

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.Ivor J.W.Oakley (9-7-2000 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Matthew 5:20

(Additional Reading Matthew 23:23-39)

Righteousness exceeding the Scribes and Pharisees

Introduction

Jesus so far has described the character of the Christian and his influence, as salt and light, which he ought to make. We come now to a section which goes into more detail about the Christian life. To make his teaching stand out and to sharpen the focus, Jesus draws a sharp distinction between his requirements and those of the Scribes and Pharisees with whom people were familiar and to whom they looked up. They saw them as paragons of virtue, for they were so holy and commendable. Jesus suddenly shatters their illusions. He says these people they look up to have got it all wrong, and they must not take their lead from them. Jesus had something entirely different in mind. **Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.**

This entirely different kind of righteousness, which Jesus requires, is one which they would have to humble themselves to receive from God's grace.

The Righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees

The Scribes were the professional students of Jewish Law. They spent their lives in explaining, studying and teaching Law. Therefore they were looked up to, admired and respected. The Pharisees were the group of Jews who followed and obeyed the teachings of the Scribes. They were the "puritans" among the Jews. The word "Pharisee" means "separated one". They set themselves apart and devoted themselves to keeping Jewish Law as carefully as they could. They went the second mile. The Old Testament instructed the Jews to fast once a year – the Pharisees fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12). They despised common people who had neither the time nor the inclination to keep the Law as strictly as they did. They dismissed them as "sinners". Tragedy of situation – they misunderstood the Law. They were astray themselves, and they led others astray.

They were not content with the Old Testament. They developed an enormous body of Law – oral tradition or scribal law to explain the Old Testament. The Old Testament, especially the Ten Commandments, contain few rules. They are rather broad general principles to be applied to individual situations in life. The Scribes wanted more than general principles. They wanted detailed rules for every man in every situation.

The Sabbath was an obvious case. Two Rabbis worked out 1521 regulations defining Sabbath observance. The Sabbath was to be kept holy, no work. But what is work? Carrying a burden. So what is a burden? Burden is food equal in weight to a dried fig, milk enough for one swallow, oil enough to put on one small part of body, ink enough to write two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. They spent endless hours arguing whether a man could lift a lamp from one part of the house to another, whether a tailor sinned

if he went out with a needle in his robe, whether or not a woman could wear a brooch, whether or not a man could wear an artificial limb on the Sabbath. These things were the essence of their religion and service of God. They said healing was allowed on the Sabbath, but only if life was in danger, and only to stop patient from getting worse. A plain bandage could be applied to a wound to stop the situation getting worse, but no healing ointment was to be applied. If a chicken laid an egg on the Sabbath, that egg could only be eaten if they intended to kill chicken anyway.

These issues were no laughing matter to Jews – even if humorous to us. Salvation depended on these things. All rules were handed down for generations without being written down. Mid third century these rules were summarised and codified in the Mishnah of 800 pages. Then there were commentaries on the Mishnah, called the Talmud (which had many volumes). In the days of Jesus, to the strict Jew, the service of God was observing this mass of legalistic rules and regulations, which were literally matters of life, death and eternal destiny.

Jesus did not recognise these rules. He repeatedly broke them e.g. healing on the Sabbath. According to Jesus, this was not one of the Laws which **will never pass away** (Matthew 24:35). His view of the Law which would never pass away was the Ten Commandments, summarized as love to God and man. What was wrong with these laws, apart from the fact that these were human traditions and not God's Law of the Old Testament? The problem was they were all about external righteousness, things that were to be seen by other people - fasting twice a week, tithing even their garden herbs, carefully washing after returning from market in case of defilement through contact with Gentiles. Such law keeping was all external and formal. It was not the religion of the heart. They were careful about the outside, but neglected the inside. Real defilement is inward, said Jesus, and he quoted from Isaiah: **People honour me with their lips but their hearts are far from me** (Matthew 15:8). **Like whitewashed tombs which look beautiful on the outside, but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean** (Matthew 23:27). Outwardly righteous, but inwardly all is hypocrisy and iniquity.

The Kingdom of God is concerned with the heart, not with externals. The Pharisees neglected the really important commandments because of their obsession with trifles. For example, there was the Corban incident, in Mark 7:11, where money was given to the Temple instead of to parents for whom it was originally intended. So they broke the fifth commandment by their traditions. **You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin – but you have neglected the more important matters of the law – judgement, mercy and faithfulness** (Matthew 23:23).

The righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees was a self-centred righteousness concerned with self and salvation. They sought to glorify self and not God. They were smug and proud, and despised others. **“I thank you I am not like other men”** (Luke 18:11). They had plenty of righteousness on the surface, but inwardly they were self-centred and not God-centred. They were self-righteous, proud of their own goodness.

How different from Christian character – poor in spirit, meek, hungry and thirsting for righteousness, humble and aware of deficiencies, need and weakness. For all their religion and morality, it was all on the surface, for the Pharisees had lost sight of the important things. They neglected the heart and neglected God's glory. They were

over-concerned with actions rather than motives, with doing rather than being. And worst of all, they were blind to all of this. They were hypocrites, but unconscious and not deliberate hypocrites. They did not think they were wrong; they were sincere – but sincerely wrong! A terrible danger for us all.

Righteousness required by the Lord

Except your righteousness surpasses that of the Scribes and the Pharisees. Jesus is *not* saying that he requires the same things as the Pharisees did, but more. He is *not* saying – if they fasted twice a week, you must do it four times, if they washed hands coming from the market, you must have a bath. He was really requiring an entirely different kind of righteousness – and it is one which men cannot produce. It is theirs only when God, by grace, works in their lives. The righteousness Jesus is talking about is way beyond any human achievement.

The righteousness Christ is concerned with is not one that we and others *see*. It concerns the heart – what we are within – motives and desires, not actions. Jesus puts what we *are* before what we *do*. **Out of the heart** (Matthew 15:19) come all our troubles and sins. The heart needs to be dealt with. **Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart** (1 Samuel 16:7). This is why, later in the sermon, Jesus is going to explain that it is not just adultery but lust, not just murder but hatred. The Lord goes beyond the external to the man himself. This is the greater and deeper righteousness with which the Lord is concerned.

Someone once said “Religion is what man does with his solitude” i.e. if you want to know what you really are, you find the answer in your thoughts, desires and imaginations when you are alone. What we say to ourselves, and not what we say to others (about which we are very careful). What we do with our solitude is what ultimately counts. The things we hide from the outside world because we are often ashamed of them – these things proclaim what we really are.

The moment we say this, we see at once how beside the point the behaviour of the Scribes and the Pharisees was. They missed the point. And this is so true with many who boast of goodness today: “I’m as good as the next man, I reckon God ought to accept me, I do this and that, I would give away my last penny”. But Jesus is concerned with heart, motives, desires, the real you. At once, we realize the impossibility of saving ourselves, of commending ourselves to God, of winning his approval. Where are we in the sight of God who looks on the heart? Everything false and spurious about us is fully exposed in his sight. Smugness and self-satisfaction soon disappear. We realize we have had it, not a leg to stand on, quite bankrupt. If God does not work in our lives, what hope have we got?

“Thou must save, and thou alone” (Toplady)

First of all we need forgiveness for the very stained past which causes us to feel so ashamed and condemned and embarrassed. How good to read at the beginning of Matthew the meaning of the name Jesus: **he will save his people from their sins** (Matthew 1:21). How heart-warming to read at the end of Matthew that his blood was **poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins** (Matthew 26:28). We need a Saviour, we need forgiveness.

Secondly we need to go to him humbly. Poor in spirit, I have nothing of myself. Ashamed. All arrogance is gone. I do need you. I am finished if you do not do something. I hunger and thirst for righteousness which you alone can give me. I have not got it and never will have. My hope is in you. I submit, and totally look to you.

God in kingly rule brings salvation. When he takes control, his power begins to work within us. The righteousness he requires is a righteousness which only he imparts and gives us as he rules in the life. Heart righteousness is God's gift, not man's achievement. God gives what he demands. Only the heart filled with God's grace can live as God requires. Only those knowing this God-created righteousness can enter his kingdom of righteousness in the future. This righteousness which meets God's standards and is the result of God's grace and power is Bible religion from beginning to end.

I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts (Jeremiah 31:33).

I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees (Ezekiel 36:27).

You must be born again (John 3:7).

The kingdom of God is within you (Luke 17:21).

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17).

Christ lives in me (Galatians 2:20).

Christ is formed in you (Galatians 4:19).

You may participate in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4).

We live in him and he in us (1 John 4:13).

The source of this new heart righteousness is not in my struggling and striving – but in the Lord's power in my life. It becomes mine when I submit, yield, lean and rely on him wholly. When God is at work in my life, he brings a different kind of righteousness, not achieved by myself or my own attainments. I am no longer self-righteous and self-satisfied. God is the centre of all righteousness. I love him, and am concerned with his glory, and I ask for his power. I want to please God. Do you know and love God? Have you submitted to him? Is he at work in your life? Is the biggest thing in your life to glorify him and please him? Does he come first?