

In Nomine Iesu

The Sixth Sunday after Trinity 2023 The righteousness that exceeds - Matthew 5:17-20

“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. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the One whose righteousness truly exceeds. Dear fellow redeemed in Christ:

True or False? “As long as you try your hardest to be good and do your best to keep the commandments, God will accept your good intentions and give you eternal life.” The statement is false. In effect it says that you and God work together to achieve your salvation. There’s a term for that. It’s called “synergism,” that is, “working together.” I do my part. God does His part. There’s just one problem. It is completely false. But if the surveys are right, it’s a popular belief. More than half of all people who identify as Christians agree with such statements.

I

Jesus says, “Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” It’s not just that we have got to do all to the best of our ability. No, we’ve got to do better than those who were the very best at keeping the Law. The Pharisees dedicated their whole lives to keeping God’s commands down to the smallest detail. For example, we think it’s difficult to give 10% in offerings. Most of us struggle to give even 3 or 5%. The Pharisees not only tithed, that is, gave ten percent of their income, but they did so with all that they possessed, even down to the herbs and spices they used to prepare their meals. They strove to keep God’s Law perfectly, even coming up with many of their own laws trying to exceed what they perceived to be the will of God.

Jesus tells us here that we’ve got to do even better than that, otherwise we’ve got no chance of entering the kingdom of heaven. None of the Pharisees measured up. None of the people of His day did. In the Old Testament God summarized His demands on us when He said, “Be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy.” And Jesus Himself taught, “You shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.” Holiness and perfection are what the Law requires. Anything less isn’t good enough.

James makes this same point very clearly. He says, “Whoever keeps the whole Law, yet fails in just one point, He is guilty of all of it.” (James 2:10) It’s akin to canning fruits and vegetables. The contents may have been prepared exactly right, the inside of the jar sterilized perfectly, and the cover on the canning jar screwed down ever so tightly, but if the seal fails in only one place, even a place so tiny the eye can’t even see it, the contents will all be ruined.

That's how it is with God's Law. Even if we could keep the whole Law, except in one point, that one point brings down the whole structure and purpose of the Law. For the Law all hangs together in love for God and for the neighbor. Nor can we say, "Oh, I did that a long time ago when I was young and foolish; but I've really changed now." Or, "Oh, I was just tired and stressed out and in a bad mood when I lost my temper; you can't hold that against me." Failing in one point is failing in all points.

Jesus could have chosen any point of the Law to use as His example. But He focuses on the 5th Commandment, "You shall not murder." Now I'm sure that just about all of us have kept that commandment, at least in a legal sense. But in God's sight this requires more than not murdering. It demands that we do him good, helping him in all his physical needs. In addition when we do something against another person, Jesus says here that we should swallow our pride, go and be reconciled to him. We should confess our wrongdoing and apologize sincerely. And when he has done something against us, we are not to hold a grudge or take some other sort of revenge. Rather we are to forgive and be merciful. In saying this Jesus shows us that the commandment has to do not just with deeds, but also with words and the desires of the heart. He says that anger toward our brother, and hostile, spiteful words put us in danger of hell. It is written, "Whoever hates his brother is a murderer." Not just the outward act, you see, but also the inward desire is sin. For all sin begins in the heart.

That's why Jesus called the Pharisees, "whitewashed tombs" and "well maintained cemeteries." Outwardly they were pure, but inwardly they were full of uncleanness and dead men's bones. But that is what all human righteousness is: Attractive from the outside but full of uncleanness on the inside. Can we do better than the scribes and the Pharisees? No, we will fail even as they did. If we place our trust in the Law and the holiness we've achieved for ourselves, we will still be delivered to the Judge, who is Christ, and He will hand us over to the officer, who is Satan, and we will be thrown into prison, which is hell, until we have paid all that the Law requires.

II

Jesus here teaches us that we must seek not an outward righteousness, like that of the Pharisees, but an inward righteousness, the righteousness of faith. We are to place our confidence not in ourselves, but in Him alone, of whom we confess, "The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusted in Him, and I am helped." Only in Christ is there an escape from the condemnation of the Law. Only Christ has kept the Law without fault or failing, even as He said, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill." Jesus alone has kept the Law. He did so for us, in our place. His righteousness alone exceeds.

Jesus fulfilled the Law in both ways. First, He never sinned, "He was tempted in all points as we are, yet without sin." (Hebrews 4:15) He didn't do what is forbidden and did do all the commandments require. He did not murder or harm or harbor hateful thoughts, but He perfectly loved His neighbor on earth and His Father in heaven. He had compassion on all, healing, doing good, and teaching truth to all. He lived a holy life as our substitute, that our unholy lives might be covered by His holiness.

Secondly, Jesus fulfilled all the requirements regarding the Sabbath Day and all the sacrifices. By His death and burial, Jesus Himself became the all-sufficient sacrifice for all sins, and so secured our eternal Sabbath rest. All the Old Testament laws found their goal and culmination in Jesus. Thus He brought all such sacrifice to an end in

His crucified body, that God's perfect Law might no longer condemn us. So, you see, not only did Jesus live a perfect life in our place, He also suffered the full punishment for our imperfections in order to reconcile us to the Father. Now He is risen from the dead in proof that we are freed from judgment and given new life and a sure hope.

That freedom, that new life, that sure hope are ours in holy baptism. For Paul says in the Epistle that by water and the Word we were buried with Christ into His death and raised with Him to new life. His death counts as our death. The judgment He endured counts as ours. We are united with Him when we believe and are baptized, and take refuge under His wings. There we are protected and kept safe from the devil and from death itself. So, there is no fear of hell and judgment for the one who believes and is baptized. Christ has already endured all that in our place, for us. Judgment day for the believer is already in the past. It took place on Good Friday. Then and there the fires of hell were extinguished, just as here and now they are doused for each of us at the baptismal font, where we were joined to the cross and buried with Christ. Now we are resurrected with Him to new life.

So it is that the words of Jesus - which seem to be impossible - are now, in fact, true in Him: "Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." Believing in Christ, our righteousness does indeed exceed that of the Pharisees. It has been given to us freely by God's grace. We have the perfect righteousness of Jesus. The Father has declared us to be holy in His sight. The Father looks at us who have been baptized in Christ, and sees only His own dear Son. Dear friends, God doesn't just demand that we straighten out our lives, He gives us a whole new life, the life of Jesus that is full and complete and perfect. Through Christ we are counted righteous, and have entered the kingdom of heaven. Believe that. For it is true.

And lest we be tempted to fall back to the old life of sin and death, to the bondage of the Law, saying to ourselves, "All that counts for my salvation Jesus did, not what I do; so now I can live however I please," St. Paul answers, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?" How can we who have been freed from hell's prison go back and put ourselves in its chains again? That's exactly what we've been liberated from! Why would we want to go anywhere near there, and so risk falling away from Christ?

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"Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." (v. 20) We were crucified with Christ, so that the body of sin might be done away with. We are no longer slaves of sin. We have been turned around. We walk with God, Christ having taken away what divided us from Him. We walk toward heaven, not away from it, as before. We walk by faith in the newness of Christ's life. He has brought us through the sea of baptism and therefore out of the house of bondage, just as He once rescued Israel from its slavery in Egypt. So, let us reckon ourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ, who has given us a righteousness that far exceeds that of the scribe or Pharisee. To Him be all honor, glory, and praise, forever and ever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria