

✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. ✠

When Christ taught, he preached not just forgiveness but stressed the law. Sinners listening were condemned and brought to repentance because they realized they could not do what Christ commanded. The law must be preached; it does not go away with Christ. Because Christ is here does not mean that the law goes away; it does not mean we do not need to pay any attention to it. Christ did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. The temptation for us today is to reduce the scriptures down to only the gospel in its narrow sense, to preach the forgiveness of sins without first acknowledging that we are sinful, without first speaking of the great wrath we have brought upon ourselves with our disobedience. The temptation is to put the cart before the horse, to get things out of order.

But it must be preached, and it must be preached first. If Christ is to fulfill the law first, we must acknowledge it, acknowledge its power over us, and its authority over all of mankind. Even in our reading, Christ has a lot to say about the law and righteousness. The law does not build us up or show us how good and righteous we are; it does the opposite. The longer we spend comparing ourselves to the commands and requirements of God, the further and further we are pushed into despair. The law does not justify but condemns; the law shows us our sin and reminds us of our need for a savior.

So we do one of two things: either we give in to the sinful tendency to avoid the law. Since Christ has fulfilled the law, we have no need of it, throw it out. There is no room for it any longer. We claim to have no need for this archaic law, which shows our sins and faults. Or we do the opposite, and we explain it away. We like the Pharisees and Sadducees love the law, find great enjoyment in it, because we weaken it, we make it something we can obtain, make it into a means of salvation. We become proud and puffed up. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were outwardly perfect; they had gone above and beyond, even inventing new laws and placing barriers around forbidden things

to make sure they were not tainted by sin. In a worldly view, they were the cream of the crop, perfect and unblemished.

But even this was not enough to garner salvation. If you desire salvation through the law, your righteousness must surpass even that of the Scribes and the Pharisees. If you desire to be saved by your own works, you must not only keep the law outwardly, but inwardly. To avoid murder is not enough; you must avoid hatred, to avoid adultery is not enough; you must never have a lustful or unclean thought. To avoid stealing is not enough; you must not covet or desire that which is not yours. Do not deceive yourself, you are not righteous according to your work. You are sinful and unclean, soiled with sin, even if you managed to keep the law outwardly, you would not possess righteousness by nature, for your nature is corrupted by sin, it is selfish and rotten, it leads you towards death and hell.

But of course, we don't even need to look at our inward emotions and thoughts. We outwardly break the law of God time and time again. We get angry and lash out against those around us, our family, and those closest to us. In fact, it's often those whom we are closest to that we become the most frustrated and angry with. It is these actions, this hatred and anger, and frustration against those who we call brother and sister that places us under condemnation. We cannot claim any sort of righteousness if we hate our brothers. Christ condemns any hatred. To be blameless before the law requires an inward keeping as well. To be justified and saved by the law, one must not simply avoid killing, but avoid all anger, avoid all hatred.

The difference is that Christ's interpretation and expounding upon the law of Moses is not tainted by human sin. It isn't tainted by the desire to weaken it to make it more palatable to mankind. With the proper understanding of the law, it becomes clear that there is indeed a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees; it just isn't ours. Christ's righteousness is necessary for salvation. It isn't simply an external righteousness, though it is never less than that; it is an internal and perfect holiness because he is not only true man but true God. It is a righteousness

unblemished by sin, unblemished by hatred, and sinful desires. With this full understanding of the law, it becomes clear that only Christ can fulfill the law for us because he is defined by it.

Christ is the one who is perfectly loving, perfectly compassionate. Christ is the one who reconciles with his adversaries. By his perfect life and death upon a cross, he offered the sacrifice that reconciles us with God. He who could have delivered us over to the judge for punishment came to our aid, taking our punishment. He is the one who was cast into the dark prison of the grave and paid everything down to the last penny, the last drop of blood that fell from his side as he was pierced.

This is the beauty of Christ, that he has exchanged righteousness with you. He has taken your worthless, selfish, and arrogant “righteousness” and given you the pure, unblemished righteousness that He has earned. He has taken your place and faced judgment on your behalf. He doesn’t just throw away the law, but he justifies and saves you through it. He has done this for you so that you might come to the table and participate in his sacrifice. You who have hated your neighbor are now welcome without fear at the altar of the Lord. You who are deserving of the fires of hell are given the righteousness of Christ, the righteousness that exceeds even the Pharisees, is yours because God has chosen to give it to you. Do not trust that you are saved because you are good enough, for you are not, but trust in Him who has fulfilled the law, seen the hatred and anger in your heart, and chose to reconcile you anyway. Trust in Jesus Christ, who has a perfect righteousness that he gives to you by his body and blood.

✠ In Jesus' Name. Amen. ✠