

Exceeding Righteousness

Trinity 6
Matthew 5:17-26

#1104
15 July 2007

In today's Gospel, Jesus says something quite frightening, when you pause to ponder it. Hear what He says again: *"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."*

The frightening thing about these words is just how good and upright the scribes and Pharisees really were – at least when you saw their outward lives. They certainly appeared to fear, love, and trust in God above all things. They did not take His name in vain. They very faithfully kept His holy day and listened to and learned His holy Word. They did not abuse their bodies by being drunkards or gluttons. They did not live in sexual immorality. They did not steal from God by holding back on their tithes. In fact, they gave even more than what God required in His Law. They fasted regularly – at least twice a week. To all outward appearances, they were very, very good people. They were the sort of people that you would delight to have as fellow church members and neighbors. They did not “play religion” at all; they were very sincere, very zealous, and it showed. Yet the Lord Jesus points to them and says to all who follow Him: “Your righteousness has to be much better than that!” What on earth does He mean?

Thankfully, He goes on to tell us what He means. He takes up the Fifth Commandment as His first example: *"You shall not murder."* Now, every scribe and Pharisee could pride himself on having kept that commandment. God said, “Don't go around sticking knives in people,” and the scribes and Pharisees could say, “Thank God, we haven't done that. We've kept that one.” But Jesus raises His eyebrow at such a bold claim and says, “Really? You think you've kept the Fifth Commandment?” Then He asks some pointed questions: “Have you ever been angry with your brother in your heart? Have you ever hurt another person with the names you've called them? Have you ever insulted or put down another human being with malice in your heart? Oh, you have, have

you? Well, then, you have broken the holy Fifth Commandment to smithereens.”

You see, we look at the outside and judge only by what we can see. There's only one problem with this: it's not how God looks at us. He does not judge by the outside, at least not by the outside alone. He looks at the inside. He looks at the inner life, at the heart. *"For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart"* (1 Sam. 16:7). That's where Jesus' real concern lies. Jesus even said, *"For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."* (Mk. 7:21-23).

Now can you see why Jesus rejects all righteousness based on external behavior? We certainly can strive long and hard to do the right things and keep our evil inclinations in check. We can fight valiantly and fairly successfully to not do what we would very much like to do at times. People around us may even think that we are good, upright, religious, and very pious people. But we know the truth. We know what's inside. We know what we would *like* to do at times; and *would do*, if we thought we could get away with it. We just cannot quite control that heart and inner will so tainted by sinful self-serving.

So the real problem is our sinful hearts. We may have some limited control over our sinful actions; but over our hearts? Who can easily stop a fit of anger or jealousy or envy or pride by flexing the muscle of will power? No one! So, what is Jesus really saying? Is He saying that no one can enter the Kingdom of heaven?

Ah, but there is One Man from whose heart flowed nothing but pure love – pure love toward God above all things; pure love toward His every neighbor as Himself. Yes, there is One Man who has such a pure heart that He

perfectly kept the Law without fail, and He lived in perfect love. There is such a perfect heart! And so there is also a perfect righteousness, a righteousness that did, and does, and always will exceed that of the Pharisees and scribes. That heart belongs to Jesus Christ, and so does the righteousness.

So, if we want to enter the Kingdom of heaven, we absolutely must have the righteousness of Jesus Christ. No, not a righteousness that is only sort of like His. No, not a righteousness that only weakly imitates His. You see, being “sort of like” or being “weak imitations” doesn’t cut it with God. Remember how Jesus summarized God’s will for us: “*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*” (Mt. 5:48). If we are to enter the Kingdom of heaven, we need a perfect righteousness, the righteousness that belongs to Christ alone – a righteousness that we can receive only by His grace and only by faith in Him.

St. Paul reminds us today that in Baptism we are joined to Christ Jesus – buried with Him into death and raised with Him to walk in newness of life. You see, Jesus freely gives you His righteousness. He who is totally sinless took upon Himself all of our sin, and the sin of the whole world. As He went to the cross, He owned all sin and every little sin we commit as His very own. He even divests Himself of His righteousness, His holiness, and He places it upon us in the water of Baptism. He clothes us in His very own perfection. What a blessed exchange! And now, because of the miraculous washing of Baptism, God looks upon us and sees not our sinful hearts, but rather the image and reflection of His beloved Son. He sees us clothed in the exceedingly perfect righteousness of His Son.

“But, Pastor,” you say, “my heart is still sinful. I still have terrible desires. Sometimes I even act on those wretched thoughts! Surely, God doesn’t just overlook that, does He?” No, He doesn’t just overlook sin. But what does Scripture say? “*My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the*

propitiation—the means of forgiveness—for our sins, and not only for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 Jn. 2:1-2). That answers the question, doesn’t it? God wants to free us from our sin, and cleanse our hearts through faith – no two ways about it. And since that cleansing job is never finished this side of heaven, we joyously live under His pardon until the end. And His cleansing work just keeps going and going and going.

“*Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*” Let’s give thanks to our gracious God that our Lord Jesus Christ gives us what we could never come up with or accomplish on our own – an exceeding righteousness freely given to us, an exceeding righteousness placed on us through the washing of water and His Word in Baptism, an exceeding righteousness placed in us again today in the Sacrament of His Body and Blood. As we keep learning to live from this gift of God, our lives will be transformed more and more into His perfect love. And on the Last Day, when our Baptism is fully completed, our lives will be like His – love, pure and simple. As we will soon sing:

*We thank You, Christ; new life is ours,
New light, new hope, new strength, new
pow’rs.
This grace our ev’ry way attend
Until we reach our journey’s end (LSB 562:6).*

Amen.