

15. The Sermon on the Mount (Part 3)

In our last lesson, we read the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: “For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” For those who knew the reputation of the Pharisees and scribes, this declaration would have been totally astonishing.

The work of the scribes was to copy the scriptures, by hand, of course. So they knew all the laws of God in detail. The Pharisees, for their part, were the strictest of all the Jewish sects. Their ambition was to keep all the commandments to perfection. They stood apart from the people, whom they treated as impure, and the people honored them for their great piety. But here Jesus says that these people were not pious enough—their righteousness was not sufficient to guarantee them a place in the kingdom of heaven about which Jesus preached. Who, then, could enter it?

In the rest of his sermon, Jesus shows how their righteousness was insufficient to please God. Let's keep in mind that Jesus did not accuse the Law of Moses. He accused those who misinterpreted it and added their human traditions to it. Not only were their teachings not according to God's true righteousness, but they also allowed some people to justify themselves instead of recognizing themselves as sinners and in need of a Savior.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE PHARISEES WAS INCOMPLETE (5:21-48)

Here is the first problem with the scribes and Pharisees: their righteousness was incomplete.

Take the subject of peace with others. Jesus said: “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire.” (Matthew 5:21,22)

The Jews said it is wrong to kill. Jesus said this is true but incomplete. If you want to be righteous, keep yourself not only from killing but also from scorning, hating or insulting others. Few of us would commit a murder, but that is not sufficient to be righteous. Do we have hate in our hearts? Do we treat others in an unworthy manner? Do we control our anger toward our brothers? Not being a murderer is not enough.

Then Jesus spoke of sexual purity: “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:27,28). The Jews said it is wrong to commit adultery. Jesus said one should not even entertain impure thoughts about a woman who is not one's wife.

Fornication begins with bad thoughts. It is said that we cannot prevent birds from flying over our heads but that doesn't mean we would let them make their nests in our hair. An impure thought may come into my head, but if I want to please God, I won't hesitate to chase that thought from my mind. I would not follow a woman with a look of desire or abandon myself to sexual fantasies about her. The Pharisees only dealt with the sexual act. Jesus said to ensure the purity of our hearts too.

Now let us consider the issue of honesty.

“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.’ But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.” (Matthew 5:33-37)

The Jews said that if you take an oath, you must keep your word and tell the truth. (It is implied that if you have not sworn, you are not obliged to do what you said.) How many people do you

know who say things like, “In the name of God, I’m telling you the truth.” Or, “I swear on my mother’s grave that I will pay you back.” Christians must not speak in this way. Jesus said we must always keep our word—period. If you always tell the truth, you don’t need to take an oath to be believed. Others will know you as a man or woman of honor, and accept your word.

And how should we act in regard to vengeance and loving our neighbors?

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also... You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” (Matthew 5:38,39,43-45)

It is true that the Law of Moses says “eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” but this expression is found in a legal context, among instructions for magistrates. It was a distortion to apply it to personal relations. At this level, the Law of Moses said, “You shall not take vengeance” (Leviticus 19:18), or, “If you meet your enemy’s ox or his donkey going astray, you shall surely bring it back to him again” (Exodus 23:4). The law of Moses does say, “You shall love your neighbor,” but nowhere does it say, “You shall hate your enemy.” As we have said, people were twisting the meaning of God’s commandments.

The Jews said we should be kind toward those who are kind toward us. Jesus said we should love everyone, even those who are our enemies. So the righteousness the scribes and Pharisees taught the people was not enough. It was incomplete.

Before continuing, notice that Jesus taught in a way that was different from that of the scribes. They continually quoted this or that other rabbi (teacher of the law) to support their positions. Instead Jesus would say, “As for me, I tell you.” And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that

the people were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Matthew 7:28,29).

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE PHARISEES WAS HYPOCRITICAL (MATTHEW 6:18,19)

The second problem with the scribes and Pharisees was this: their righteousness was hypocritical. Jesus spoke on this subject in Matthew 23:5: “But all their works they do to be seen by men.” Here, in contrast, are the instructions that he gave his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount:

“Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward... And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly... Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.” (Matthew 6:1,2,5,6,16-18)

In these verses, Jesus spoke of charity, prayer and fasting. The Pharisees practiced all these things, but they did them to be seen of men. But righteousness that is only external is of no value. Righteousness that we only practice for men and not for God is of no value. Those who try on purpose to be noticed when they do a good deed, those who pray in such a way that everyone around them may hear or see them, those who don’t hesitate to talk about the fact that they are observing Ramadan or some

other fast, none of these people are practicing the religion of Christ.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE PHARISEES WAS DIVIDED

Luke 16:14 tells us that “the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they derided Him.” In Matthew 23:14 we hear Jesus tell them, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense make long prayers.”

The third problem with the scribes and Pharisees was that their righteousness was divided: they wanted to serve God and be righteous before Him, but at the same time they wanted to serve money and get rich. And so Jesus shows in the Sermon on the Mount that in order to be truly righteous, one must make a choice.

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart

will be also... No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”

Money becomes a god in the lives of many people. Financial considerations are what determine all of their actions, and they put their trust in money. They count on money to solve all their problems. The object of their love is money (and what it can buy), whereas their love should be reserved for God. Whoever thinks and lives in this way is not righteous in God's eyes, regardless of the amount of time he or she spends in Church.

We should all have as our priority in life to be righteous in God's sight and to be citizens in his kingdom. Let us not fall into the same trap as the Pharisees. If our righteousness is incomplete, only taking outward actions into account, if it is hypocritical, aiming primarily for the approval of men, or it is divided, our hearts being given at the same time to both God and material wealth, we will one day hear these words from the Lord, words which are quoted in Matthew 7:23: “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!”