

Trinity 6  
Matthew 5:17-26  
Christ Fulfills All Righteousness  
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"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

What is righteousness? It's important for us to know what righteousness is, since our Lord Jesus tells us that our righteousness must exceed the scribes and the Pharisees for us to go to heaven. Righteousness is what is right. To be righteous means to do what is right, holy, and good. Righteousness is measured by how it conforms to God's norm, God's law. Who determines what is righteous? God does. We heard read the Ten Commandments from Exodus chapter twenty. Righteousness is measured by how closely one follows these prescribed commandments of God. Righteousness is measured by pure teaching. Jesus says, "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." Pastors are commanded to have *righteous* teaching. Their teaching must have their source from God himself, grounded in God's Word. So to enter the kingdom of God your righteousness must be greater than the scribes and the Pharisees. Your teaching must be purer. Your works must be holier. You must be fully obedient. As Jesus says later in this same sermon, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (5:48)

Righteousness is determined by God. Jesus is God. So to know what is righteous, we need to listen to Jesus. For some strange reason many who claim to follow Jesus think that he is very lenient on the law. He's some "live and let live" type of guy. However, if we actually listen to what Jesus preaches, we learn that that is not the case. Our Lord doesn't simply have a strict interpretation of the Law, he has the one true pure sense of the Law. He teaches us that when God commands us not to murder, he does not simply mean don't kill anybody. God doesn't want you to be angry with your brother. In fact he says that anyone who is angry with his brother is liable to the same judgment as a murderer.

You see, when God gave the Commandments to Moses, he didn't simply intend to govern the outer works of his people. He was revealing to them how they should be on the inside and out. Jesus criticizes the scribes and Pharisees for their backward teaching of the Law. He cries, "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence! You blind Pharisees! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean." (23:25-26) Likewise, Jesus compares them to whitewashed tombs filled with the unclean bones of the dead. Jesus is interested in the judgment of God, not men, because God is the one who determines righteousness. And God looks at the heart. Jesus teaches that for you to be righteous, you must first be righteous on the inside.

Jesus doesn't only say that you are a murderer if you are angry with your brother. He says if anyone looks at a woman with lust in his heart he has already committed adultery. (5:28) Everyone who divorces his wife, except on the grounds of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." (5:32) Jesus teaches that we ought not retaliate against those who hurt us and to love and pray for our enemies. We are to give to the needy in secret, so that no one knows the good we have done, except God.

If you want to be righteous and have a righteousness that exceeds the scribes and the Pharisees, you must obey the commandments, not simply in action, but in thought and word.

So, I have a question for you? Are you righteous? Does your righteousness exceed the scribes and Pharisees? It might be easy to criticize the scribes and Pharisees, because Jesus does it so freely, but remember, Jesus is perfect. Is *your* righteousness greater than theirs? Does your righteousness match God's Law? Do you try to help your brother at every opportunity? Do you pray for those who do you harm? Perhaps you have never physically committed fornication or adultery, but have you every lusted after a man or woman not your spouse? Have you held a grudge? Have you coveted what isn't yours? Have you been lazy or dishonest? Have you loved God with your whole heart and diligently listened to his word? Unless your righteousness exceeds the scribes and the Pharisees, you will by no means enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

I certainly hope you are all honest enough with yourselves to see that you are not righteous. Your righteousness falls well below mark. By your own works you cannot enter God's kingdom. Rather, you are doomed to hell. Yet, let me read to you from this same Gospel of Matthew what Jesus later says to the chief priests and elders of the people in chapter twenty-one, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe in him." (21:31-32)

I thought your righteousness must exceed these holy men to enter God's kingdom! How on earth do thieving tax collectors and sexually immoral prostitutes enter the Kingdom of God before them? Because they believed John the Baptist. And if you believe John the Baptist, you believe Jesus. John came in righteousness, because he preached Christ Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. (John 1:29) He preached repentance and faith in Christ (Matthew 3:1-12) In fact when Jesus told John to baptize him in the Jordan River he said, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." (3:15)

Jesus fulfilled all righteousness. Not only did he fulfill God's Commandments, "You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, and mind" Jesus fulfilled the entire will of God. Jesus says in our text, "I have not come to abolish [the Law and the Prophets], but to fulfill them." To fulfill the will of God, Christ was crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 53:5) And as the Prophet Isaiah foretold, "By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities." (53:11)

According to the pure teaching of the Law our righteousness does not exceed anything except the requirements to go to hell. Yet, Jesus tells us that even thieving tax collectors and prostitutes enter the kingdom of heaven, because they believed the righteous Gospel of Jesus.

Jesus isn't contradicting himself. You do need a righteousness greater than the scribes and Pharisees to enter the kingdom of God. And there is a righteousness greater. Jesus' own righteousness. And the only

way you receive this righteousness is as a gift through faith in Christ. Christ fulfilled all righteousness. When he was baptized in the Jordan he joined himself to sinners and fought against temptation for us in the wilderness. He defeated the wiles of Satan for you. Christ's righteousness is in full conformity with the will of God. It lacks nothing. And it is through this righteousness, not *yours* that you enter into life everlasting. Yet this righteousness becomes your own through faith.

St. Paul writes, "Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, ***not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith...***" (Philippians 3:8-9)

You are saved and given your citizenship in God's kingdom through faith in Christ Jesus as a free gift without any works on your part. Now does that mean that you can disregard your Savior's instruction on murder, adultery, and the rest of the law? Should we sin, so that grace may abound? By no means! (Romans 6:1-2). St. Paul writes, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." (Romans 6:3-4)

This passage is not speaking of the resurrection from the dead on the Last Day, although, that is a certain reality. Paul here speaks of the Christian's daily renewal. By the power of the Holy Spirit given you in your Baptism you die to sin every day. Through repentance and contrition you place your sins and sinful desires in Christ's tomb and rise to new life. You live a new life in Christ. As St. Paul writes to the Galatians, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:20)

Through faith in Christ, Jesus lives in you, working righteousness in you through the power of the Spirit you received in your Baptism. Jesus teaches us that outward works do not make a person righteous. Cleaning the outside of a tomb doesn't remove the corpses inside. Rather, through Baptism Christ makes

you clean on the inside. He produces in you good works, a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. This righteousness is greater, because it is done through faith in Jesus Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit, who works righteousness in you. Righteousness that serves your neighbor, even when he hates you. Righteousness that confesses the truth. Righteousness that shows forth in every preacher and teacher, when the pure Gospel is preached.

The righteousness done by you through faith does not save you. Rather it is the fruit of Christ's righteousness given to you as a gift. Do not trust in your works, but in Christ's work for you. So that when you can't see your righteousness; when your sinful thoughts and desires convict you and accuse you, you can throw your sins, your unrighteous desires, yes, your entire old man into Christ's tomb. And rise, trusting not in your works, but in Christ's completed work. Christ's righteousness cannot fail to exceed all requirements. His righteousness is the only way to salvation. And he gives it to you as a gift.

Amen.