

Trinity 6, 2017 – Resurrection, Ansonia

+May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

*“Jesus said unto 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.” (Matthew 5:20)*

We, as modern day Christians, are not too well informed about the Pharisees and the scribes. We perceive them to be evil or bad people. Let me correct that misconception.

During the time of Jesus, the Pharisees and the Scribes were considered the most holy and the most righteous people on earth. If we had to compare them to today’s people they would have been in the same league as Billy Graham, Pope John Paul II, and Mother Teresa.

The Pharisees, meaning the separated ones, one of three major religious societies, were mostly middle class business men, but they had a very big impact in the decision making in the Sanhedrin. Unlike the Sadducees, who were aristocrats, or the Levites, who were the priests, the Pharisees were in contact with the common man.

They accepted that the written Word was inspired by God. But of importance to them also was the oral tradition, which they defended by saying that it could be traced to the time of Moses. So they added some of these traditions to God’s Word and obeyed the Word of God together with these traditions.

Let’s look at what they believed:

- They believed that God controlled all things, yet decisions made by individuals also contributed to the course of a person's life.
- They believed in the resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:6).
- They believed in an afterlife, with appropriate reward and punishment on an individual basis.
- They believed in the existence of angels and demons (Acts 23:8).

Isn't that what we believe? You might also recall that Paul was, before his conversion, also a Pharisee.

Now let us look at the scribes. They were learned men who studied the Law, transcribed it and wrote commentaries about it. We can say that they were also like lawyers today, helping people with the writing of documentation, at a fee off course.

One of the jobs they did was to preserve Scripture. They took this job very serious, so much that they would copy and recopy the Bible, ensuring that the copy was correct by even counting the letters and spaces of each copy. These were people who taught the scriptures to others.

However, they did not just stick to the law in the scriptures. They also added some man-made traditions to the mix. They knew the written word but they ignored the heart of the word.

We can see, then, that these scribes and Pharisees were learned men who knew the scriptures and who could interpret the scriptures to others. These were men who were perceived to have been the most righteous of all men.

And then Jesus says that our righteousness should be more than theirs. That must have been a shocking statement in those days.

But note that Jesus never said that He had a problem with the fact that they knew the Scriptures. He never said that He had a problem with their knowledge. He never said that He had a problem with the works they did.

What He did have a problem with was their holiness, their righteousness. He stated that their righteousness was not enough to get them into heaven.

Jesus said that “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Their righteousness was not enough to get them into heaven.

So what does it mean to be righteous?

Righteousness is the condition that God will accept. It is a right standing before God. And there is only one way to be righteous and that is to be without sin. That is to be completely holy. That is to be 100% perfect.

As humans in our human form it is impossible to be righteous, because we have all sinned. Nobody is without sin and therefore nobody is righteous.

Listen to what St. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans:

*“Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: For all have sinned, and come short of the*

*glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 3:20-24)*

You are not justified, therefore you are not righteous, by your deeds or because you obey the law, or you read the Bible, or you come to church every Sunday, or you pray for 12 hours a day, or because your parents are Christians. We are all unrighteous because of our sins. And, as St. Paul said, “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God”

In spite of all the Pharisees and Scribes were and what they knew, they believed that they were righteous because of their position and what they attained because of it. They believed that they were standing tall and prominent in the community because of their own accord. They believed they were righteous because of who they were. They believed they were righteous because of their standing in the world.

We constantly live in a struggle between what world expects and believes and what God requires. We have all grown up in a world where we are told we must be wealthy, young, good looking, fashionable, thin, have the right degree from the right school, and so on, if we are to have any value. Even more insidious in today’s world, we are taught to accept any and all types of behaviors and immoralities as “constitutional” and “basic human rights” even though they are evils beyond anything the founding fathers or early church fathers could have imagined. We are told to embrace what Fr. Bill Peckman refers to as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism”, the modern belief that all religions are the same, that God only wants us to be nice, fair, and inoffensive to all, that the central purpose of our life is to be happy and pleased with

ourselves, and that God is only needed in our lives when we need something. And perhaps the greatest untruth of all: all good people go to heaven; a complete contrast to what Christ himself said in today's Gospel, "*except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.*"

Following the mantra of this Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, Fr. Peckman explains, eliminates the consequences of sin and reduces Heaven to the ultimate participation trophy. It destroys the very Christian concept of selfless service. If the focus is on me, then service is reduced to being important only if it makes me feel good. If the focus is on me, there is no need for service in the community and church. It has nurtured a society of the entitled where too much free stuff is never enough. It reduces God to being a butler, a servant, an instant fulfillment dispensing machine. It is enslavement to the self. It is a life where one pushes oneself not for the good of others, but to suit one's own goals. It is destroying priestly vocations. It is shredding the concept of marriage. It has changed the attitude of having children to being a matter of convenience and selfishness instead of being a sacred trust.

But our struggle is not with the world. St. Augustine points out in The City of God, our struggle is between the City of God, and the City of Self. We have a choice within ourselves to embrace the world with its narcissistic and selfish ways, or we can embrace the love and grace of God. We can embrace the modern-day religion of man being the center of the universe, or we can live as we are truly meant to live – children of God who is the center and Creator of all things.

Each of us has an opportunity, a choice, or in the words of that great old hymn, “Once to every man and nation, comes the moment to decide.” You can choose to live either by emotions and feelings or by the truth of divine revelation, by the world or by God, by society or by Christ. The choice is within you.

We need to be vigilant in our faith, being demanding and pushing ourselves to walk in that righteousness that is greater than that of the Pharisees and Scribes, not just knowing and reading the Law, but living the true spirit of the Law every day of our lives. It is written in the book of the Prophet Micah, *“He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?”*

The choice is before each one of us. We can choose the wide easy path of the world, live in the here and now and ignore eternity, or we can choose the narrow, difficult path of righteousness in Christ. It is not an easy path. It isn’t the popular path. But it is the only path that leads to salvation and everlasting life.

The time to choose is now.

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.