

We read as follows in Jesus' name:

[Jesus said:] "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. ..." (ESV)

This is Your Word, heavenly Father; sanctify us in the truth, Your Word is Truth. Amen. (John 17:17)

In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Dearly beloved,

Excess righteousness is what Jesus revealed is necessary for one to enter the kingdom of heaven.

That is, our righteousness has to exceed that of the Pharisees, those ultra-conservative Jews.

This would have been a shocker for many in Judea and Galilee, not the least of whom the Pharisees.

These were the guys that seemed to know and keep the Law better than anyone else.

These guys went over and above what was required in the Law of Moses.

Remember Jesus' characterization of the Pharisee in contrast to the tax collector?

The Pharisee prayed: **God, I thank You that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.** ^{Luke18:11-12}

Where God required one day of fasting per year, this man did it twice a week.

Exceeding far more than what God prescribed.

Even tithing the minutest herbs like mint and dill and cumin. ^{Matthew23:23}

How many times do we have reported in the Gospels that the Pharisees would rebuke Jesus because He ate and associated with "sinners"?

The Pharisees would have no association with such people, lest their bad habits or company corrupt their otherwise spotless reputation or character.

The Law and the Jewish traditions were a burden, but a doable burden, so it was believed.

They helped to set the Pharisees apart from everyone else, at least in their eyes, probably in the eyes of some others, too.

And this was part of Jesus point. The righteousness of the Pharisees was a sham because they were keeping it to be seen and heard by men,

not seen and heard by God who **looks not at the outward appearance, but at the heart.** ^{1Samuel16:7}

I am sure that you know, or think you know, of people like this.

Perhaps you see hints of it even in yourself, as you choose to do or not do certain things,

not based upon what the Lord's eyes and ears will witness, but on what certain people will witness.

So our righteousness is a sham, too. It's shallow, a facade.

Take, for example, the 5th Commandment which Jesus expounds in our text.

You shall not kill, or murder.

This would seem to be a pretty easy law to keep, since murder is a definite act of ending a life.

But Jesus goes ahead and expounds on this commandment, not making a new law, but teaching the fuller and original meaning of this commandment.

We do not break the command simply by the final act, but also by everything leading up to it. He condemns our evil thoughts saying, **everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.**

You see, anger allows us, at least temporarily, to hate our brothers and to justify whatever harm we would inflict upon them for any and every offense we have perceived as coming from them. It allows us to say things to them or about them that we otherwise wouldn't; to **insult** them and call them **fools**, or in our usual parlance, "idiots", "stupid", "morons". Anger makes us feel justified to not only hurt or harm them or otherwise cause them grief, but even and also to withhold the love that God commands us to have for our neighbors.

And so our outbursts of anger, even wrath, whether sequestered only to the mind, or expressed in our words and actions (or inactions), are a violation of the 5th Commandment. St. John shows what serious offenses these are against God in his 1st Letter where he writes:

Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.^{1John3:15}

And again, **If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.**^{1John4:20}

Jesus condemns our anger, hatred, and insults. In God's eyes, these things are murder. They are not only liable to the judgment of a counsel of men, but of God Himself and the sentence is severe.

Where loveless and murderous thoughts, words, and actions would come from us, God's just judgment would lead to **the hell of fire.**

By this alone, we are condemned before God, yet as He plunges us into the baptismal water, our sinful nature thrashes about wanting to insist that we have also done good, that we have our own natural righteousness.

It wants to draw God's attention to the love, kindness, and mercy that we have shown to our loved ones ... and even, at select times, to those who have wronged us.

We believe ourselves to be magnanimous and that this "righteousness" exceeds God's requirements, and should count towards removing at least some of our guilt.

But Christ sets us straight, "...when you have done all that you were commanded, say, **'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'**"^{Luke 17:10}

So instead of excess righteousness, our personal righteousness is not up God's perfect standards. We cannot earn His favor. We cannot earn a stay of execution.

And so, any hope of our own righteousness before God is drowned and dies in our baptismal waters as we come before God and confess our anger and unkind words, our loveless and wrathful actions.

So we get a glimpse into why the Church for centuries has known how important it is for the health of our conscience to confess all our sins, to stand before God and *confess unto Him that we are by nature sinful and unclean,*

and that we have sinned against Him by thought, word, and deed. (Confession of Sins; ELH, p. 61)

But this still leaves us where we were before: outside the kingdom of God,
for, as Jesus said, your righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.
That is to say, you must have true righteousness, true perfection before God.
But where are we to obtain such perfection, when we have just admitted our complete imperfection?

We receive it from the One who came, not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. Matthew 5:17

Again, let us be taught by the Church's confession.

After we confess that we have sinned against God *by thought, word, and deed*,
we continue, *Therefore we flee for refuge to Your infinite mercy,*
seeking and imploring Your grace for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We need the excess righteousness of the one and only perfect Man, Jesus Christ.

The One whose perfection, because it is perfectly united to His divine nature, has infinite value
so that it can be and has been accounted to you as your righteousness, your perfection.

Jesus is, as Jeremiah foretold, the **Lord our righteousness**. Jeremiah 23:6

Having your sinful nature drowned in Baptism, the Lord raises you back out of the water
as a new man, *daily coming forth and arising to live in newness of life* in Jesus' righteousness.

It is this exceeding righteousness, true righteousness given to you by Christ Himself,
that grants you entrance into the kingdom of heaven, and not just on the Last Day, but today.

It is your entrance into the kingdom of heaven that gives your conscience peace
as you stand before God's judgment throne each and every day.

It is also this exceeding righteousness that allows you to have peace even with those who offend you
and would tempt you to anger and hatred.

For you realize that they have the same natural flesh as you that needs Christ's righteousness.

You are not better or more righteous than they are, as the Pharisees thought they were.

And so you need not separate to exalt yourself above them.

Instead you pray, *Thy kingdom come*, so that the Father's kingdom of grace may come to them as well.

It is an expression of Jesus' excess righteousness given to you that you would seek
not only your own entrance into God's kingdom, but also the entrance of your difficult neighbors.

Such a realization opens up our hearts and minds to those around us.

Like you, they need righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees and their own sinful nature.

And like you, they need Jesus Christ and His excess righteousness.

And how do you suppose God has ordained for them to receive it?

Through the love and mercy that He gives to them through you.

You, who have been forgiven, now are empowered and emboldened to forgive offenses,
and to be reconciled with your neighbor, sharing Christ's righteousness and
bringing them to the entrance of the kingdom of heaven.

But how difficult a task. How often we fail. How weak and frail is our flesh.

Then come and take the flesh and blood of Christ, your Lord and your righteousness.

Eat and drink the forgiveness of your sins and give your conscience peace.

Eat and drink the exceeding righteousness of God to strengthen your soul
against the temptation to anger and hatred and lovelessness.
And be filled with Christ, your love, your mercy, your patience and perseverance,
your righteousness.

In Jesus name. **Amen.**

Soli Deo Gloria