

“Your Righteousness Does Exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees”

Matthew 5:20-37

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus dispels any ideas about you, me, or anyone else being able to fulfill God’s Law, and live a life pleasing to God, without putting your faith and trust in the forgiveness of sin.

Jesus spells out, commandment by commandment, how all of us continually fall short of God’s demand that we need to be perfect. Last week, we also heard these words spoken by our Lord: “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

We talked about this in our Sunday morning Bible class last week. This was a frightening, disheartening statement for the Jews listening to Jesus. The Jews didn’t see the Pharisees or teachers of the law ever doing anything wrong. They were the keepers of God’s Law. They upheld the Law. How could ordinary people ever surpass their lifestyle? They didn’t murder. They didn’t commit adultery. They didn’t steal. Or so it was thought.

But Jesus comes along and says that if you even think of doing something wrong, in God's eyes, it is as if you have already done it. You have sinned. We sin (all the time) in thought, word, and deed, as we confessed earlier.

Did you ever think about how much God is concerned about sins of thought? We tend to dismiss that as being any serious concern. However, there is a reason He gave two commandments in regard to coveting.

Likewise, Jesus says that if you are angry at someone, it is the same as if you had taken a gun and killed him. When you are angry or call someone a "fool," you are a murderer. Most murders are not committed with guns or knives. Most "killing" is done through contempt for another person, or the casual indifference that regards a person as being less than person. Martin Luther said that "If all the murderers were to be stoned, the streets would be flowing with blood." We are all murderers. We are all sinners.

When we know that we have sinned, we often feel that we are unworthy of Christ and His Church – and rightly so. We are unworthy. All sin is detestable to God. All sin is punishable by eternal death. We have no right to stand before our Lord if we are trying to stand there in the personal righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. All sin, even a fracture of an iota of sin is punishable by eternal death. But all sin is forgivable for the

person who receives the mercy and grace of God in faith and trusts in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

If you ever feel that you are unworthy to be here in God's House, you are most definitely on the right track. If the Church was filled only with the people who deserve to be here, the pews and the pulpit would be empty. It is the people who feel worthy to be here that I am most concerned about.

As David says in Psalm 51: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

We are continually drawn to Christ's cross. It is our only source of comfort. Without the knowledge that our sins have been paid in full by the blood of Jesus Christ, we would read our Gospel lesson today and despair. The word "Gospel" literally means "Good News." Without the knowledge of Christ paying for our sins and placing His perfect righteousness on us, there would be no "Good News" this day.

But God does have Good News for each of you. The high standard of God's Law that Jesus talks about in His Sermon on the Mount is impossible for any of us to keep. None of you have even kept one of those laws perfectly. But the Good News is that Christ kept them for you. Your righteousness has exceeded that of the scribes and Pharisees. Your righteousness is perfect. Your righteousness is blameless and without guilt. Not because any of us are worthy, but because we confess we are

unworthy. It is our broken spirit, our broken and contrite heart that makes us acceptable to the Lord.

When we come to God's House and confess: "I am a poor, miserable sinner. I am by nature sinful and unclean. I have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed...by what I have done, and by what I have left undone. I have not loved you with my whole heart. I have not loved my neighbor as myself."

When we confess this before God, what is it that immediately happens? In the stead and by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, all of your sins are forgiven in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And having been forgiven, in God's eyes, it is as if the sin never occurred. He views each of you with perfect, blameless righteousness.

As we look around, we know that we are sitting with a group of murderers, thieves, and adulterers. But when God looks down on us, He does not see any guilt or any blame that needs to be pointed out. Whatever sins have occurred in the past, Christ has already carried them to the cross.

Our righteousness does exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, because since our Baptism, God only sees Christ's righteousness that has been placed upon you. Therefore, you will certainly enter into the kingdom of heaven. Amen.