

Sermon Matthew 5 17 26 6th Sunday after Trinity 1 Year Series

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Text: Matthew 5:17-26 (v. 20): “(Jesus said) For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven”.

Theme: The righteousness required by God

Goal: To desparate on our own righteousness and rely only on Christ’s righteousness.

Dear Friends,

Introduction: Do you want to enter the Kingdom of Heaven? I do! But does our righteousness surpass that of the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law of Jesus’ time?

I – The righteousness of the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law.

The Pharisees and Teachers of the Law were considered by the ordinary people as perfect servants of God. They performed all their duties at the temple and at the synagogues. Some of them knew the entire Old Testaments by heart and they were experts on the canonic laws established by the church. They used to teach the people, especially the teenagers, according to all traditions of the Jewish people. They gave the tenth even of the herbs and spices they planted in the backyard of their houses, like mint, dill and cumin (Matthew 23:23). They dressed themselves in a very special way, that everyone could recognize a Pharisee or a Teacher of the Law when they walked on the road; and everyone bowed to them out of respect. They used to offer long prayers on the street corners so that everyone could see that they were praying (Matthew 6:5). They gave alms to the poor, sometimes announcing it with trumpets, so that all could see the charity they were performing (Matthew 6:2). What to say against such kind of perfect church members?

They also boasted, like many nowadays, that they had never murdered anyone, never committed adultery, and that they had never stolen anything.

Now, Jesus says in our text that our righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law if we want to enter the Kingdom of heaven. How can it be?

Martin Luther tried it when he entered the monastery as a young adult. He obeyed all the commandments and performed all the duties required by the church of his time. But he didn't get peace; on the contrary, he became more desperate day by day due to his incapacity to obey every detail of the law, and he felt that he was condemned and that he would never reach the Kingdom of Heaven.

II – The righteousness required by God.

God sets a very high standard of perfection to each of us. He wants us to be like Adam and Eve when they were created perfect in the image of God. We can see in the Ten Commandments and especially in the deeper interpretation Jesus gave to the Commandments, as we read just about the Fifth Commandment today; and Jesus explained other Commandments in details as well in the verses that follow our text. *He emphasized its deep, underlying principles and total commitment to it rather than mere external acknowledgement and obedience* (CSSP, Footnotes).

Can anyone obtain this righteousness by obeying the Commandments? Some still try it and some churches encourage their members to follow the Law and to be perfect to obtain the Kingdom of God. But it is impossible. *The Bible is more than an owner's manual of life, it is much more than a regular maintenance schedule and a list of things we should do.* (P. Brandt, p. 41)

After the man fell in sin, he cannot obey the Law hundred per cent anymore. The Law just accuses us and bothers our conscience, pointing at us the finger of judgment: you are guilty! you are guilty! One of the goal of the Law is to show our

incapacity to obey it and to take us to desperation. This was the reaction of the people on Pentecost Day, when they heard Peter preaching the Law to them: “When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’ Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for forgiveness of your sins’” (Acts 2: 37,38).

III – The righteousness of Christ.

What a man cannot achieve by the Law, Jesus achieved it for us. He not only obeyed the Law perfectly on our behalf, but He also suffered the penalty of our disobedience dying on the cross. The holy one dying for the sinners. Jesus, the Righteous One, got the righteousness that He didn't need; and He offers His righteousness to us by faith.

This was the big discovery of Luther. In his desperation because the Law was accusing him and condemning him, he searched deeply in the Bible and found that there is another righteousness apart from the righteousness required by the Law. And the text of Romans 1:17 changed his life and changed the entire world with the work of his Reformation. Paul wrote: “For in the Gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”

This righteousness by faith, given by God's grace to all who believe in Jesus, surpasses the righteousness of the Pharisees and of the Teachers of the Law; surpasses our own righteousness, and gives us a new life. Our sins are forgiven, our debts are cancelled, and our guilt is taken away! The severe Judge, who was ready to condemn us, now, for the sake of Christ, declares the sentence: NOT GUILTY! to all who believe in Jesus Christ! Peace and a new life flow from the heart of God into our life. He is now our lovely Father in heaven.

IV – The fruits of God’s righteousness.

“What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?”, asks Paul in the Epistle for today (Romans 6:1). And he himself gives the answer: “By no means!” We died to sin... and just as Christ was raised from dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life” (vv.2,4).

The gift of Jesus does not release us to lives of sloth and indolence, grousing about getting up on Sunday and begrudging every moment of service to our fellow human being. The gift of Jesus empowers our worship. We have the promise that God hears us. He is here to forgive us and loves us. He unites himself to us and walks out those doors with us into the world in which we live. His presence empowers our service; now every moment of every day is lived for Him, for He has purchased them all and filled every moment with His overflowing goodness. (Phil Brandt, p. 51)

Conclusion: As a conclusion, I quote Luther on this text: *In this Gospel, we see that our dear Lord Jesus Christ wants to teach his Christians... that they bear in mind that they ought to live uprightly with one another, being neither false nor hypocritical. So now in this Gospel Christ intends to make a distinction between true saints and hypocrites... Whoever wants to be a true Christian should say to God, Dear God, in this commandment you have poured out your heart and will, as to how I should conduct myself toward my neighbor; that is your Word and truth. Well then, dear God, I want to treat my neighbor kindly and help him; grant me your grace, power, and Spirit so that I may bring it to pass... In the kingdom of Christ there is to be no anger, only kindness and love; the heart is not to be bitter against anyone, and neither mouth nor hand are to cause anyone grief.* (Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils Vol. 2. Ed.: Eugene Klug. Baker, 1996. 320-326.) (Quoted by Phil Brandt, pp. 39-42).

May God empower us by His righteousness to live a godly life by faith in Jesus. Amen.

Pastor Carlos Walter Winterle, Cape Town, 23 July 2017