**God’s Righteousness**

**Matthew 5:17-26**

6th Sunday after Trinity

07.11.2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jesus gives a number of imperatives in our text today after claiming that He did not come to abolish the law or the prophets, but to fulfill them. He declares that none of the Law will pass away, not an iota or a dot. He also commands that 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.

In today’s world, we need to remember these words of Jesus. I would be a wealthy man if I had a dime for every time I heard someone declare that portions of God’s Word no longer apply to use today, especially certain portions of God’s Law – that the times have changed. Unfortunately, there are pastors who have gotten rid of portions of the law – they want to scratch itching ears, telling people what they want to hear, making them happy. (2 Timothy 4:1-5)

If those making such statements are right, then Jesus was a liar! Yeah, I’m with you! I will trust that Jesus, as true God, knows best. But it also means then, that what Jesus declares after that is also true – that those who do such things, those who relax God’s commandments, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. To be called least in the kingdom of heaven is to be excluded from that eternal kingdom forever. Even though they may claim to be Christians, they will not enjoy the eternal glories of God’s glorious kingdom.

What exactly does this all mean? Jesus goes on to explain, “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The scribes and Pharisees were leaders in the church of that day. They were rabid watchdogs looking over the people to make sure they did not do what they were not supposed to do. These are the same people who complained that Jesus ate with “sinners,” as if they themselves were sinless. They had the outward appearance of being good. They were self-righteous –judgmental – as if they were somehow better than others because of appearances.

Sure, they knew the letter of the Law, but not the spirit of it. Jesus continues so that they might understand God’s intent for the law. “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.”

He also explains reconciliation with our neighbor, people are not to hold a grudge.

How righteous are you, oh Pharisees?

Our text is just a portion of the larger sermon on the mount which began with chapter five verse one, continuing to the end of chapter seven. Throughout it, Jesus is giving God’s decrees on what the Law means, and what He requires for righteousness.

He declares that lust in the heart is as much adultery as sleeping with someone with whom you are not married. Swearing, taking an oath to prove you are not lying, like “I swear to God” is forbidden. Hatred of your enemies is a sin. Unwillingness to forgive is a sin. And He goes on.

How righteous are you, oh Pharisees?

God’s Law is holy! It is just! It is good! There is nothing wrong with it! You and I are in no way to futz with it, play with it, change it, or in any way adapt it so that somehow it is more attainable.

Yes, you are to keep it – all of it – and you are to do so in the manner God prescribes, even in your heart. To keep it as the scribes and Pharisees suggest, and place your hope of eternity upon your keeping of it, is to be in danger of eternal destruction.

Many act like Pharisees, thinking they are better than others. They think they outwardly appear to be keeping God’s Law. Jesus’ is speaking so that they will no longer trust in themselves, in their apparent good works – He is in calling them to repentance.

Some want to water down God’s Law. While they might not admit it, they are also trying to give the appearance of being good. They’d like to get rid of some of the outward rigors of God’s Law. But Jesus’ narrowing down of things shows it to be even more stringent than just the outward appearances. Jesus’ is speaking so that they also will not trust in themselves – He is calling them to repentance.

Jesus has come into the world to fulfill all the Law and the prophets. God in human flesh, He is perfect as none other has been or ever could be. His perfection He came to sacrifice unto death upon the cross to pay the debt of death owed by all sinners. It is why He came! He desires to make them righteous – God’s righteousness dwelling within them.

Too many refuse! Most would rather trust in themselves. Either they think they are good enough, or they excuse themselves by saying God is more tolerant than His written word declares. In either case, they are trusting themselves.

Dear friends in Christ, if your thoughts, words, acts, and deeds are not as righteous as God is – perfect and holy – your righteousness falls short before God. You will be held accountable by God.

Let us consider this further. You are the redeemed of God. What should your life look like? Should you be like the rest of the world? Should you live like those who do not know God, live?

Paul gives us God’s answer. Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom. 12:1-2)

We are to be different in the world, a living example to others of God’s righteousness.

I know what you are thinking though. “But Pastor, I am not perfect! In fact, I am far from it! What am I supposed to do? I fear I may be lost!”

All I can say is, “You and me both! You and me both! I am as lost as you condemned by this word. I’ll even take it a step further. I know how I should be living, just as you do. I have repented of where I have failed – in sinfulness. And, I return to do the same sins. That is why what God declares in our Epistle lesson through Paul’s pen is a bit scary. What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?

Yeah, just as I thought? How can I still do what I know I should not do? Even worse, how can I return to those sins after being repentant of. Do you remember that our righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees? I know that mine does not – neither does yours.

But before we get too discouraged, let me continue reading from our Epistle again.

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.

Hold on there, what did it say? We are baptized into Christ’s death? We were buried with Him by baptism into death? Does that mean what I think it does? Does that mean that the wages of sin which I deserve – death – has already happened in Jesus, God’s Christ?

This is why Christ came, to fulfill all righteous – to fulfill the Law and the prophets. Christ alone is the Righteous One. The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees is not – it is a delusion of their own imaginings.

Christ’s righteousness is the holiness of God incarnate, the One who spoke the Law to Moses. It is this righteousness that He sacrifices unto death upon the cross. It is this righteousness that He delivers to you.

Even more from Paul’s pen sounds hopeful.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

You have already died, all yours sins put to death – in Christ Jesus!

The debt of death you owe God for your sinfulness is already paid in full – in Christ Jesus.

You are living a new life, raised from death in the forgiveness that is your, and in which you now live – in Christ Jesus.

This new life is not your own, it is God’s gracious gift to you – in Christ Jesus.

You are refreshed and renewed in your holiness of life when you eat the very flesh pierced for you and drink of the blood of Christ shed for you.

God’s own righteousness is yours – in Christ Jesus.

Thanks be to God you are righteous before God. God’s righteousness is your righteousness – in Christ Jesus to life everlasting. Amen.