

7.16.2023 Trinity 6 (Matthew 5:20-26)

The Sermon on the Mount is our Lord's longest, most-detailed teaching about the kingdom of heaven, and the people of God. In this sermon, Jesus said to His disciples and to the crowd that gathered to hear Him, "*Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven*" (Matthew 5:20).

We aren't surprised by that statement, but those words would've shocked Jesus' original audience. To us, His words don't sound problematic, because when we read through the New Testament, the scribes and Pharisees continually stand in direct opposition to our Lord, and in the end, it is "*chief priests and Pharisees*" (John 7:32) who send the Temple guards to arrest Jesus, before He is turned over to the Romans to be crucified. From our point of view, it couldn't be more obvious that our righteousness must exceed theirs, but we have a different perspective than the people who gathered to hear Jesus speak at the beginning of His ministry.

The people our Lord addressed that day would have known the scribes to be learned men, experts whose role was to interpret and teach the Law. His original audience would have recognized the Pharisees as men who were distinguished from others because of their strict, outward adherence to the more than 600 laws contained in the Torah, and many who gathered that day to hear our Lord may have also been familiar with a Jewish proverb, which stated, "If only two men were to enter into the kingdom of heaven, one of them would be a Pharisee and the other a scribe."

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus pointed to the scribes (experts in the letter of the Law), He pointed to the Pharisees (experts in external adherence to the Law), He pointed to men who, from every outward appearance, would surely one day be among those in the kingdom of heaven, and then, addressing the common, everyday people, He said, unless your righteousness surpasses that of these so-called experts, you are not fit for the kingdom of God in this life, or in the life to come. This is shocking, and if we place ourselves in that scene, we can imagine our response would be quite similar to the one we heard from the disciples last Sunday, after Jesus said, "*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the*

*kingdom of God,*” to which His disciples replied, “*Who then can be saved?*” (Matthew 19:24-25).

The thought of who then can be saved would naturally come to mind because the scribes and Pharisees were the elite, respected, religious leaders. They were the men who were sought out for spiritual guidance, because they were the ones seen praying in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets. They were the people who had painfully sad faces during a strict fast. They were those who were seen giving to the poor (Matthew 6:1-18), but what the people didn't recognize in this public display, Jesus did - the condition of their heart. Later in Matthew's Gospel, our Lord would tell his listeners to respect these men because of their position of authority, “*but do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach... Everything they do is done for people to see*” (Matthew 23:3, 5).

Many of the scribes and Pharisees practiced a ceremonial, legal form of prideful self-righteousness that was designed, not to honor God, or to love Him and their neighbor, but only to be seen by others. It was a show that fooled people who “*look at the outward appearance,*” but their show didn't fool God, because “*the LORD looks at the heart*” (1 Samuel 16:7). Unto God, “all hearts are open, all desires known,” and from Him, “no secrets are hid” (Collect for Purity). God our Father knows the hearts of His children perfectly, and using the imagery of a Father's perfect knowledge and steadfast love for His children, Jesus told a parable that helps us recognize and understand this “fatal flaw” that was present in the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

When we hear the Parable of the Prodigal Son, most of us probably focus our attention on the wayward son, perhaps remembering the moment when we, like him, finally came to our senses and by the grace of God returned to our Father, who *ran* to welcome us home, but it just may be that the longer we are in our Father's house, the more we should consider the older son, who was every bit as lost as the prodigal once was, though it is a little more difficult to recognize from the outside, because he was the son who remained at home, stayed out of trouble, and obeyed the rules.

We call it, *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*, but it is noteworthy that Jesus

chose to end this parable with the story of the older son. He tells us that when the prodigal returned home, his father killed the fatted calf, and they began to celebrate. At that time, the *“older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf. But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him. So he answered and said to his father, Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him. And he said to him, Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found”* (Luke 15:25-32).

The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, like that of the older son, led these men to consider themselves to be the perfect sons of their Father, and they based this high opinion of themselves not on their love for God and his children, but instead on their own outward conformity to His commandments. You can hear their thoughts in the self-righteous statement of the older son, who said, *“These many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time”* (Luke 15:29). Outwardly the scribes and Pharisees obeyed God. They honored Him with their lips, but their hearts were far from Him (Matthew 15:8), for their service to God came not from a place of love and gratitude, but from prideful self-righteousness. Service and strict adherence to the Law had become an idol, a source of pride, and this pride brought them to a point where they (as crazy as it seems) welcomed God’s judgement, because they believed that they’d *“never transgressed your commandment at any time,”* that they had done everything that was required of them, and had therefore earned all that the Father has freely given. This distorted perspective blinded them, leaving them unable to recognize the grace and love and generosity of God our Father toward all of His children.

The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, like that of the older son, stirred up feelings of anger, and they refused to come in. Therefore, their

Father came out and pleaded with them. He sent His servants, His angels, His prophets, and at last, God sent His Son (Hebrews 1:2), but “*His own received Him not*” (John 1:11), because their so-called righteousness didn’t approve of such grace being lavished upon sinners. They wanted laws and rules and a savior who saved only by example, thinking that by their own strict, outward conformity to the letter of the law they could follow such an example perfectly, and work to save themselves, but “*no, we neither make nor save ourselves*” (Ephesians 2:10 MSG), and therefore the Father killed the fatted calf, God gave His only Son (John 3:16), who offered Himself freely and voluntarily on the Cross at Calvary, and thus, God provided everything for this eucharistic feast, a feast of praise and thanksgiving to which all are invited to come for forgiveness of sins, come for intimate communion with Him, come and receive all other benefits of our Lord’s Passion.

The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, like that of the older son, was a prideful self-righteousness, a show for others to see, void of love for God and neighbor, and therefore it was not righteousness at all, but just another man-made idol created to be worshipped instead of God. This is why Jesus warned His disciples: “*Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven,*” and His statement naturally leads those who are seeking the kingdom of heaven, those who are striving to “*enter through the narrow gate*” (Matthew 7:13), to ask, how do we reject the counterfeit righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, to the end that we may take hold of the kingdom of God, and His righteousness?

In conclusion, oddly enough, let’s look to a Pharisee for the answer. St. Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, tells us that he was, “*as to the law, a Pharisee... as to righteousness under the law, faultless*” (3:5,6). Before his conversion, Paul, the zealous Pharisee was considered to be among the holiest of people. *His* righteousness under the law was faultless. He observed every detail perfectly, but after his conversion, remember he suffered the loss of all things, and counted them as rubbish, he wrote, “*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*” (3:8-9).

Before he encountered our Lord on the Damascus road, Paul had a righteousness of his own, the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, the righteousness of the older son, the righteousness that is an idol to worship instead of God, but after he gained Christ, such righteousness was *rubbish*, because through faith in our Lord, St. Paul gained infinitely more: the exceeding *“righteousness from God that depends on faith.”*

So, how do we reject our own counterfeit righteousness to the end that we may take hold of that which comes through faith? Just like Paul the Pharisee on the Damascus road, we do so through a personal encounter with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The Church doesn't need experts who specialize in external adherence to the letter of the law. What the Church needs, and what this world needs, are Christians who keep the commandments because they understand the meaning and intent of the law, its summary: *“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets”* (Matthew 22:37-39).

May we be given grace to live such a life of love, that we may walk in holiness and righteousness all our days, not our own righteousness, but the *“righteousness from God that depends on faith.”*