

Sermon for the Second Sunday after Pentecost June 7, 2026 jj
Rev'd Mark B. Stirdivant, Christ our Savior Ev. Lutheran Church, St. Augustine, Florida
✠ sdg ✠

We seem to be quite well-informed on what Jesus thought of the Pharisees. They have a stigma that will never leave the memory of their name to the end of time. John the Baptist harshly condemned them as hypocrites while he was baptizing and preaching in the wilderness. Those people who truly listened to Jesus' words noticed a pronounced difference between what the Lord was saying and the endless hair-splitting legalisms of the Pharisees. No doubt this school of mostly Jewish laymen, not of priests, was comprised of elite scholars and influential pillars of the community, sort of like an upper-crust, exclusive and ultra-religious Lions Club or Kiwanis. But as revered as they were by other people, it's obvious that Jesus didn't approve of even the most well-meaning among the Pharisees.

What would be interesting to find out someday, is what did some of the Pharisees think of Jesus? Sure, we know that the Pharisees ended up collaborating with their liberal rivals, the chief priests to get Christ crucified, but I'm talking about what they thought of Him at first. They should have noticed that large crowds listened intently to Jesus and His preaching. He performed spectacular miracles to demonstrate the power of God that was truly with Him. His authority was definitely a cut above what even the most articulate among the Pharisees could ever muster. There were even times when it seemed like Jesus was outdoing them at their own game, as He was saying things like, it's not enough to say you've obeyed the commandment "Thou shalt not murder," just because you don't have actual blood on your hands. "But I say to you that

everyone who is angry against his brother is liable to the judgment." (Matt. 5:22) That was from the Sermon on the Mount, of course not from the parts that today's politicians like to quote, but it's there, and the Pharisees took notice when Jesus said things like this concerning God's Law.

Not only did Jesus speak with great authority, but these leading men must have noticed that He backed up His words with an exemplary life. He was no hypocrite, and there was not a stain of scandal on Him. In fact, I'd venture to say that, early on, some of the Pharisees would have felt the desire to copy this notable rabbi's life, asking what He would do, if He were in their own given situation. Not only Pharisees, but also other people would have very likely looked up to Jesus as the prime example of how to live a righteous life. The Psalms spoke of the "righteous" as the opposite of "sinners." (like Psalm 1) The Pharisees defined it further in light of their own moral and ceremonial laws—pages on pages of detailed codes of conduct written by their own scribes that were to be followed to a "T" by the ideal, sinless and upright person. The Dead Sea Scrolls, by the way, include some of these kinds of documents, in addition to their ancient copies of Biblical books. Curiously, to these legal experts, Jesus seemed to live a life so much better than they could achieve—no doubt they and the other people in the crowd could see in Jesus the true "righteous man."

But then Jesus began preaching about “righteousness,” and that’s when the Pharisees probably would have gotten confused. To be sure, when Jesus said “righteousness,” He still meant the ultimate and highest good. But when He described righteousness, He did not use one bit of moral teachings or commandments to follow. Not one thing this rabbi said would coincide with the written codes that the Pharisees knew backwards and forwards. They wouldn’t have known which way was up or down! As confused as the Pharisees must have been at first when they heard Jesus speaking about righteousness, some of them definitely caught on later when they helped organize the plot to kill Him, for then they knew what Jesus was really about and they would have none of it!

What was Jesus describing when He talked about righteousness? It’s not a hard-to-grasp concept, actually. Many Christians believe they have to contemplate some hidden, Divine perfection that is out of reach when they hear the word. But when you hear “righteousness,” try inserting the phrase “plan of salvation.” Of course the only true plan of salvation is the one that God revealed to us in His Holy, perfect Word, the Bible. So, similarly, the only, true righteousness is Jesus Himself, who came to give His life to save yours. When Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness,” He meant that you must seek out Christ, who gives His righteousness, His plan of salvation to you, so that you don’t have the need anymore to run after earthly things like the pagans. (Matthew 6) A righteous man, as He is described in many Psalms and in other places in the Bible, is someone who believes in the one, true plan of salvation, that is, who believes in Christ. Take the 23rd Psalm

for example, when it says, “He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.” Does that mean the Lord our Shepherd directs us to do perfect works so that we can finally please Him? Not exactly. Rather, He leads us to the cross and His Word and the gifts of the Divine Service, where we find our Lord’s perfect righteousness handed out for free and what does that righteousness do? The answer was already sung in the same Psalm: “He restoreth my soul.” If you think that’s a big difference from the Pharisees’ idea of righteousness, then you would be right! It’s the difference between Law and Gospel, just like night and day. If you think righteousness is based on works that you have to do, then, as obvious as it sounds, you are on the road that leads to Pharasaic works-righteousness, which Jesus warns is the road that leads to hell and personal hopelessness. Either you understand and believe the pure truth, or plan of salvation, that God has revealed as His gift to you, no strings attached, or sadly, you are lost.

For Pharisees of His time, and of every age, including ourselves today in our sinful human nature, Jesus says, referring to the prophet Hosea: “Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice.” In the Old Testament reading you heard the direct translation from the Hebrew which gives us the similar term “steadfast love.” The mercy, or steadfast love that God desires from His people is the precise mercy, steadfast love and righteousness that He so freely gives to you, the believer. All the works of sacrifice, whether it was an Old Testament sacrifice of a temple offering or an offering of time, talent and treasure of our day, these works are what God still wants and commands, but His mercy is already yours as the Apostle Paul says clearly,

“apart from works.” (Eph. 2:8-10) That's what the Pharisee could not understand, that one could receive righteousness as a gift. They thought that their pious life of legalistic observances could save them. The one pure righteousness, the only effective plan of salvation, affects your life this very day, and changes it in a certain way. That way follows the road map of the Ten Commandments, the perfect will of God in written form.

This way of righteousness is totally lost on anybody who does not understand salvation by grace. Martin Luther didn't even get it until he thoroughly studied the actual Scriptures themselves, and when he found the pure Gospel truth, it was like the gates of heaven finally opened to his troubled soul. Everyone else who insisted on works-righteousness, not only Roman Catholics but also radical Protestants, thought he was nuts, or worse. Many modern Protestants think Lutherans are just looking for a way to use God's grace to make way for a carefree life of sin, when actually, they've got it backwards. You are saved by grace apart from works, and you are then empowered by the Holy Spirit to do the works God wants you to do as His workmanship, and as a light shining in our dark world.

There cannot be a better Christian group-event, so to speak, that acts out in real time this precious truth than when the people of God gather for the Church's liturgy. Though it seems easy at times to write it off as a legalistic novelty, at this holy time and place the righteousness of God, the one and only plan of salvation, is the essence of this weekly marvel of which we all catch ourselves saying in shorthand, “Oh, I'm just going to church.” It's even worse for us (Pastors) because it's too easy to call it “just

a job.” Or the bumper sticker, “Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven.” Just? Like it's something we should expect as some appointment to cross off our to-do list? Hardly at all! Remember, here are the angels and archangels bowing in wonder, if only our eyes of faith could only see it! Here is our Lord and Savior week after week showing us what this means, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice.” The liturgy is not a mindless task that takes you away from true piety, it ensures, rather, that your minds are focused on the one, true righteousness that God has revealed to you in His Word. I myself, a recovering Pharisee standing before you, stand in awe of the forgiveness that is here promised for me, and I assure you as the Lord's called servant that the same mercy is here for you too.

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