15), being called by God (1:1–2), being saved (1:18), being spiritual (2:15), being united with the Lord (6:17), having the mind of Christ (2:16) and being in Christ (1:30) (cf. Cornelius 2023:13). This new identity is spiritual, with the potential to develop into a personal identity (Cornelius Forthcoming) and ultimately a core identity (Du Toit 2024).

Conclusion

Humankind can never attain *God's righteousness*, understood as his perfect commitment to what is right. *Righteous behaviour* refers to actions that align with what God expects, and this is particularly relevant in Matthew 5:20 and 6:1. In these verses, the audience is warned that their δικαιοσύνη must reflect a complete transformation of the heart, and that its purpose should be to be seen by God, not by others.

1.Theologian John Piper presented a conference paper in 2010, titled 'Does Jesus preach Paul's gospel?' In this paper, Piper (n.d.) argues that Jesus, as portrayed in the Gospel of Luke, speaks of justification by grace through faith, based on Christ's blood and righteousness.

Humankind's righteousness can be understood either as an *achieved* or an *ascribed* status. As an *achieved status*, δικαιοσύνη is grounded in adherence to the works of the Law and in a deliberate commitment to conform one's behaviour to God's standards. In the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:6 and 10, Jesus makes two pronouncements regarding righteousness as an achieved status: those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and those who are persecuted because of righteousness, are considered blessed in the eyes of God. This status is a forensic declaration by God and is recognised by fellow-believers – yet it remains grounded in human effort.

An *ascribed status* of righteousness is an outcome of God's righteousness – a repaired relationship between God and humankind – accepted by the believer through faith. This form of δικαιοσύνη is mentioned in Matthew 6:25–34, where the audience is encouraged not to worry about the future but to always seek God's kingdom and his righteousness. This righteousness is not earned but given – a gift from God, an *ascribed status* under his grace. As this status increasingly becomes the believer's *master status*, it begins to shape the believer's spiritual identity into a new identity in Christ – one that is deeply spiritual and gradually internalised as both a personal and core identity.

Before the work of Christ, righteous behaviour could thus lead to an *achieved status* of righteousness. But because of God's righteousness – revealed through the work of Christ – righteousness became available to believers as an *ascribed status*. When this ascribed status becomes the believer's *master status*, it flows over into a new identity in Christ. This new identity grounded in spiritual rebirth becomes a personal identity that guides and influences all other social identities.

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Data availability

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