



Real Righteousness

St. Matthew 5:20

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Last week we looked at Matthew 5:17-19. Jesus tells us there that he came not to abolish the Law, but to fulfil it – in fact, he says, “Whoever relaxes even the smallest part of the Law and teaches other to do the same, will be least in the Kingdom of Heaven.” This little paragraph that runs from verses 17 to 20 is one of the most important passages in all of the New Testament, because here Jesus explains the nature of his ministry. As I said last week, some of the people listening to him would have been confused. He came with authority and performed miracles, yet he hadn’t trained under the great rabbis, he wasn’t part of the school of the Pharisees – and what he did was often opposed to the rules and norms setup by the Pharisees. In fact, he frequently criticises the teaching and interpretation of the Law that was taught by the authorised teachers of the day. He went out of his way to spend time with tax collectors and prostitutes – the dregs of society. And on top of all that he talked about “grace.” What he was preaching was different from anything the people had heard before. They thought he came to start a new religion and to throw out what they knew.

And so Jesus corrects them, and here at the beginning he lays down two important principles of his ministry: First, that what he is teaching is in no way inconsistent with the teaching of the Law and Prophets; but, secondly, that his teaching is also very different from the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees. He says, I have come to fulfil the Law, but he also says that the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees isn’t enough – it won’t get you into the Kingdom.

If the Law was important to Jesus, it ought to be important to us. No, Jesus came not to abolish the Law, but to fulfil its righteous requirements himself *and to enable us to follow it too*. We have an obligation to keep all God’s commandments, both the big ones and the

small ones. We have to do and teach it all. Jesus came not to relax the standard that the people knew, but to make it even more stringent.

And so Jesus now turns our attention to the scribes and Pharisees. If the Law is really that important and if the whole purpose of God’s grace is to give us the ability to keep the Law, then we have to understand what the Law is and what it demands from us. Holiness is not a feeling or experience we have. Holiness is keeping and fulfilling God’s Law. Holiness is something we do, something we practice as we live our lives each day. It’s the honouring and keeping of God’s Law each day as we follow Jesus’ example. It’s being like him. That’s what holiness is. So you see, holiness is tied to the Law. You can’t separate them.

This is where the scribes and Pharisees come into the picture, because in Jesus’ day, they were the embodiment of holiness – at least that’s how people saw them and that’s how they saw themselves. But instead of pointing to them as an example of true holiness, Jesus says:

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:20)

Those are scary words, because in Jesus’ day you just couldn’t get any more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees. The scribes were the men who spent their days studying, teaching, and copying the Law. They were the ones you went to if you had a question about the Law. They studied it day and night and they knew it backwards and forwards. They were men who devoted their entire lives to the Law.

The Pharisees were a religious party and they were known for the great zeal with which they sought to live the Law. The name itself means “separatist.” They were men who set themselves apart from the rest of the world so that they could live out their code of ceremonial acts. They knew that holiness was to follow the Law, so they had studied the Law and written out their own code of rules – a code, that if kept, would supposedly keep them from breaking the Law. In doing that, they went way beyond the requirements of the Law – because they wanted to be on the safe side. Theirs was a code that, to the average Jew, looked impossible to keep. And so everyone looked up to the

Pharisees, they were the ones wholly devoted to the Law and to living holy lives – no question about it: *they were wholly devoted to righteousness*. And yet Jesus says to those people listening to him, “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Yikes!

So we have to ask ourselves: What is true holiness? What is true sanctification? What does it mean to be “religious”? The Pharisees worked harder at it than anyone, and yet Jesus says that the righteousness of even the least, the smallest, the spiritually wimpiest Christian is greater than the righteousness of the Pharisees.

To understand Jesus’ point we need to look at the religion of the Pharisees, and one of the best places to look is in Jesus’ own parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. These two men went up to the Temple to pray. The Pharisee went up to the front, to a prominent place where he could be seen, and loudly thanked God that he wasn’t like other men: that he wasn’t like this lowly tax collector. He thanked God loudly that he wasn’t an extortioner, that he wasn’t unjust, that he wasn’t an adulterer, that he wasn’t like that tax collecting dirtbag. That’s all well and good. Jesus grants that the Pharisees were righteous in these ways. They fasted twice a week when the Law only said to fast once a year. They were sticklers with their tithes. If they grew a field full of wheat and a sprig of mint or anise grew up in the wheat field, they’d not only tithe 10% of the wheat crop, but they’d also tithe ten percent of the mint of the anise. If a Pharisee found a dime on the sidewalk, he’d be sure to tithe a penny of it. They were careful to observe every aspect of the ceremonial Law: making all the right sacrifices and doing all the right things. They would put most of us to shame. And yet throughout the Gospels Jesus condemns these men, and here he tells us that unless our righteousness is greater than theirs, we won’t be a part of his Kingdom.

So, if they were so great, what was their problem? Well, Jesus repeatedly calls them hypocrites. Their problem was that all of their righteousness was external. Their religion was for show – it had nothing to do with the condition of their hearts. In Luke 16:15, Jesus says, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in

the sight of God.” Another time the Pharisees condemned Jesus’ disciples because they saw them sit down to eat without washing their hands. And Jesus responded to them saying, “You Pharisees are so very careful to clean the outside of the cup before drinking from it, but you forget the inside of it. It’s not what goes into a man that defiles him, but what comes out! It’s out of the heart that come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immorality, thefts, and lies.” In that same passage Jesus calls the Pharisees white-washed tombs. They look fine on the outside, but inside there’s nothing but death. Think of the Taj Mahal. It’s arguably one of the most architecturally perfect buildings on earth, and yet the building is a mausoleum for the wife of an emperor. All that grace and beauty on the outside, but on the inside is nothing more than a decomposed corpse.

But we have no right to feel smug when Jesus condemns the Pharisees. How often do we come to Church and drop a tithe cheque into the plate every Sunday, month after month and year after year, yet inside our hearts are black with all sorts of evil. We’re prone to doing the right thing when everyone is watching, but if we can get away with sin, all too often we’ll do it. And so Jesus says, that unless our righteousness is greater than that of the Pharisees, we won’t make it into his Kingdom.

You see, the Kingdom of God is concerned with the heart. The externals of religion ought to be there too, but it’s the heart that really counts. It’s said that the best definition of religion is this: “Religion is what you do when no one is watching.” If you want to know who and what you really are, you need to look at what you do and what you think about when you’re alone.

Jesus also condemned the Pharisees because they were more concerned with the ceremonial than with the moral. That’s what naturally happens if you’re more concerned with the outside than the inside. They made all the right sacrifices, they were careful to make sure that they weren’t rendered ceremonially unclean, but they didn’t give a rip about the moral aspects of the Law. We still live with this same danger. It’s not just the person who is more concerned with the fine points of the liturgy than the fine points of holiness.

It’s the person who thinks that he’s taken care of an obligation when he comes to church on Sunday morning so that he can spend the rest of his Sunday (or the rest of the week) as he pleases. That’s the problem of the Pharisees. The person concerned with real righteousness asks himself what he can do on the Lord’s Day so that it really is the *Lord’s* day, instead of thinking only about some external duty. The Pharisee asks, “What do I *have* to do?” The truly righteous person asks, “What *can* I do?”

You see, when it came to caring for God and man, the Pharisees didn’t really care for either – they cared about themselves. The Pharisee didn’t really care about glorifying God – he just wanted to glorify himself. Think again of the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee wasn’t there to worship God. He was there to proclaim his righteousness before men. He stepped up to the most prominent place and instead of going there humbly and first confessing his sin to God, he loudly proclaimed his lack of sin. The ironic thing was that he was full of sin – if nothing else the sin of pride and full of lies and self-deception. But you see that’s what happens when we choose to follow our religion based on our own ideas of what’s important – when we set our own agenda for holiness instead of following God’s. We make a list of all the do’s and don’ts that we think are important and we compare ourselves to others – and then we’re satisfied because we’re doing better at keeping our list than someone else is. But in doing that we forget about the importance of our relationship with God.

I’ve seen some real Pharisees in the church. I’ve known men struggling to keep their heads above water in dealing with the sin of homosexuality, who when they went to a church, were treated like dirt. I’ve seen men stand like the Pharisee before God saying, “Thank God that I’m not like this poor gay! I’ve never had a gay thought in my life!” I’ve seen women who have left behind lives of promiscuity or prostitution come to the Church and been treated the same way. And yet it’s the men and women struggling with sin, daily fighting to keep their heads above water, that understand their need to daily commit themselves to God’s care and who are spending time in prayer and in the Word – growing close to God – while those condemning them barely crack their

Bibles open during the week and pray – if they pray – only when they’re in desperate trouble or have some need – and then their prayers are just “Gimme, gimme, gimme, God!”

You see, that’s the other thing that condemned the Pharisee: the total absence of the Beatitudes in his life. This is the difference between him and the Christian. The Christian lives the Beatitudes. He’s poor in spirit, he’s meek, he’s merciful, he’s a peacemaker. He’s not satisfied that he’s done *one* righteous thing today. No, he hungers and thirsts for righteousness. His one great desire is to be just like Jesus. Where the Pharisee was self-satisfied, the Christian is never satisfied, because with each step he takes toward Christ-likeness the more he realises just how many steps there are between him and his goal. That’s how we have to judge ourselves.

In the end, Jesus condemns the Pharisees, not because they kept the Law in part, but because they didn’t really keep it at all. They tithed from the tiny mint plant that grew up in the wheat field and they fasted twice a week, but they forgot the main point of the Law: love of God and love of man! That’s the core of true religion. Loving God and loving our neighbour is the true worship that God wants from us. If we aren’t doing that, the rest is pointless. In fact if we aren’t loving God and our neighbour, any other offering we bring to God is unacceptable. That’s why Jesus says that if you come to the altar and remember that your brother or sister has something against you, go and make amends first, then come back and make your offering.

You should come to Church every week. You should be tithing. But those things don’t make you holy. The true test of holiness is your relationship with God, your attitude toward him, your desire to keep his commandments *out of gratitude for what he’s done for you*. The *externals* of religion grow out of the *internals*. If you’re doing the externals without the internals you’re a Pharisee – you’re a whitewashed tomb full of dead men’s bones. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, “To be holy does not just mean the mere avoidance of certain things, or even not thinking certain things; it means the ultimate attitude of the heart of man towards that holy, loving God, and,

secondly, our attitude towards our fellow men and women.”

Too often we focus on the details instead of the principles – on our actions instead of our motives – on doing instead of being. In the next few verses we’ll look at Jesus’ condemnation of the Pharisees when he says, “You guys are proud of yourselves because you don’t commit adultery; but you’ve already committed adultery when you let your eyes linger too long on a woman who isn’t your wife.” He’s saying that it’s what’s in the heart that really counts. You don’t become a Christian by doing some things and not doing others. You become a Christian by entering into a relationship with God, and by making your supreme desire to know and to love him better and better. That’s not something that happens just because you come to church on Sundays. It happens when you devote yourself to knowing God. When you give him all of your attention. As I said before, there aren’t any shortcuts to knowing God or to becoming more like Christ. You do it by spending time with him: in prayer and in the study of his Word. Jesus calls us to be his disciples and that’s what discipleship is all about. The Twelve weren’t called disciples because Jesus said, “Follow me,” and they said, “No thanks, but we’ll be sure to read about you in the newspaper.” No, they were disciples because they *followed* him, and because they came to *know* him. They went where he went and walked where he walked. We can do no less!

We have to be careful here too. Is Jesus teaching salvation by works? Is he saying that we have to be better than the Pharisees to get into the Kingdom? No. St. Paul reminds us, “None is righteous, no, not one” (Romans 3:10). Every one of us stands condemned by God’s Law. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Jesus didn’t come to teach that we can save ourselves by being righteous. But neither did he come to do it all for us so that we don’t have to do anything. Remember that Jesus’ requirement of a righteousness greater than that of the Pharisees comes right after his statement that “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.” (Matthew 5:19).

Jesus’ point is to show us how we are to keep the Law. If not an iota or a dot is to pass away, if we are condemned for relaxing even the smallest part of the Law, then how are we to keep it? Jesus is saying here that righteousness is the living proof of our having received the grace of God in Jesus Christ. This is the point that St. James makes when he tells us about faith and works. Some people say it’s all about works and other’s say it’s all about faith. Jesus (and James) are saying, “No, both of those statements are wrong. The evidence of the true Christian’s faith *is* his works.

St. Paul says, “do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). Jesus says, “When you get to heaven, you can’t just cry out ‘Lord, Lord,’ unless you do the things that I command you.” *Doing is the evidence of believing!*

We need to be very careful. Before you claim that you’re covered by the grace of God in Jesus Christ you need to ask yourself if your life is holy, because to receive God’s grace means not only that he has forgiven your sins through the death of Jesus Christ, but also that you’ve been given a new nature. It means that a new work is being done in you by the Holy Spirit, working to make you more like Christ. The man or woman who has been born again and is indwelt by the Holy Spirit is by definition a man or woman who is righteous and whose righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. That person is no longer living for himself. He’s not self-satisfied and he’s not self-righteous. As his heart is purified, he grows to love God more and more and his great desire is to honour God and to give him glory – and Jesus tells us that we do that by keeping his commandments. In John 14:21 he says, “Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.”

In conclusion let me say: If your heart has been regenerated. If your mind has been renewed, you will have a love for God’s commandments – your greatest desire is for holiness – not just external, but an inner holiness that produces holy externals.

So you need to ask yourself: Do you know God? Do you love God? Is your greatest desire in life to glorify him no matter what the cost? Does this come first in your life – before your husband or wife, before your kids, before your job, before hobbies or sports – not so that you can be better than other people, but so that you can honour and glorify and love God, who sent his only-begotten Son to die for you so that you could be restored to fellowship with him?

Please pray with me: Our Father, we give you thanks that you sent your only-begotten Son to be the righteousness that we can never attain and that he died in our place. Draw us to yourself by the working of your Holy Spirit, we ask, that we may desire a closeness to the one who has redeemed us and that we may have a great love of your Law – a desire to be holy as Christ is holy. We ask this in his name. Amen..